

# The Hand of Glavius

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# Chapter 1

“It belongs in a museum!”

“No, Mr. Flakestone. It belongs to the highest bidder.” Torim pulled the trigger on his caster. The firing pin stamped the loaded shell with the rune to activate it. The magic started gathering and a split second later a roaring burst of flames exited the barrel of the gun. It was like the breath of a dragon. The hot flames burned flesh and bone and even got the stone beneath the dwarf to start melting. The brief screams of Mr. Flakestone were horrific, but nothing Torim hadn’t heard before. The cave felt eerily silent as the screams died down and the charred and cracked bones of the dwarf slumped to the ground.

Torim holstered his caster and grabbed the crown from where it had been laid down by the dwarf. It was a crown made from pure gold with various sorts of jewels embedded in it. It had belonged to one of the emperors of Ramyn. A relic of the past thought lost, but Mr. Flakestone had found it, much to Torim’s dismay. He had been on its trail as well and lost the race by a few minutes. Had he known someone else was following the same clues he’d have rushed more and not enjoyed the extra drinks at the bar.

Looking around the cave he could see ruins that told of ancient settlements. He knew that just above him was where the foundations of the modern city of Ramyn stopped. Pillars of steel and concrete burrowed deep underground, but not as deep as the centuries old city had. That no one had found the crown spoke of the neglect the historical ruins had to endure.

With a sigh Torim stashed the crown in a large pouch that he fastened around his belt. He raked a hand through his short cut brown hair before turning away from the charred corpse and heading towards the ramp that led up to the surface. There were loose rocks here and there and piles of rubble where there had been a more serious collapse. It had taken Flakestone some digging to get to the prize. On that account Torim was grateful for the dwarf. Digging wasn’t something he enjoyed doing.

Not a good trait for someone whose business was digging up old things and selling them to the highest bidder.

The dust made him cough and sneeze. His brown coat was turning grey in many places. The ramp soon opened up to a more open area. Metal beams as thick as Torim came down from the ceiling. The cavern of rock stretched as far as the dim light from his lantern allowed. Attached over his shoulder and hanging on his chest it left his hands free and offered as stable a light as his own footing was. Being powered by magic meant the light didn't generate heat.

"Got it?"

"Sure did, old man," Torim replied and shaded his eyes from the bright light pointed at him. He turned off his own light and loosened the pouch on his belt and lifted it up for the man to see. He heard the click of a caster being cocked.

"Just throw it here, lad. Easy."

"Douggy. What's going on?" Torim made no move to throw the crown at his turncoat partner.

"A higher bid."

"And that's why you're pointing a caster at me? Come on, Douggy. You know me. When have I ever turned down a higher bid?"

"Never," Douggy admitted and took a step closer to him. It brought him into the light. His grey hair was tied behind him in a ponytail. His braided beard had various sorts of beads hanging from it. His face was dominated by a potato like nose. His age was starting to show with a slight hunch to his back, but other than that he looked as fit as a man half his age. "The trouble is they also paid me to get rid of you."

Torim's expression turned grim. "So that's how you plan to retire. Off the blood of your friend."

"Yup. Now, give me the crown." Douggy extended a hand while pointing his caster straight at Torim. He had no choice but to comply. Reluctantly, he handed off the crown and took a few steps back after it.

"Who's paying you?" Torim asked and casually surveyed the area. There were no hiding places, no place where to quickly duck for cover. Even if there was, not many things could protect you from a caster. The only way that offered even a slight glimmer of hope was back down the ramp he'd come up.

"Sorry, boy. You know me. No loose lips." With that Douggy pulled the

trigger.

As soon as Torim saw it he turned and started to run towards the ramp. He also started to pull out his own caster from its holster. He felt the heat on his back before he felt the flames licking his clothes. Then he was completely engulfed. He started counting seconds.

One.

He entered the tunnel leading down.

Two.

He stumbled on some loose rocks and almost lost his balance.

Three.

His lungs started to burn. He'd been holding his breath. The urge to gasp for air was too strong, but the flames were still surrounding him.

Four.

He spotted a large rock. He headed for it. And ducked behind it. It stopped the flames. He'd gotten enough distance between himself and the caster that the flames weren't as strong. After gasping for breath he patted down some of his smouldering clothes before checking the pendant around his neck. The once clear blue sapphire on it had turned opaque. Another second and its protection would have failed. Another second and the flames would have burned him to death just like they had done at his command to the dwarf.

"Got to remember to thank Anjali for her gift."

The stream of flames had died down. Torim dared to hope his former friend would think him dead, but then he felt the rumble. He turned on his light and peeked from behind his shelter just in time to see the stone rise up and block the way. He cursed and slumped down again, his back resting against the stone. As far as he knew the only way out had just been blocked by a wall of stone.

In a rush he reached for the pouch on his hip and dug out the shells he had left for his caster. They were thick cylinders that tapered off towards one end. Meticulously engraved runes covered them all over, save for the flat end where the caster would stamp the last rune to activate the shell. Torim examined the runes to see what he had to work with.

One for fire, two for water and one for air. None for stone. Douggy had

assured he had plenty of them and there had been no reason not to trust him then.

“I knew I should have stocked up before getting on this job,” Torim muttered to himself and stashed the shells back in the pouch. He holstered his caster and sat for a while and worked on a plan for getting out of the predicament.

Knowing Douggy the stone wall he'd erected would be thick enough that the single fire cartridge he had wouldn't be enough to melt through it. Wind and water were useless against it as well. The only thing he could think of was to make his way back down and search for another route to the surface. He dug deep into his memories of the place and what he'd learned about it from the historical records.

Torim stood up and patted some dust off his clothes before heading down the slightly sloping ramp. A small smile passed his lips.

He'd remembered something he'd read in a book about ancient crooks. The lowest level of the city had been held up by buildings that reached from ceiling to floor. The hollow pillars acted as homes and businesses. Some of them had been used by enterprising people to tunnel up to the level above. There was a chance such a building might still be standing. Finding it would mean a lot of climbing and frustration, but it was the only way he could think of that might let him avoid starving to death in the darkness.

He found himself at the spot where the charred bones of the dwarf rested. He shone his light around hoping to spot a promising looking building, but all he saw were crumbled down bits of buildings that may once have reached to the cave ceiling. It was an unnerving thought. That the supports holding all that mass of rock in place were mostly gone. The thing could collapse any time.

“Don't worry about the big things,” Torim muttered to himself and headed further into the cave. His light didn't reach very far and knowing the size of the area he was only seeing a tiny portion of it at a time. He walked past what might once have been a shop. There were crumbling down pieces of wood by the still standing wall. It looked like it might have been a vegetable stand at some point.

Occasionally he could hear rocks falling. It made him think he wasn't alone. Given that the subterranean area was inhabited by all sorts of creatures it

wouldn't have been too much of a surprise if some of them had found the abandoned cave and made it their home. All he could hope for was that they were harmless creatures instead of some of the more dangerous ones.

Still, it was enough for him to load his single fire shell into his caster.

By his own estimate it was a few hours later that he came across a towering building that seemed to reach all the way to the ceiling. From the outside and from what he could see with his light it looked to be intact. It was carved straight from the surrounding stone so it was far more sturdy than anything built out of bricks and mortar. Torim pushed aside the rotting remains of the door and walked inside.

The lobby was a large space where might once have been a shop of some sort. To the left side began the stairway that disappeared up above. With a sigh Torim climbed the first few steps. It would be a long way to the top. If it wasn't one of the few buildings with a secret way out then he'd have a long and exhausting climb for nothing.

One step at a time he made it further up. He passed open doorways into a small apartments the poorest of the poor had lived in. Most of them weren't anything more than a single room. All of them didn't even have windows. There was broken furniture and layer of dust that kicked up as Torim passed by.

By the time he reached the top sweat was running down the sides of his face. His breaths were heavy. He wasn't in bad shape, but climbing stairs was something that made even the most fit gasp for breath after a while. He shone his light around and saw nothing but solid rock above him. He lowered his head and let out a frustrated sigh.

"Would have been too good to find it on the first try," Torim said to himself and gave the ceiling above him one last look. He reached up and touched the stone in search of any sign of a hidden door. He looked around the walls for any secret switches that might open one, but found nothing of the sort. Giving up, he went to the single window and rested against it for a moment and looked into the darkness. He shone his light out and hoped to spot another tall building.

The light died down too quickly to reveal any.

"No giving up yet," said Torim with a deep breath. He started the long way

down. It was easier than going up, but he still needed to take breaks now and then and at ground level he started to contemplate using one of his water shells to get some drinking water. He decided against it, not knowing how many days it would take to find a way out. If there was a way out to find. He'd need the water later.

So he continued the search. In the darkness it was hard to tell the passage of time, but Torim figured it must have been an hour before he ran into another building that reached all the way to the cave ceiling. Much to his disappointment he found the climb to the top had been for nothing. There was no hidden hatch, no way out of the cave. Being too tired from the climb up he decided it was best to stay up there and rest. If there were creatures roaming the cave they were far less likely to climb all the way up. Torim found himself a room and huddled in a corner to catch some sleep.

How long he slept he didn't know. When he woke up it was as dark as when he had fallen asleep. His stomach growled for something to fill it, but he had nothing. His throat felt dry and the thought of using the water shell seemed more tempting than before, but he decided to put it off for a bit more. A quick stretch to get rid of the stiffness of sleep and he started down the stairs to continue the search.

It was the second building that finally offered him a way out. At the very top he found a switch hidden in one of the rooms and pushing it opened up a hatch in the ceiling. Judging by how well it was hidden and how smoothly it still worked it must have been made by a dwarf. An extremely skilled stone worker at that. Shining his light up into the opening he could see indents in the wall. Places where to grab to climb up. He thanked who ever had made the hatch that they had not gone with wooden ladders. There would have been no way to climb up if they had.

Dwarves built things to last.

Torim checked his belongings that they were securely fastened. Then he positioned himself under the opening in the ceiling and jumped. His hands found the lowest indents and found a firm grip. He grunted and pulled himself up. His hands found another hold and he continued to pull himself up. Once he got his

feet on the lowest of the holds he stopped to catch his breath.

“Glad I’m not a dwarf,” he muttered to himself and glanced down. It had been close even for him. Not reaching would have been the ultimate slap in the face.

The tunnel was narrow enough that he could lean back and his back would rest against the wall. It made it possible to find a relatively comfortable resting position. He used the opportunity to shine his light up. There were plenty of handles for him to grab, but he didn’t see an end to the tunnel. He hoped it wouldn’t be too long. Not having eaten was starting to make him feel weak.

He started making his way up. One hand up, then the other foot, then the other hand, then the other foot. It was tiring and he had to stop several times to catch his breath and let the burning sensation in his hands and legs subdue.

To his surprise the tunnel ended in a corridor instead of another hatch that would have led him to the cave above. He pulled himself up from the shaft and slumped down on the floor. After a moment of rest he shone his light down the corridor. It was roughly cut, but tall enough that he’d be able to walk standing straight. He noticed an ever so slight upward angle to it so there was hope it would lead him to the surface at some point.

Torim felt the sting in his calves when standing up. It made his first few steps painful, but his muscles soon got back into the groove. Walking felt easy after the strain of climbing and he felt like walking for miles would be no problem.

After walking a mile he’d changed his mind.

“Damn tunnel better end soon,” Torim muttered to himself and pushed on.

By the time he found the end his feet were starting to feel like one more step would snap a bone. It was a simple hatch above his head. There was nowhere else to go. It took a bit of strength to push it open. Dirt and dead leaves fell on him, but close behind came a flow of fresh air his lungs drew in with a hunger. He used the handholds and pulled himself out the hole.

Slumping down on the green grass made him smile. It felt good after all the hard stone. The smells and the sound of wind was comforting. A dwarf might have found the contrary to be true and as much as Torim enjoyed hunting for treasure, being underground for a long time never felt right. A human was meant



to walk under the sun, not below tons of rock.

Looking up and seeing the blue sky brought a smile on his lips and gave him the energy to sit up. Looking around he saw the city of Ramyn in the distance. Once it had been a marvel of magic. The three floating layers that had made up the central island had been a sight many had travelled long distances to see.

Now, it was a marvel of technology and magic.

Instead of floating masses of land there were buildings made of steel and concrete that reached for the sky. Tall, cylindrical pipes pillowed smoke to the sky and ships with sails puffed up by the wind ploughed through the dark smoke as if braving a storm at sea. Most were still wooden sail ships that could have gone on water as easily as they took to the air, but there were some more modern ones, made entirely of metal, powered by magic and the furnaces within them.

It was a different city in a different time.

Torim stood up with sigh. He wasn't looking forward to the long hike to the city.

## Chapter 2

“It’s broken!”

“Yes, I assumed that’s why you called me. What I need to know is *how* it’s broken.” Anjali gave the man a stern look. The trouble with customers, sometimes, was that they were stupid. Genuinely the sort who had half a deck of cards while trying to play a game.

“I don’t know how. That’s why I called you. You figure it out.”

“Why don’t you just show me what you were trying to do and we’ll see if it happens again. That’ll help me track it down.” Anjali reminded herself that the people running a cargo ship weren’t the sort who’d be intimately familiar with every bit that powered the vessel. They tended to be an impatient lot with tight schedules, but at least they paid well. Most of the time.

“All right,” said the man and started pulling levers. They were at the heart of the ship. There was the steam engine that powered much of the ship, provided electricity for the lights and made it move. Then there was the centre of the weave of runes that covered much of the ship. They were what enabled it to fly and travel into space and other planets. While the engine master pulled the levers the ship magician drew his own runes in the weave to activate it all.

The engine behind Anjali started chugging along. Men shovelled coal into the furnaces to keep the fires going. The runes started to activate. A blue light spread from the centre of the weave and started to spread along the lines it was supposed to. Then it all died down. The engineer pulled levers to shut down the engine before turning to Anjali.

“See? Broken. And we need to be up and moving in an hour. We can’t do it like this.”

“I’ve been through every single rune on this ship and can’t find any problems,” said the magician. He was young. Anjali figured he was a new graduate and on his first assignment. Someone like that could easily miss something subtle.

“Well, it’s not a mechanical problem,” said Anjali and gave the engineer a

look. “Your engine runs fine up until the runes need to activate. It’s definitely a problem on the magic side.”

“Told you,” said the engineer and gave the young magician a victorious look. “Fix your shit.” He stomped away apparently not willing to spend any more of his time on it now that the problem wasn’t in his area of responsibility.

“He’s a gruff one, isn’t he?” Anjali gave the young magician a small smile. She could see how nervous he was. A nervous mind wasn’t what she needed right now.

“They don’t call him Beast behind his back for nothing,” said the magician.

“A fitting name. All right. Let’s get to work. Bern, was it?”

The magician nodded.

“Bern, I hate to say it, but the Beast is right. It’s not a problem on his end. There’s a disruption in the runes, somewhere, that’s causing a surge. That surge breaks down the entire weave and stops it from doing what it’s supposed to.”

“But I’ve gone through every single rune on this ship and spotted no problems,” Bern protested. “I spent a day on it!”

“I don’t doubt you,” Anjali replied in an attempt to calm down the worked up young man. It was never easy to have your work questioned. Much less by an outsider. Much less on your first job. “But something is clearly wrong with the rune weave. It’s easy for even seasoned magicians to miss a tiny scrape here or there. Something like that is enough to cause problems. These metal ships are pretty new so it’s possible some entirely new kind of problem has cropped up. What ever it is we need to find it and fix it. All right?”

Bern gave her a reluctant nod and adjusted his robe. “What’s the plan then?”

“There is something we can try,” said Anjali and dug around one of the many pouches attached to her belt. She wasn’t a fan of robes like so many other wizards. A pair of practical pants and a short sleeved shirt were her attire of choice during the hot summer days.

In the heat of the engine room the light clothing was an even bigger positive, though she was still sweating.

She pulled out a rune covered stone from the pouch and presented it to

Bern. “This is a tool I made. It helps track down where a problem occurs within a weave of runes. It’s not perfect, but it should point us in the right direction. So what I need you to do is try and activate the weave once more and I’ll use this to try and find the problem spot.”

“We can do that,” Bern agreed and went back to where the runes converged. He looked to Anjali for a nod of approval to proceed and when he got it he started to draw the runes needed.

Anjali focused on the stone in her hand and drew a few runes above in in the air. They remained there, floating with a pale blue shimmer. They weren’t permanent and would disappear quickly. They gave just enough magic to do what was needed.

The runes on the ship started to activate. Then the failure occurred again.

Anjali took her eyes off the stone in her hand and looked around. She could see the magic move. Like fine dust in the air. She spotted an eruption of particles not far from the large furnace responsible for powering the ship. Then it was gone. The runes in the air had disappeared, but her little device had given enough information.

Without saying a word she started towards the place where she’d seen the little eruption. She followed the runes on the wall. They ran down towards the floor where she had spotted the burst of particles. She noticed one of the runes had a scuff on it. It wasn’t much, most would have dismissed it as nothing and she assumed Bern had done the same, but a close look revealed the damage to be enough to ruin everything.

“Tsk.” Anjali shook her head and glanced back at the young wizard who had supposedly gone through all the runes on the ship. Half a deck of cards was being generous with him. “Here’s your problem.”

Bern rushed over and crouched to examine the rune. “How did I miss that?”

Anjali wanted to say something nasty, but held her tongue. “It’s easy to miss. Very minor flaw that’s on the edge whether it’ll affect things or not. Just fix it and we’ll give things another go to see if that’s the culprit.”

Bern nodded and started to work on it. Anjali watched over his shoulder as the man repaired the rune. He made no mistakes, to Anjalis surprise. The

magicians on freight ships weren't the top of the class. It wouldn't have been unheard of if he didn't know how to repair the rune. A fatal flaw if the ship was in the middle of space and something went wrong.

After he'd repaired the rune they went to the rune weave again and activated it. This time everything worked as it should have. The rune weave lit up and stayed that way all through the test.

"Everything seems to be working," said Anjali with a relieved tone. The hotness of the furnace was starting to get to her.

"So it seems," said Bern with no small amount of relief. He turned to give Anjali a smile. "Thank you."

"It's what your captain pays me for," she replied with a small smile and headed up towards the deck. Down a corridor and up a stairway and she stood on the wooden deck of the otherwise metal ship. Unbuttoning the top button of her shirt allowed some cool air to flow down and take away the worst of the heat the engine room had pushed on her. She walked to one side of the ship and looked over the pier it rested against.

To the right of her was one of the large paddle wheels that drove the ship when it was moving. For water use each paddle was a bit over sized, but when flying that extra surface area was needed to make any meaningful progress. She knew there was a similar wheel on the other side of the ship. The two wheels towered over everything but the command bridge on the ship. The top was covered in metal to keep the paddles from catching any wind that might slow down the momentum.

"Anjali! Got it fixed?"

She turned to greet the captain. He was a gruff man who had seen the world. His skin looked like the sun had burnt it more times than the man wearing it could count. The colour of his hair had faded into a pale white and the pipe in his mouth was puffing out an equally white smoke.

"All working now, Fez. And you owe me ten coins of gold."

"Ten? You're robbing me blind." He waddled over next to her and leaned his back on the railing.

"If you don't want to be robbed by me you should hire more competent

crew,” Anjali pointed out.

“That’d cost even more,” said the captain and dug around the pouch hanging from his belt. He pulled out coin after coin and carefully counted them before handing them to her.

Anjali counted the coins with equal care and put them in her coin-pouch. She gave the captain a smile. “Pleasure doing business with you.”

“With your rates I’d imagine it’s a pleasure no matter who you work for,” said the captain. “Now get off my ship.”

Anjali grinned. “One piece of free advice. That wizard you have running things. Fire him. Fire him before he gets you all killed.”

“Bern? But he’s a good kid,” said Fez with a frown.

“Maybe, but he’s sloppy and sloppy gets you all killed.” Anjali gave Fez one last brief smile before heading for the gangplank that led to the pier. She had to dodge workers and sailors going about their duties as well as horse drawn carriages and the occasional steam powered truck. Looking up at the sky all she saw were plumes of dark smoke drifting with the wind with the occasional ray of sunshine making it through. It made her wish the city was still in its former glory.

Not that it was all bad. The old streets had been narrow and claustrophobic at times with the tall buildings surrounding them from all sides. Leaving the docks lead her to wide streets with enough room for four carriages to go side by side while still leaving enough room on either side for pedestrians to walk with five abreast. The buildings were tall on either side, but not the sort that towered over like a mountain. Four stories might have been the tallest.

The city of Ramyn had built itself wide instead of tall after the collapse of the floating masses of land. The tallest things were the pipes from all the factories that had sprung up.

The hope was it would push the smoke further away from the city, but it still left plenty of soot that fell down and gave everything a layer of black dust.

Anjali chose a side of the street and walked along with the rest of the people. She passed by windows that gave glimpses into shops and taverns. At times an enticing smell of food would linger about a place she passed by. It made her

stomach growl, reminding her that she had not eaten anything since the morning.

Now that she had left the ship behind she started to feel bad for advising the captain to fire the young wizard. She had to scold herself for feeling that way. It always happened. She'd say something bad about someone and regret it later. Her conscience lagged behind the rest of her by half an hour. It had gotten her in trouble more than once and despite her efforts to reign it in she still made mistakes like that.

Shaking her head she pushed on towards her own shop. It was near the central market and the ruins of the once magnificent arena where gladiators had faced off against each other and wild beasts of all sorts. There had been talks of restoring the place to its former glory, but the age gladiators had passed. The ruins drew in more tourists than a fully restored arena would.

There was something to be said for not doing too much with the old.

It might stop being old.

Her shop was at the edge of the actual market square, tucked away on a side street. The prices at the actual square were far too high for her little operation. Most of the buildings there were the sort of businesses that could afford it; Luxury items, high end restaurants and taverns and the occasional speciality shop that commanded enough of a premium for their products to survive.

In the old days it had been a place for the average person. Now it was the sphere of those with means.

She turned to a side street and walked past the first few shops before arriving at her little store. *Anjali's Runemagic* was taped in the display window. Behind it there were several small items on display, from caster shells meant for display to tiny trinkets that offered some easy magic for their user. Basic protections and defences mostly.

Anjali opened the door and walked in. A small bell let out a subtle ring to announce her arrival. It wasn't a big shop, at least not in the display area. There were a handful of display cases with various items on them. A couple of shelves had some bigger items on display and a counter separated the shop area from the back where her work area was. It took up a bigger portion of the shop than the

product display area.

“Hey, you’re back already.”

“Wasn’t much of a problem, Anika.” Anjali gave her assistant a smile. “Been busy?”

Anika sighed and rested herself against the counter. “I wish. Just a couple of browsers that didn’t end up buying anything.” Her black hair piled up around her as she rested her head against her arms and sighed again. “If this keeps up you’re going to go under and then I’m out of a job. Then how am I going to pay for my education?”

“Don’t worry. I’m not going out of business any time soon,” Anjali assured her. She walked behind the counter and gave Anika an encouraging squeeze on the shoulder. “Besides, the Towers have lots of programs to get people to graduate. They’re not going to let you flunk out with only two years left.”

“I’d still rather pay my own way through than rely on handouts,” said Anika and sat up on the bar like stool she was sitting on. She wasn’t very tall so when sitting down she could easily rest her head on the counter.

“And that’s why you have this job and you’ll have it for at least two more years. Focus on your studies and let me worry about the shop staying afloat. Not that there’s anything to worry about. All right?”

Anika nodded and glanced at her with a brief smile.

“If anyone needs me I’ll be in the back. Got to make some new caster shells for the stock.”

Anika nodded.

The workshop was separated from the showroom by a doorway with nothing more than a thick canvas hanging in it. Anjali pushed past it and let out a deep sigh of relief. She hoped her words had soothed any worries Anika had. She liked her enough and she wasn’t half bad at selling stuff or making caster shells. With time she’d grow into a fine crafter.

She walked over to her work desk and sat down in the long necked stool. She just wanted to sit for a bit and let her legs rest. The desk was filled with tools for rune carving. There were several caster shells waiting to be engraved and made to live up to their full potential. Around the room there were shelves filled



with parts waiting to be used. If she wanted to she could build an entire caster with just the tools and materials she had in the shop. There were plenty of other weapons she could also make, but caster shells were about the deadliest things she made. Most of the other things were meant for protection against people who didn't have the moral qualms with making deadly weapons.

Anjali pulled the caster from her belt and set it on the table. She pulled off several pouches as well and set them down. When she grabbed the coin pouch she stood up and headed for the small safe that sat on the opposite side of the room. She drew the rune to remove the protections and then pulled the key from under her shirt and opened the lock. As soon as the lock was open she tucked the key back under her shirt. It hung from a strong leather strap that had all sorts of runes drawn on it.

Her neck would break before it did.

She placed the coin pouch on one of the two shelves in the safe. It wasn't the only pouch in there. Some had pure, raw, gold and silver that were needed in certain items. There were pouches with precious gems and sealed scrolls. She closed the thick metal door and drew the rune to secure it. She heard the lock turn back in place.

Then the wall that separated her work area from the store exploded.

She cursed as splinters of wood and stone showered her and stuck to her exposed skin. She was never one to be taken by surprise and left unable to act so she crawled back to her desk and reached up to grab her caster. One quick grab into one of the pouches still on her belt and she had a fire shell loaded into it. She worried what had become of Anika. Looking at the big hole in the wall she knew it was right in line with where she had been sitting. The dust in the air prevented her from seeing clearly into the shop.

Remembering something she reached into one of her desk drawers and pulled out a pendant. She quickly put it around her neck and hoped it would be enough. It wasn't the most potent protective charm she'd made, but it could handle a variety of things thrown at it.

She took a quick breath and lunged through the doorway. The canvas brushed against her cheeks as she pushed it aside and ducked behind the still

intact counter. The dust floating in the air had not given her much chance to survey the shop, but she had spotted a figure near one of the display cases. That notion disappeared from her mind when she noticed Anika laying on the ground not far from her. There was blood on her face.

“Anika,” she whispered as loud as she dared. It wouldn’t do to draw the attackers attention while her help was injured. She had to take priority over everything else.

To her relief the young woman stirred and looked up at her with wide eyes. They looked more blue when contrasted with the dark red blood that had smeared half her face.

“Anjali,” she managed to breathe out with a wavering voice.

“Can you move?”

Anika nodded and pulled herself towards her. It wasn’t a long distance, but she moved agonizingly slow. “It’s one person,” she managed to say when she got to Anjali.

“All right. You get back into the workshop. Hide behind the safe. That thing has so many protections it’ll ward off just about anything.”

The young woman made no arguments and started crawling into the back through the doorway. Anjali had gotten a glance at her wounds. It looked like something had scraped the side of her head, but the wound didn’t look that bad. Plenty of blood, but head wounds tended to be that way.

Another deep breath and Anjali stood up and aimed her caster at where the figure had been standing. It was still there, trying to get into one of the display cases.

“Stop what you’re doing!” Anjali shouted at the figure. It spun around to face her. It was a man holding a caster. He wore a mask that covered his face and clothes that were as plain as they were average in quality. The wooden mask was painted black with a couple of golden stripes running down the cheeks. He said nothing. Instead he started to pull the trigger on his caster.

Anjali was quicker.

An orb of fire shot out from her caster and headed for the man. It forced him to stop what he was doing and duck. Anjali didn’t stay up to see what happened.

She ducked behind the counter and quickly loaded another shell into her caster. She then turned the dial at the end of the barrel to change the way the shell worked.

It was her own innovation to the caster. Most used the shells to define whether it would shoot out an orb of fire or a stream of flames. Her caster had the dial at the end of the barrel to determine that, which made her shells more generic. It allowed them to pull in just a tiny bit more magic.

The orb of fire exploded right where the man had been standing. The flames expanded out and scorched every surface that wasn't protected by runes. The heat reached Anjali and felt suffocating. Every drop of air seemed to be sucked into it. Looking up she could see flames licking the counter. She cursed out loud.

It had not been the most elegant way of responding. Much of her shop would be burned down by it. The worry Anika had expressed was starting to seem more real.

As soon as the flames died down Anjali stood up from behind the counter, her caster ready to fire. She scanned the room for the masked man. The display window of the store had blown out. Some of the display items had flown out into the street. The masked man stood up from behind one of the display cases near the door. Anjali quickly aimed her caster at him and pulled the trigger. The man did the same.

Her jet of flames met a stream of water. Host mist filled the room and hit her like a brick wall. Sweat ran down her face and it felt like her skin would be scalded by the heat. She kept her stance as long as the flames were bursting from her caster, but as soon as it died down she ducked down and let out a sigh of relief for the cooler air. Her clothes clung to her like she'd been working the field all day on a sunny day.

She heard the footsteps of someone running away. A peek beyond the counter and all she saw was the mist and the looming figures of the showcases and shelves. No sign of the attacker.

For a moment Anjali considered running after the man, but decided against it. The city guard was no doubt on its way already and her running off would just leave Anika to deal with them. She had been through enough for one day.

Anjali stood up with her caster still ready and made her way through the hot mist to ensure the man was truly gone. Peeking out the door she saw nothing but stunned passers by, some still covering behind barrels and close by stalls of other stores. There was a stunned silence looming over everything.

The mist was quickly being dissipated by the small breeze coming down the street and Anjali ducked inside to see how Anika was doing. She found her hiding behind the safe as she had instructed her to do.

"It's all right now. The man is gone," said Anjali and crouched in front of the frightened woman. "The store is wrecked, but the man is gone."

"Are you all right?" Anika asked and gave her a concerned look. It reflected well the expression she was seeing on her employer.

"I'm fine," Anjali assured her though she was feeling tingly all over her face. "Just that hot steam that probably has me looking like a boiled lobster." She gave her a small smile as reassurance. The steam had all but dissipated from the room, but her clothes still clung to her and started to itch.

"The store!" Anika jumped up and headed out. The wound on her head didn't seem to bother her at all. She'd found a piece of clothing to wrap around it. It seemed to have soaked a significant amount blood.

"Don't worry about it," Anjali headed after her. The mist had mostly disappeared from the shop and she finally saw how bad it was. Display cases were broken, shelves had crumbled and merchandise was scattered around the floor, some clearly broken and in need of repair. The display window was broken and what had been on display was strewn across the street. Fixing it all would take a lot of time and quite a bit of funds. On the positive, the steam looked to have put out most of the flames.

"You still think the store is going to be fine?" asked Anika and gave her a look of concern.

Anjali did her best to put on a confident face as she walked over to her and put a hand on her shoulder. "We'll be fine. Let's go outside. The city guard will be here any moment. Best we meet them out there to explain what happened. We've got to get someone to look at that wound of yours too."

Anika nodded and let the older woman lead her out the store.

## Chapter 3

Torim thanked his luck for running into the farmer. Getting a ride next to him in his wagon carrying barrels of ale meant an easy time getting to the city. Listening to the man babble about the poor harvest he'd had and the challenges posed by the changing economy made time fly by faster. Not that he cared much for what the man was saying, but after spending time underground it felt good to hear someone else talk.

"Thanks for the ride," said Torim as he hopped off the wagon. They'd arrived in the city, not far from the bridge than connected to the southern half to the central island. The farmer gave him a hand wave and whipped the horse onward.

Torim took a deep breath of the city air. It had a hint of smoke in it mixed in with everything else, from the near by shops to the hint of urine from drunkards using the alley as a lavatory.

"Home sweet home," Torim muttered with a grin and turned towards the huge bridge leading to the central island. The metal beams were as thick as a man and made up a mesh that was strong enough to hold up the four lane road laid on top of it. On either side there were walkways. A railing separated them from the brown water flowing below them. Occasionally a ship would sail under them. A passing steamer would blow its dark smoke up to the bridge and momentarily blind everyone. The little kids loved it, but the parents always tightened their grip on them to keep them from being bumped into.

Passing by Torim grinned at it all as it brought back memories of his own childhood. He glanced at the Towers of Magic and shook his head. The city around them had changed, but the wizards had been stubborn and kept the old appearance. They were still made of grey stone and stood out in the middle of everything else around them like a sore thumb.

Given the nature of wizards that was likely the intention.

The central island was surrounded by docks right from the base of the bridge. The only places with something else were the eastern and western tips that were reserved for city defences. Torim walked past all of that towards the

centre of the island. He stopped at a street vendor selling quick bites to eat. He grabbed a soft bun that had some fried meat along with onions and a spicy sauce stuffed inside it. Juices ran down the corners of his mouth after the first bite. His stomach growled a welcome to the food. He made short work of the bun. It wasn't a full meal by any stretch, but it killed the worst of his hunger.

When he turned to the familiar side street he was surprised to see the shop ruined and some of the city guard still on the scene. Getting closer he saw the broken display window and the merchandise that had been tossed to the street. There were plenty of curious onlookers and those passing by often stopped for a bit to try and get a look inside the shop.

Torim had always liked Anjali and her young assistant.

Now he worried what might have happened to them.

He was relieved to see Anjali poking the carnage inside the shop. She looked to be unhurt, though her skin did seem to have a more reddish tint to it along with some minor scrapes. Her skin was usually very pale which contrasted well with her dark hair. She was a lightly built woman, not very tall, but there was more fire in her than a red dragon.

"What happened here?" Torim asked as he leaned against what had once been the display window. Now it was more like a second door.

Anjali looked up and smiled when she saw him. "Someone tried to rob the place. Shot it up the place with a caster. Quite the incident. The Guard is already on it, but I'm not holding my breath. No one saw the man's face so they don't really have much to go on."

"I hope no one got hurt." Torim made his way to the actual door and carefully stepped in. There was shattered glass all around the floor along with splinters of wood and other debris.

"Anika bumped her head," said Anjali and picked up what looked to be a pendant. The chain was broken and it looked like a stone had come loose from the pendant itself. "Don't worry. She's fine. The healer looked her over and I sent her home to rest. Can't say the same of this pendant." With no slight amount of frustration she tossed it into a broken display case.

"You said it was a robbery. Was anything taken?"

"I don't know. Look at this mess. I have no idea what's broken, what's missing and what's just displaced." Anjali blew some air to push away a strand of hair from her face.

"If it makes you feel any better I spent a lot of time trapped under the old city," Torim walked over to the counter and rested his back against it. "Douggy betrayed me."

"What?" Anjali stopped what she was doing and turned to regard him. "You've been friends for what, a decade? What would make him turn against you?"

"Gold, apparently," said Torim with no small amount of bitterness. "He took the crown we'd been searching and said someone paid him to take it. That someone also paid him to kill me. He really did try to kill me. Shot his caster at me."

"I'm sorry. I know he meant a lot to you."

Torim gave her a brief smile of appreciation. "No idea who paid him, but I'm going to find out. I'm going to find him and repay his attempt at my life."

"He is a crafty one," Anjali reminded him. "He taught you most of what you know. If he wants to disappear he can."

"He can, but the one who bought the crown probably can't. I find that person and I can get on Douggy's trail. At least that's my hope. Only hope, probably."

"Well, I hope you catch him. Betrayals shouldn't go unpunished." Anjali turned once more to her ruined shop and picked up another item from amongst the debris.

Torim looked around the shop. The hole that led to the back of the store made him think she was lucky no one had died. He'd been there often enough to know the hole was precisely where Anika usually sat when it was quiet. "Quite a coincidence your store gets robbed the day Douggy betrays me. Pretty violently too."

Anjali stopped what she was doing and turned to regard him once more. Her eyes narrowed. "You're implying there's a connection between the two."

"I don't know. There could be. Douggy knows we're close. Who knows what the person who hired him wanted. It could be they weren't content with just

seeing me die. You've helped me plenty of times. No secret that."

Anjali folded her hands in front of her and looked thoughtful. She nibbled on her lower lip, something she tended to do when in deep thought. Torim had always thought it made her endearing.

"The timing is suspicious, I'll give you that, but I can't see it being true. Sure, I've helped you, but so have dozens of others. I'm not special in that sense so why target me?"

Torim shrugged. "Not much real evidence for it right now, though I haven't checked with anyone else who works with me. Maybe they've been hit, maybe not, but either way, I'd be careful if I were you. That robber used a lot of force for someone who just wanted to grab a few items."

"If he even grabbed anything," said Anjali and lifted up a piece of a broken vase. She looked at it with a sad expression and tossed it aside, breaking it even further. She let out a sigh.

Her demeanour made Torim worry. Usually she was filled with a fire that never seemed to go out. No matter what was thrown at her she'd combat it with a fierceness only a mother dragon could compare to. He almost regretted even bringing up the possibility that his own troubles had anything to do with hers. There was no proof at this point and it only served to make her worry more.

"I shouldn't have tried to make the connection between the robbery and my troubles. It's probably not true. I'm sorry." Torim pushed himself away from the counter and towards the door. He had things to tend to and Anjali had her own worries. He was only slowing her down. "I've got some people to see. I hope they find the one who did this to you."

Anjali gave him a brief smile. "If they don't, I will. Stay safe and if you need anything just let me know."

Torim stopped in his tracks. "Now that you mention it, I could use some caster shells."

"You got the money 'cause I could really use it about now?" Anjali gave him a stern look. Usually she gave him some slack on payment, but given the state of her store Torim couldn't bring himself to blame her for wanting to be paid on the spot. He rummaged through his coin pouch and pulled out some gold coins and



handed them to her. She counted them before heading to the back. He could hear her safe being opened and closed and a moment later she came back with several shells in her hands. There were all sorts and she handed them to him. Satisfied that it would be enough Torim stashed them in his shell pouch and gave her a nod of thanks.

"I'll drop by tomorrow," he said before stepping out the door. "Depending on how things go I might need your help."

"I'll be here," Anjali replied and gave her ruined shop a depressed look. "Lots to do to get this place open again."

"You'll do just fine," Torim said and headed down the street. Most of the interest from passers by had died down and even though there were still two members of the guard on watch to calm nerves the situation seemed to have simmered down. The slight worry she had for Anjali and her safety nagged at him, but it died down when he reminded himself that she was likely more capable of taking care of herself than he was.

She might have mostly made simple items, but she knew the runes well enough to do some incredible things. She was a graduate of the Towers after all.

His stomach growled reminding him that a proper meal was still missing. His mouth felt dry as well. He found himself the nearest tavern and ordered up a pint of cold ale and a proper meal. He sat down at one of the tables outside the tavern. It let him keep an eye on the people passing by which made for a decent enough distraction from his thoughts. He thanked the waitress when she brought him a plate with two slices of bread, potatoes soaked in a meaty gravy and a separate serving of greens. He stuffed his mouth with an appetite that matched the time he'd spent underground.

Meanwhile his mind was busy at work thinking about who to see first. Him and Douggy had several mutual associates that might know why the old man had betrayed him. Choosing the right one wasn't a hard decision in the end. It was likely he was the one Douggy had gone to first.

Torim finished his meal and washed down the last of his ale. It had refreshed his mind and body and gave his step a spring that had been missing. He headed away from the busy central market area and headed towards the eastern tip of

the island. The further away he got from the centre the more changes there were. There were less carriages and modern steam powered carts and more people simply walking. The clothing got less fancy and more the working class. The buildings didn't change that much, but the stores were more the sort that sold consumables the common people needed. Sturdy boots, shirts that lasted, but weren't of ornate colours. The sort of thing someone working at one of the factories could afford to buy for their family.

Most of the buildings lining the busier, wider streets were businesses of some sort. From tailors to bakeries to even a couple of newspaper prints. Torim turned away from the main street and ventured to the smaller side streets. Those were lined with apartment buildings. Looking up he could see clothes lines running between buildings and a couple of women hanging up freshly washed clothes to dry. While they were doing that they chatted loudly to each other despite being on the opposite sides of the street.

Despite it being a big city it was the sort of sight that gave it a community feel.

The red brick buildings looked nearly identical to each other. The only real way to tell them apart were the numbers above the doorways and the bronze signs next to the door that named the building. Torim stopped in front of a building with the number 745 on top of the doorway.

While the buildings were mostly identical there was a clear difference in how they were looked after. Looking at the building next to him, number 744, he noted the door was freshly painted, someone had swept the stairway recently as it lacked a fine coat of soot.

745 on the other hand had paint peeling away from the door and the only soot that had moved from the stairway leading up to it had been moved by the people walking up and down. Torim shook his head and headed up the stairway. The door led into a hall with a stairway climbing up the right side. To the left was a single door reserved for the person who was supposed to sweep the stairs and keep the paint from chipping. Judging by the way the door to the apartment was wide open there was no such person.

It was the third floor where he stopped and made his way to the left of the

stairs. In either direction the corridor had doors lining it. The floor creaked under him. Some of the boards looked like they might shoot up and smack him in the face if he stepped right at the end of it. He made his way past a few of the doors and stopped in front of one of them. It had the number 17 painted on it. Not wasting time he knocked on it and stepped to the side just in case.

“Yeah, who is it?” came a male voice from the inside. He sounded groggy, perhaps because he had just woken up or because he was drunk already.

“It’s me. Torim.”

He heard a grunt and some crashing noises before the door cracked open and a messy haired man peeked out. He squinted at Torim before a smile appeared on him. “So it is. Come on in.”

“Thanks, Vance.”

Torim entered the apartment and Vance closed the door behind him. If the owner of the apartment was messy with his hair and clothing that seemed to have soaked up a good portion of his last ten meals, the apartment itself was a wreck. There was but a single path leading from room to room. Everything else was covered in stacks of books and other items. As Torim made his way along the path towards what might have been the main room of the apartment he could swear he spotted some trinkets of gold among the stacks of clothes, empty bottles and hammers. Ignoring that the man had a dozen hammers stacked on a barrel Torim made his way to the single open space he could find. There were chairs there, but all of them had items stacked on them.

“What bring you here?” Vance hurried past him and started clearing one of the chairs.

“Has Douggy been here to see you?” Torim asked and watched the man move a stack of parchment before the chair appeared from underneath it all. The second long stop in his cleaning gave away much more than the answer he gave.

“Douggy? No, haven’t seen him. Why would I? He never liked me much. Why I always preferred to deal with you.” Instead of offering the chair to Torim, Vance sat on it himself.

“See, having dealt with you as much as I have, I know when you’re lying. And you’re lying right now.” Torim crossed his hands over his chest and gave the

man a stern look. "I'm in no mood for it today. I'm looking for Douggy because he betrayed me and tried to kill me. I know from the way your eyes are darting around right now that you've lied to me about seeing him. So why don't you do yourself a favour and tell the truth before I beat it out of you?"

"All right, all right, he was here," Vance blurted out in a panic. He kept looking around and touching the items closest to him as if they gave him some strength to deal with the situation. "Said you were done and out of the business just like he was, but that there was one last thing I could do for the both of you."

"What did he ask you to do?" asked Torim and leaned in towards the man. He could feel himself getting closer to his treacherous partner.

Vance shifted in his seat and reached behind him to grab a piece of cloth that was sticking out from under a pile of books. He pulled it out and started nervously crunching it between his fingers. "Nothing really. Just to arrange an item to be delivered to a certain place."

"Was it a crown?" Torim asked. If it was then he'd have a good clue to follow.

"A crown?" Vance shook his head. "I don't know what it was. It was wrapped in cloth, but it couldn't have been a crown. Maybe a book."

"Do you still have it?"

Vance shook his head while he continued to mangle the piece of cloth in his hands. "I arranged delivery as instructed."

"All right. Where was it delivered?"

"I have it written down somewhere," said Vance and stood up. He started rummaging thorough the piles. How he ever found anything was a mystery to Torim. A person could have spent a week poking through all the stuff he had in the apartment and not find what they were looking for. Still, the man's ability to gather stuff was impressive and had led Torim and Douggy on many of their most successful hunts. He also had an impressive network of people who'd deliver items which made him valuable in another way.

"No, not here," Vance muttered to himself and pushed past Torim back towards the door leading to the corridor. Torim followed close by, not wanting to give the man the opportunity to slip away. Not that he would. He'd rather die in a fire than leave behind the things he had spent so much time gathering.

“Ah, here it is.” Vance pulled out a piece of parchments from between two books. He handed it to Torim. “That’s the address.”

It wasn’t one Torim recognized, but that wasn’t surprising. He hoped it meant no other friend had betrayed him. Not that he had many friends to betray him. Hunting for treasure wasn’t the sort of life that leant itself to making friends.

“Well, Vance, thanks for the information. If you run into Douggy again tell him I said I’ll collect on the debt.”

“I’ll do that,” Vance assured him and gave space for him to slip by and leave behind the mess that was his apartment.

Torim folded up the piece of parchment and stashed it in a pocket as he made his way down the stairs. He knew his next stop and marched towards it with a grim expression.

## Chapter 4

Anjali wiped some sweat off her forehead and put aside the broom. The store was still a mess with the broken display cases, but at least the shards of glass were off the floor along with the splinters of wood and stone. The hole in the wall and the broken display window still told what had happened.

A couple of workers were nailing boards where the display window was. A piece of glass as large as that was expensive to buy and they weren't really the sort of thing you could just walk into a store for. They had to be ordered and delivery took time. Boarding up the big hole was the best solution while waiting for the new window. It would make the store a bit darker and less appealing to anyone walking by, but at least it would prevent anyone from simply walking in during the night.

She walked behind the counter and sat down on the chair Anika often used. As she looked around the store she couldn't help but sigh. There was still a lot to do to bring it back to its former glory. At least the attacker had not stolen much. Only a single item that didn't worry her too much. It was a protective amulet that couldn't be used to harm anyone, at least not directly.

She watched the workers nail in the last few boards. It made the store dark and uninviting. She had ordered a new window already, but it would take a week for it to arrive, or so the dealer had said. With luck it might take less than that.

Still she couldn't shake off the conversation with Torim. The notion that it had not been a robbery, but a targeted attack against herself and Anika was so unlikely that worrying about it seemed like a waste of time. But the robber had not taken much of value. Perhaps because he'd been drawn into a caster battle.

Which was exactly what had her worried.

The caster shells used weren't cheap. The item the robber stole was barely worth more than them. Someone who could afford a caster could easily have walked in and bought the pendant. Maybe he had hoped to rob more, but that still posed a question as to why a simple robber would have a caster. There were simpler and cheaper weapons.

And why had he taken a shot at Anika? She was no threat. With a caster pointed at her she would have given no trouble. Anjali had made it clear to her. Nothing in the shop was worth more than her life. There would have been no reason to try and kill her.

That thought was enough to get her on her feet and head to the back. She grabbed her usual pouches and fastened them around her waist. She holstered her caster and made sure she had enough shells to make use of it. She then headed out and locked up the place as best she could. The workers had already been paid and they'd finished boarding up the place. It was as secure as it was going to be in its current condition.

Worried that there might have been some truth to the musings of Torim she headed for Anika's place. While she was a student at the Towers of Magic she did not live in them. There were too many students these days for all of them to live there. So they rented apartments here and there where they could be gotten on the cheap.

There were plenty of such buildings not that far from the Towers. They'd sprung up with demand. Anjali hoped Torim was wrong and that the worries that had gotten her on the move were as unfounded, but none the less she hurried down the crowded streets. The quicker she could set her mind at ease the faster she'd be back at the store ensuring it stayed afloat despite the setback of the day.

Heading for the south shore of the central island had her going towards the docks. The people walking the other way reflected that. Many of the were dressed like sailors and dock workers and there were plenty of wagons hauling goods. Some were even the modern ones powered by steam and runes instead of being drawn by horses. Those tended to be reserved for the more valuable goods that needed quick delivery and warranted the extra cost of such a new mode of transport.

Anjali was happy to see more of them on the streets. Meant more work for her when they broke down. Servicing such things was a new frontier for those who knew the runes and so far she had managed to garner a trustworthy reputation when it came to such work. She also didn't charge as much as some of the others. It made for a good side business to selling the items she made. In the

future it might even become the main business.

The apartment building Anika lived in was only a few buildings away from the bridge leading to the Towers. In the old city it would have been far above ground, but since the collapse the bridge had been moved to ground level, much like everything else. Around the area the people on the streets changed. Gone were the sailors and dock workers as were the wagons hauling goods. Instead there were mostly young people, wearing the robes of the Towers, as they made their way to classes and back home. There were taverns with tables and chairs in front of them. Most were occupied by the same sort of people enjoying drinks with friends while debating something that had taken place in class or been mentioned in their books. Some sat alone their noses firmly planted in an open book.

It was all very care free and light hearted. It made Anjali miss her own time at the Towers. Those had been simpler times with less responsibility and worries.

The buildings were multi-storied and built of the red brick that seemed to have become the default for the city. It was cheap and durable and easier to build with than carving out pieces of natural stone. The only real way to tell the difference between the buildings were the large bronze numbers hanging over each entrance door. Anjali looked for number eight and when she found it she headed through the door and up the stairs.

Anika lived on the third floor. The apartments were small so there were plenty of doors lining the corridor. Anjali stopped and knocked on the door with the number 318. She waited for a response. To her relief it didn't take long for Anika to open the door. She looked surprised to see her.

"Anjali. What are you doing here?" she asked with an equally surprised voice.

"Just wanted to check how you were doing," said Anjali and smiled. The bandage around her head looked clean and she didn't seem bothered by any surprising pains.

"Come in," said Anika and stepped aside. Anjali stepped into the small apartment, though calling it that was a stretch. It was only a single room with barely room for a bed, a desk and a couple of chairs. Not much different from the rooms at the Towers. The buildings were all about providing the largest amount of



people with a roof over their heads. The students spent most of their time at lectures, their jobs and at taverns with their friends. So the bare essentials suited most of them fine.

“You seem to be doing all right,” Anjali noted as her friend closed the door. She took a seat on one of the chairs as Anika sat down on the bed. It left them facing each other no more than a couple of feet from each other.

“The healers did a good job,” said Anika with a small smile. “Not that my injuries were that bad. Just a scrape, really. Should be able to take off the bandage by evening.”

“That’s good,” said Anjali. “Something just doesn’t sit right with me about the whole thing. I managed to clean up the shop after you’d left and noticed the robber didn’t actually steal much of anything. Just a pendant. Not something worth shooting a caster over. Did he say anything before shooting at you?”

Anika shook her head. “No, he didn’t say anything. Just pulled out the caster and fired. Then you fired back. I don’t think he had much time to steal anything.”

“But doesn’t it strike you as a bit odd that someone with a caster would try to rob the store? People who can afford those don’t tend to need to rob places.”

“Maybe he stole the caster too,” said Anika and gave her a curious look. “What’s really bothering you?”

“Torim stopped by the store after you’d left,” said Anjali. She couldn’t miss the reaction of disappointment and curiosity the words brought about. She knew the young woman found him fascinating and often chatted with him when he stopped by. The disappointment must have been because she had missed him. “Apparently Douggy turned on him. Tried to kill him.”

“No!” Anika breathed out.

“Don’t worry. He’s fine. Hunting for the traitor as we speak, but the timing made him worry the robbery might be connected.”

“But Douggy taught him everything he knows. They’ve been together for more than a decade. How could he betray him?” Anika asked.

“No honour amongst thieves, I suppose,” said Anjali and shrugged.

“Torim isn’t a thief!” Anika countered. She looked more upset about the

implication than the man himself would have been.

“You remember Lord Favron? Torim had no trouble digging up his grave mere days after the burial just to get at a clue.”

“But the Favron family ended up with the artefact he found thanks to that clue,” Anika pointed out.

“Only because they made the highest bid for it,” Anjali reminded her.

“Well, all right, he’s not someone a god would deem a saint, but he’s not a thief. He’s just.. he finds things people have lost and buried away.”

“So he’s a grave robber, is what you’re saying?” A small smile fought its way to Anjali’s lips.

“That’s such a mean way of putting it,” said Anika and pouted, but offered no counter argument to the label assigned to the man.

An uncomfortable silence grew between the two. Taking a deep breath Anjali almost missed the subtle click coming from the corridor. It was a sound she knew all too well. The sound of a caster being cocked.

“Get down!” she managed to shout and lunge forward to drag the younger woman off the bed and down to the floor. She scrambled to shield her with her own body. She wasn’t sure Anika had any protections where as she had an amulet around her neck that would offer some protection from what was to come.

The door behind them exploded mere seconds later. The flames shot into the room a fraction later and smashed against the single window the gave light to the room and broke it. While most of the flames shot out through the window, some hit the wall around and deflected back into the room. Soon the bed, the desk and everything else wooden was on fire.

The heat was strong enough that Anjali held her breath and hoped Anika had the sense to do the same. She had seen the results of people thinking an amulet was enough to let them stand in the middle of an inferno and still breathe normally. While it would protect against the flames it did little to keep away the hot air from your lungs.

It was possible to burn your lungs into useless sacks of tissue by just inhaling.

Thankfully caster shots weren’t that long lasting. As the jet of flames died

down Anjali drew in a deep breath and reached for her own weapon. She fumbled for a shell from the pouch around her waist and loaded it in before rolling on her back and taking aim at the door. There wasn't much left of the door. What was there was burning with orange flames. Anjali could clearly see the man through the wreckage. He had on the same clothes as when he'd robbed the store and the mask was still there, covering his face.

She wasted no time pulling the trigger on her caster.

The jet of water shot out and smashed against the man. He was thrown back against the door behind him and smashed right through it. Anjali hoped the room was empty. Hurting an innocent bystander wouldn't have sat well with her. Some of the water splashed from the door frame and put out the flames. A mixture of smoke and steam filled the room and corridor. The air cooled down.

"You all right?" Anjali asked and scrambled to get off Anika.

"I'm fine," Anika assured her and glanced around. "My room!"

"Don't worry about it. You're still alive," Anika said and reached for another shell from her pouch. She loaded her caster and tried to peer through the smoke to see if the enemy was still looking to hurt them or if the hit had knocked him unconscious. She made it to the door before she got the answer. She barely dodged the deadly shower of tiny rocks that whizzed through the air. Anika let out a yelp before she managed to hide on the other side of the door.

"Were you hit bad?" Anjali asked as the shower of rock continued to pour in through the doorway. At least the brick wall that protected the two of them seemed to be holding up.

Anika shook her head and rested her back against the wall. "Just clipped my arm. Going to leave a bruise."

Anjali focused on getting a shell out of her pouch. She discarded a few as being too destructive or ineffective. Finding the right one wasn't always easy. Especially in the heat of the moment. Not that she had many options left. Hesitantly she picked out one of the fire shells and loaded it in after taking out the one she'd previously loaded.

"When I say go, you run out of here as quick as you can," Anjali said and gave Anika a stern look.

“What about you?” she asked.

“I’ll be right behind you,” Anjali assured her. She had no intention of staying behind to get burned alive. As soon as the shower of stones died down Anjali stepped through the doorway and into the corridor. She aimed at the broken door opposite and pulled the trigger. A thin strand of flames shot out of the barrel of the gun and started slithering into the room opposite.

“Run!” Anjali shouted. She felt Anika brush past her, she heard her footsteps as they got further and further away. She kept her focus on the thin strand of flame. It was risky just standing there, but it was a slow shell to fully activate. She had to wait for the strand to break off from the caster. It would continue slithering into the room and seek out anything living, wrap around it and then burst into flame.

A nasty piece of work that Anjali wished she had never created, but it was effective.

The strand broke loose and Anjali darted after Anika as quickly as she could. Reaching the stairway and a few steps down she could feel the building shudder and the sound of flames erupting outwards. A wave of heat rushed past her even in the stairway. She hoped no one on the floor had opened their door. The brick walls should have been enough to protect anyone in the adjacent apartments.

She reached the ground floor and rushed out the front door. She found Anika standing there along with a sizeable crowd whose attention was geared upwards. Stopping and looking back up she couldn’t blame them. There was a big hole in the building wall and there was smoke and flames visible.

A real spectacle.

“What happened?” Anika asked. She glanced around the crowd and started pulling Anjali away from the scene. Some of the onlookers were starting to give them more attention than the smouldering building.

“He might be dead,” Anjali replied. “The strands exploded so that means they found something living to wrap around.” She didn’t resist as the younger woman dragged her away from the crowd and onto a side street that kept them away from prying eyes while still giving a decent view of the building.

“Let’s hope that’s true,” Anika said and sighed. “I’m not getting my security

deposit back, that's for sure."

"I'm sorry. I don't know what's going on or why we're being targeted, but I'm sorry it has found its way to you." Anjali shook her head. She still couldn't quite believe where things had gone.

"It's not your fault, I'm sure of it," Anika assured her and gave a brave smile.

There were shouts coming down from the bridge. The two women glanced in that direction and saw a group of wizards making their way across. They looked to be in a hurry to see what was going on at one of the student houses.

"We should go unless we want to answer some questions," Anika said. "They probably think it's just some student whose experiments went wrong, but they'll soon figure out it was more than that. They'll find the caster shells and then they'll ask questions we might not want to answer."

Looking at the grim faces of the wizards as they got closer Anjali couldn't deny that it was best to move on. "Let's go to the shop."

"Will that be safe?" Anika asked.

Anjali shrugged. "I don't know, but at least we'll have some items around to help us. Besides, I'm low on caster shells. And I think you might need one too."

That made Anika's eyes light up. Casters were expensive and well out of reach of a mere student at the Towers. While most wizards tended to frown upon using them, many chose to carry one as they had the convenience of not straining the user when fired, unlike doing magic directly.

The two ladies began the trek back to the shop. As they walked a squad of city guard passed them, no doubt called by the column of smoke snaking up to the sky. If they found the charred corpse of the man responsible for the attack there would be an investigation. Anjali wished she could take a peek at it when the time came, but that seemed unlikely to happen.

It was probably best to stay as far from any investigation as possible.

"They're going to find out it was my room that got attacked first," Anika noted as they walked. The people on the streets weren't paying much attention to them. Some were just busy going about their own business while some had stopped and formed little groups as they looked on at the rising pillar of smoke.

"They might," Anjali agreed and glanced back. The column of smoke didn't

seem to be getting any smaller. She hoped the entire building wasn't going to burn down. While it was made out of bricks there were still support beams and plenty of furniture to burn down.

"What are we going to tell them?" Anika asked.

"Not like we know much to tell at this point," Anjali said and focused on the street ahead. "We'll figure something out. Don't worry. I'll look after you. I know you lost a lot in that."

"All my clothes, books.. everything." Anika sounded like she was only just realizing she didn't have anything other than what she was wearing when it came to possessions. It was a hard place to be, that Anjali knew from personal experience and she felt a bit guilty about it. It was because of her she was in the situation. She owed it to the young woman to make sure she got back on her feet.

"Don't you worry about none of that. I'll help you out. The important thing is you're unhurt and alive."

Anika smiled. "Not all bad news, indeed."

The two walked in silence for a bit. The further away they got from the scene of the incident the more people were going about their normal lives. Looking back the column of smoke had disappeared from view, now replaced with the tall buildings that blocked the view.

The shop greeted them in the state Anjali had left it in. She unlocked the door and the two slipped in. The door was locked behind them. The shop itself was still in disarray so they made their way to the back room. While the wall was gone it was in better order than the rest of the shop. Anjali took a seat by her desk and Anika found herself a chair next to the safe.

Anjali opened a drawer on the desk and pulled out some shells for her caster. She examined a few of them for the markings that told what they did and discarded a few while stashing other in her shell pouch. She glanced over at Anika. "Right. Your caster."

The words made the young woman's head snap up and her eyes brighten.

Anjali dug out the key to the safe and walked over to open it. Casters were expensive enough to not be on display. They were hard enough to make that she didn't have many of them anyway and the demand for them didn't warrant a big

stockpile. The heavy door of the safe opened without noise and Anjali reached in to grab a wooden box. She had three to choose from. Two of them were in decorated boxes with velvet lining. Those were orders for customers and Anjali had no intention of handing them over to anyone but the person who paid for them. The third one was in just a simple, plain wooden box. It was the one she grabbed and pulled out before closing the safe.

She handed it to Anika and gave her a stern look. "I'll loan it to you until this thing is resolved. Be careful with it, use it responsibly and most of all, make sure you don't get innocents caught in any of it."

Anika nodded. "I'll be careful." She couldn't hide her excitement as she opened the box and pulled out the caster. It wasn't the prettiest of weapons. It lacked many of the decorative touches many other casters had. They were a bit of a luxury item after all. The simple wooden handle had a nice sheen to it and the metal barrel did have runes engraved on it that gave it some air of prestige despite being a purely functional piece of the weapon.

Anjali headed back to her desk and took a seat. She shifted through some of the shells and discarded some of the more dangerous ones. Not the sort you'd want to hand to a first time caster user. Or anyone else for that matter.

Anika examined the weapon more closely, cocked open the barrel to see how it was loaded and tried how it felt to grip the wooden handle. It wasn't a perfect fit for her small hands, but it gave a solid enough hold that she figured it wouldn't fly off her hands while shooting. She knew some of the shells could give quite a kickback while others didn't move the weapon at all.

"It's not the prettiest, but does the job," Anjali said as she turned around and threw a small pouch to Anika. The younger woman fumbled to catch it. Somehow she managed it without dropping the weapon or missing the pouch.

"I hope I won't have to use it," Anika replied and opened the pouch. She found ten shells inside. Her eyes widened. "Are you sure? That's so many."

Anjali nodded. "Don't worry about the cost. You just keep safe."

"But it's too much," Anika protested and pulled shut the pouch. "You've promised me too much with the apartment and my belonging and now this."

Anjali smiled briefly. "I've been in a similar position as you are. Nothing to

my name but the clothes on me. It's not a good place to be and I wish someone had extended a hand to me then. Well, now I can do that to someone. I'm not going to let that chance to give a bit of light to someone go past me."

"You make it sound selfish," Anika managed to say with a brief smile. She pulled out the holster for the caster from the box and fitted the weapon in it. She stood up to fasten both the weapon and the pouch around her waist.

"It is," Anjali admitted. "At least partly."

"Well, I don't know how to thank you for it." Anika gave her a bewildered look. "All I can think of is helping you find out what's going on."

"The wizards from the Towers will likely be searching for you. They're going to find your room wrecked and they'll worry you either died or disappeared. You know how they are. They don't let students get away with a lot and torching your own room and running away is certainly frowned upon."

"I didn't torch it," Anika reminded her.

"You're going to have to go in and explain it," Anjali said and gave her a stern look. "Otherwise we aren't going to be able to do much. Besides, you'll probably be able to hear whether I managed to kill the bastard or not."

"They'll ask questions. Why I was attacked and such," Anika sighed. "Lying to them isn't easy."

"You don't need to lie. You can honestly say you have no idea. Just try to keep me out of the picture. They're not exactly fans of mine and if they find out I'm involved they'll probably lock you in the towers just to keep you away from me." Anjali gave her a sad smile. It was never easy to remember some of the things in her past and the falling out with the wizards of the Towers was one such thing. She took a deep breath and forced the thought to the back of her mind.

Anika knew better than to ask what had led to the fall out between the shop owner and the Towers. She knew the wizards could frown upon someone like her just because of her profession. She made what many deemed trinkets and worked as a glorified blacksmith as she maintained the engines on ships. There was more to it than simple choice of career, but she did not like to talk about it. Pushing on the matter didn't seem appropriate.



“I’ll go back there in the morning,” Anika said. “If need be I can say I was at the shop helping you after it got robbed. That’s not far from the truth.”

Anjali nodded. “Sounds like a good plan. Though they might ask if the robbery is connected to the attack on you.”

“And I can honestly answer with a ‘I don’t know’.” Anika smiled.

“Indeed.” Anjali sighed. “Well, we’re both here anyway. Why don’t we clean up the shop a bit?”

The two got to work with the hope that the next day everything would be back in its place and the shop would be open to customers once more.

## Chapter 5

Anika felt nervous. It was the first time she was in the chambers of one of the Tower Masters. It didn't help that the man himself was sitting right opposite to her, his keen eyes fixed on her. There were two other, senior wizards, standing on either side of him, equally focused on her.

"You say you were away when the incident took place," said the Tower Master.

Anika glanced up from her hands and at Arding Kelness, the master of the tower of Fire. He had greying hair and beard, though his natural brown hair was still giving a fight against the ageing. His forehead had a column of wrinkles on it, telling of days spent with a frown on his face. His green eyes were piercing and forced Anika to look down quicker than she liked.

"Yes. I was helping my employer. There was a robbery and the shop suffered significant damage. We were cleaning the place up, hoping it would be in shape to be opened the next day." Anika hoped her thin lie would go unnoticed.

"Good thing you were away or you might not be alive right now." It was the man standing to the left of Arding. He was one of the older teachers at the Tower, named Ewory Moris. Older than Arding, he already had a fully grey hair and a moustache. Surprisingly he did not have a beard. His skin was wrinkly and the right side of his face had an old burn wound covering it. There were rumours amongst the students that he had gotten it in a failed experiment while others claimed the breath of a red dragon had narrowly missed slaying him.

Ewory never confirmed nor denied any of the rumours so the scar remained a mystery.

Anika nodded. "It's terrible what happened. I lost everything."

"It's a good thing no one was hurt," said the woman standing to the right of Arding. Inan Keltaidar was one of the youngest in the higher echelons of the Towers. Just barely past thirty, her hair was still a fiery red and no wrinkles blemished her almost ivory white skin. Her voice had an velvet smoothness to it.

Anika did her best to hide her reaction. The attacker had not died. Anjali

had not managed to kill him which meant he was still out there, plotting and no doubt ready to make another attempt at what ever it had been he had tried at the dormitory.

“A small miracle that. Several rooms burned down completely. The whole building was in danger for a moment,” said Arding. He leaned back in his chair. It let out a creak that would have made a first time sitter worry, but the wizard paid it no attention.

“And you are certain you have no idea what happened?” Inan asked and stared at Anika with an intensity that would have melted ice. “The investigation suggests your room was the first place to go up in flames. Then the room opposite to yours. Are you certain you did not leave an experiment unattended?”

Anika shook her head. “All I had in the room were books as part of the lessons I’m taking. Experiments are strictly against the dormitory rules. I would never break them.”

The three wizards exchanged looks. Anika managed a quick glance of them without being noticed. They did not look convinced by her story.

“You said your employer was robbed,” Arding started. “Tell us about that.”

“I’m not sure what that has to do with anything,” Anika tried to avoid the question.

“It is a bit odd that your employer gets robbed and then your apartment gets torched,” Arding said while giving his beard a gentle stroke. “Could be the same person.”

“I don’t see how. The person who robbed my employer was seeking magical items. He broke display cases and sought something particular. There’s nothing of value in my apartment and I’m not capable of producing anything that wouldn’t be easier to find at the shop.” Anika could feel her nerves strain as she tried to hold herself together and present her case in a confident voice. She wished the entire thing was over. Facing three senior wizards wasn’t something anyone could face without some worry.

“Are you certain he was only robbing the place?” Inan asked.

“As certain as I can be without being him,” Anika replied. She sighed, closed her eyes and let her head sink for a moment before opening her eyes and looking

up at the trio. "I honestly do not know anything about the person who did this. I've lost everything in it and these questions aren't helping anything. If there's nothing more, I'd like to go so I can start piecing my life back together."

The three wizards exchanged looks. It was hard to read their expressions, but what Anika could see gave her hope.

"All right," said Arding. "It's clear this has affected you quite a bit and we're sorry to have asked these questions of you. The city guard is investigating, but we felt it was our duty to ensure there is no further danger to other students. We're satisfied that you're not aware of any such danger and trust you would inform us if you became aware of such. We hope you will be able to continue your studies without this incident causing problems. From what we have heard from the teachers you are a very promising student."

Hearing such praise coming from the tower master gave Anika a warm feeling. It made her feel proud of the effort she had put into the studies. It had paid off. She gave the trio a smile. "Thank you. Hearing that from you means a lot."

Arding smiled as well. It was genuine and warm. "Off you go then." It was said with the sort of voice a parent would use on their child after giving them a good talking to.

Anika nodded, stood up and left the room. As soon the door closed behind her she let out a sigh of relief. The chamber she arrived in was empty, save for a few chairs to provide a seat for those waiting to meet the master. She rushed straight across the room to the chute leading down. She had to wait a bit for the transport disc to reach the very top of the tower before she could step on it and start the descent to ground level.

The disc lowered at a steady pace, guided by the elemental spirit tied to it. It whisked past some floors, offering a glimpse to the corridors that disappeared as quickly as they appeared. There were students hurrying to their lessons, groups talking together and senior wizards going about their business. Sometimes the disc would stop and a few people would get on and at other times get off. It took several minutes for it to get to the ground floor.

The entrance hall was a busy place with plenty of people going about their

daily lives. There were groups of students talking and laughing. There were guests looking to talk with wizards and students whose duty it was to find out if the wizard in question was available and then guide the visitor to their chambers. All of this took place in a room that took up the entire base of the tower. There were entrances leading to the other towers and one leading to the single bridge that connected the towers to the city.

It was that entrance to the bridge that Anika headed for.

She hoped none of her friends would see her. Not that she had many. Life in the Towers could be competitive which led to friends stabbing each other in the back. Many thought it better to stay to themselves and focus on the studies instead of making friends. Anika fell into the latter group, though she had not managed to avoid making a few friends. Mostly from other Towers so they didn't pose as much of a threat.

A gentle breeze greeted her when she walked out the entrance and onto the bridge connecting the Towers to the central island of Ramyn. The five towers were off the shore of it and rose straight from the river rushing past them. She walked at a brisk pace to cross the bridge. Without looking she knew the brown water of the river was lazily flowing past. If she looked back, past the towers, she might have seen a few river boats passing by. She kept her eyes forward. There was plenty of traffic on the bridge and at times it got crowded and slow moving. She pushed past all that and finally arrived on the island.

"How did it go?"

Anika jumped, startled. She had not noticed Anjali parting from behind one of the stone pillars that stood on either side of the bridge.

"I managed," she replied and continued walking. Anjali offered her the caster and pouch back. Anika stopped to put them on. It would have been unwise to meet the wizards with them. The additional questions raised by them might have been enough to keep them suspicious of her.

"Do you think they believed your story?" Anjali asked as the pair started walking again.

Anika shrugged. "They're hard to read, but they seemed satisfied that I didn't know anything. Which is mostly true. They did say no one died in the incident so

the attacker is still out there.”

Anjali cursed. “How did he manage to fool the flames?”

“Maybe he didn’t,” Anika pointed out. “There are protections that could withstand it.”

“Very expensive ones,” Anjali said. “Or a very powerful wizard, but I haven’t gotten that sense from him.”

“He does seem like someone who doesn’t quite know what they’re doing,” Anika agreed. “If he was a wizard he’d have magic in use that would be far beyond what the caster can do.”

“But not as convenient,” Anjali noted. “If he’d used his own magic would he have been able to get away as quick as he did?”

“Or would he have succeeded?” Anika asked and kept walking. She figured they were going back to the shop so that’s the direction she was going. Anjali kept following so it didn’t seem like she had anything else planned.

Anjali shook her head. “We don’t know enough to even guess. What we need is more information. I hate to say this, but I think we need to talk with Torim.”

Anika had trouble hiding how excited the prospect made her feel. She tried to be casual about it. “You sure that’s going to help us? He doesn’t know much more than we do, does he?”

“We can hope he has found some leads,” Anjali replied. “If he hasn’t then we don’t really have any other option. Well.. ”

The fact she trailed off like that and had a undecipherable expression on her made Anika even more curious about what she had planned to say and what thought had so interrupted her. “What?”

“It’s nothing,” Anjali said quickly and walked past her.

“Come on. it’s obviously something,” Anika countered and matched her hastened pace. “I’m in this as much as you are. I have a right to know.”

Anjali bit down on her lower lip and considered the consequences for a moment. It was risky. It was a world Anika had not tipped her toes in and once they’d gotten moist there was no going back from it. It was the sort of thing that could get her in trouble with the Towers.

Then it might also be the only solution to their problem.

"I don't know," Anjali started hesitantly. "It's a world you shouldn't even get a glimpse of."

"I was nearly killed by a fire shell from a caster while I was in my room studying. I don't see how there's anything worse in the world I could get a glimpse of."

Anjali couldn't help but laugh a little. "Oh you sweet, innocent girl. There are worse things in this world than burning alive. Much worse. Not to mention the Towers would likely be upset if a student of theirs was poking around in such a place."

Anika couldn't help but feel a bit insulted by the laugh. "I'm not that innocent. And the Tower Masters already seem to be a bit upset that I'm working with you."

"Well, that's no surprise," Anjali replied. "Those old farts think my work is beneath them. They think it's a slap in their faces after all they did for me." She snorted. "They think I shouldn't be free to do what I want and instead be tied to their little stone pillars for life."

Anika had heard her complain of the wizards enough times to not put much weight to her words. "So, what's this place you don't want to take me to?" She hoped a direct question would get an answer.

"Let's get back to the shop first," Anjali said, dodging the question. "It's not something to be spoken about in public." She looked around at the people passing by. It was unlikely any of them were paying attention to the pair or what they were saying, but it was obviously a risk she was not willing to take.

Knowing that protesting would not get her anywhere, Anika nodded and followed the shop owner through the streets.

Despite all the cleaning they had done the previous day the shop was still a mess. The inside was worse off, but even from the outside it was obvious something horrible had happened. Even more surprising was the fact they had a customer waiting outside. The young man took off his hat as the two women closed in.

"Hello," Anajli said with a smile. "Are you looking to shop for something?"

The young man shook his head. "No. I was told to come here and hire a rune

master named Anjali. The captain of my ship was very clear she was the only one he trusted. There are some runes on the ship that need looking at.”

“What ship and how bad is it?” Anjali asked. She hated the idea of putting on hold what she had had in mind, but one glance at her shop was enough to convince her to take the job no matter what it was. She needed the money to rebuild and keep Anika fed.

“The *Brisk Brewer*. It’s bad. Captain Johaug had to bring it down from the tower and land it in the water. I’ve never seen him so angry.” The young man seemed to be genuinely fearful of the anger.

“Can’t blame the captain for that,” Anjali said. “The ship hasn’t touched water in over five years. Must be really bad if that’s the case. Give us a moment. I’m going to grab a few things from the shop and then we’ll come with you.”

“We?” Anika asked.

Anjali gave her a brief smile. “Yes, we. You’re coming too. I have a feeling it’s going to be a two person job. Besides, no point guarding the shop.” She gave her still ruined store a sorrowful look.

Anika couldn’t help but smile. She had begged to go with her on jobs for a long time. It had happened two times and even those jobs had been brief and she hadn’t had much to do. The prospect of doing real work with her washed away any questions she had about the mysterious place she had avoided telling her of. Instead she rushed inside the shop and helped gather tools and supplies that might be needed.

Ten minutes later the pair joined the young man on the street. They had two heavy bags with them. Anjali was quick to shove her bag to the young man. Anika wished she could do the same, but two bags seemed like a cruel thing to do to the man. So she carried her own, shifting it from one shoulder to the other as one grew tired.

“What sort of ship is it?” Anika asked, wanting to get some image of it before seeing it.

“Three masts,” the young man said and glanced back at her. “It’s a great ship. Sturdy and trustworthy. Mainly we haul cargo between Ramyn and the cities to the south.”



"I know the ship wizard," Anjali said. "I've worked on the ship previously. He's not the type to let things get bad. He makes regular checks and does the needed maintenance and repair. Makes me wonder what could have happened."

"He died," the young man said. He sounded down about it. "We don't really know what happened. One morning he didn't come for breakfast and when I went looking I found him laying in his bed, tucked in like nothing was wrong, except he was dead. No sign of anyone doing anything to him so we figured it was just his time. We buried him at sea."

"I'm sorry to hear that," Anjali said as they walked the street leading to the southern dock. "He wasn't that old so it's surprising."

"Made the journey back a lot more troublesome," the young man said. "Lucky we had his apprentice on board. He managed to keep us up in the sky 'till we made it here, but then the issues began."

"That's probably it," Anika said. "Inexperienced wizard can overload the runes and cause all sorts of damage if they're not careful."

"Captain's going to throw him overboard if that's the reason he had to set her down in water," the young man said with a visible shiver running down his body.

"You can't blame someone not ready for the job for not being good at it," Anika said.

"He can," the young man countered.

"Especially once he sees what I'm going to demand for payment," Anjali said with a wide grin.

"Don't be greedy," Anika chided her employer.

"I won't," Anjali assured her. "It just sounds like this is going to be a lot of work. And there's two of us working on it so.."

"Just remember to be generous enough that he comes to us the next time something happens," Anika reminded her.

"I'll try," Anjali said.

The trio continued their brisk pace of walking. The docks were busy as always and the roads leading in and out were filled with people as well as wagons hauling goods to and from the port. The first glimpse of the actual docks were the

tall towers. High enough that three ships with tall masts could park on top of each other without trouble. There were winches and passage ways that allowed goods to be loaded and unloaded from the tied down ships. The lowest berth was at water level and mainly serviced ships that couldn't soar through the skies. The two above it serviced ships that could fly. Just like there were piers next to each other there were docking towers next to each other.

The extra ships made the already packed docks even more so. The towers worked, but were congested and slower than the regular piers. It had been the only option to expand the docks on the already fully built up island. On the outer edges of the dock two more were being built. They were relatively recent additions, after all.

The young man guided them to one of the piers towards the middle of the dock. The *Brisk Brewer* was a sight to behold. Three tall masts with numerous sails furled up. With them all unfurled Anika could imagine how majestic it would look soaring through the sky. The blue paint with yellow accents along its railing was a pleasant enough combination to look at and the sharp shape of its bow looked like it could slice through any wave.

Getting next to it the sheer size of the vessel became more apparent. Anika figured there would need to be at least three or four of her standing on top of each other to even touch the railings of the deck. Now that she was closer she could also see the runes engraved on the side of the ship. They blended in well with the blue paint now that they were inert, but once powered she could imagine them popping out like a splash of blood on fresh snow. Looking down to the waterline she could see a small strip of black tar that covered the bottom of the ship.

"We'd better hurry," the young man said and guided them to the gangplank leading up to the ship deck. They had to dodge dockworkers and cargo that was being offloaded from the ship on the other side of the pier. A heavy winch was offloading a large net filled with sacks of something – likely grain or flour. The air was filled with the sounds of men shouting, the seagulls crying in the sky, wagons rolling on the heavy wooden piers and winches creaking under the heavy weight of what ever was being hoisted up.

They walked up the gangplank as quick as they could to arrive in the relative peace of the ship deck. Looking up Anika could see the tall masts and the men climbing around in them, checking ropes and ensuring that the sails were in good condition. Above them loomed the bottom of another ship, docked at the first level the tower offered. It was slightly unsettling, knowing such a huge thing could come crashing down on you, but she reminded herself that the glowing runes all along the hull would ensure that wouldn't happen.

"Wait here. I'll go get the captain," the young man said and headed for the cabin at the stern of the ship.

Anjali gave Anika a look. She stuck close to her. The deck was busy. A couple of young men were mopping it. Ropes were being checked for any signs of wear and tear. Cargo was being unloaded. No one seemed to be slacking off.

"Doesn't look like the deck runes have suffered that bad," Anjali noted as she crouched down to look at some of the runes engraved onto the deck. There weren't many of them, but they were important. She pointed to a line of runes that ran from the bow all the way to the stern where the helm was. "The main connection seems to be in order."

"Hard to say without inspecting the whole thing," Anika reminded her. "Could be a rune right under the helm has something wrong with it and that's causing the problem."

Anjali nodded. "Good. you're awake." She gave the younger woman a brief smile.

"Are you going to be testing me all the time we're here?" Anika asked and hugged herself as a gust of wind blew over the deck. She could swear she felt some droplets of water hit her face.

"Of course," Anjali said as she stood up and wiped her hands on her clothes. "What would be the point otherwise?"

Anika sighed. Not that she could blame Anjali for wanting to keep testing her. What better way to assess how far she had gotten in her studies. It was a way to see where she was. If she did well she could maybe hope to have future jobs she could go on with her.

That was if the ship survived what was currently going on.

“Anjali! Fix this mess!” The booming voice carried over the noises of the deck and the docks surrounding it. The man walking towards them had a grey beard and the hat of a captain. A heavy coat rested on his shoulders, blue in colour. A white shirt and red trousers made up the rest of his conflicting clothing.

“Johaug. Long time no see,” Anjali replied with the softest of her voices. The two shook hands once the captain got close enough. His face was wrinkled to the point where it was hard to imagine how he would have looked as a young man. Days out in the sun on the open seas – or skies – was hell on your skin.

“Skip the pleasantries. We need to be out of the docks by the end of the day. You’ve got to fix this mess by then.”

“Can’t promise anything, but we’ll do our best,” Anjali replied. She gave the man a sly smile. “Going to cost you, though.”

Johaug snorted. “Figured it would. Don’t have a choice. Cheaper to pay you than to pay the fines for late delivery. The apprentice is below deck. Don’t know what he messed up, but it brought her down all the same. We’re lucky it happened so close to the city. Managed to get here and land in water.”

“What exactly happened?” Anika asked.

Johaug measured her from head to toe.

“She’s my apprentice,” Anjali offered to alleviate any suspicions the man might have.

“Damned if I know,” Johaug huffed. “One moment we’re up in the sky, cruising as always, the next the ship start to list to one side. Damn near lost a couple of men to that. Somehow we managed to right the ship, but then it listed to the other side.”

Anika and Anjali exchanged looks.

“Must be a problem with the stabilizer runes,” Anika offered.

Anjali nodded. “At least that should be the thing we check first. Any other problems?”

“We started to lose altitude at one point,” Johaug said. “Nearly scraped the tree tops before we got some lift again. I demanded answers from the apprentice, but he doesn’t seem to know anything. Poor old Nestor didn’t have time to teach him much.”

“Well, we’ll sort it out,” Anjali assured the man and grabbed her bag from the deck. “I’m sorry about Nestor as well. He took good care of this ship.”

“Going to be hard to replace him,” Johaug said. “Speaking of which. I need to get to the Towers to get some potential names.”

With that the conversation ended and Johaug walked off the ship. Anika grabbed her bag again and followed Anjali down below deck. There was plenty of light there due to lanterns. Anjali led the way, being familiar with the ship and its layout. They passed a crew sleeping area and went down another set of stairs to reach the very bottom of the vessel. A few bulkheads separated the lowest level. There was space for cargo both at the bow and aft, but in the middle there was a large room with a solid looking door that kept out anyone who had no business being there.

Anjali pushed it open without hesitation.

A scrawny looking man jumped up from the desk. He looked ready to run. There were dark bags under his eyes. By the robe he was wearing it was obviously the unfortunate apprentice that had led the ship down its troubled path.

“Who are you?” he demanded in high pitched voice.

“Captain Johaug hired us to fix this ship,” Anjali said without paying much attention to the man.

Anika entered the room and looked around with unabated curiosity. It was the first time she was seeing the centre of a ship. Lines of runes flowed into it from all over the vessel. They were all gathered on a large, round table in the centre of the room. A lamp above illuminated the area so that everything was easy to see and read.

It was the room that tied everything together and kept the magic flowing and working to keep the ship in the sky.

The heavy thud of Anjali setting down her bag pulled Anika away from the lines of runes and back to the matter at hand.

“I didn’t break anything, I swear,” the young man said, sounding both desperate as well as insulted that such a thing was being implied.

“I’m sure you didn’t,” Anjali said with a soft voice. Even Anika could see that

the young man would not respond well to being pushed. Being sympathetic and reassuring seemed like the best way forward. “But there’s a problem and we’re here to fix it. What’s your name?”

“Everyone calls me Pok,” the young man replied and seemed to relax a bit.

Anjali raised an eyebrow at the name, but said nothing more about it. “Right then, Pok. The ship listed and lost altitude. Notice anything off with the runes?”

The young man started to explain what had happened, but a subtle gesture from Anjali sent Anika away from the pair to investigate the runes. She walked up to the round table and started to examine it.

There were eight main lines coming to it, from both sides of the ship, from the bow and aft as well as each of the masts and one from the helm. The runes wound up into an ever tightening circle until there was only a small, cup sized bare spot left in the middle. Someone could have mistaken it for a decorative element since the runes were intertwined and there were lines guiding the flow of energies. It was the most complex collection of runes Anika had laid her eyes on and she struggled to make sense of it. She tried to recall what her mentors had taught her and how to best start unravelling the knot of symbols.

It took her a while, but she found the control points and where the activation runes would be drawn. As far as she could tell there was nothing wrong with any of it. No wear or tear, no burnt through runes.

It was as she had expected.

It was rare for the control circle to be damaged. From what she had heard and read of incidents the most common place for failure was the transference lines of runes as well as the outside hull of the ship. With that thought she moved on from the table and examined the eight lines that led to it.

“I didn’t do anything wrong!” Pok insisted in a whiny voice. “I controlled everything as I’ve been taught. The only reason we didn’t crash is because I managed to save things when we lost power!”

Anjali remained surprisingly calm when dealing with the agitated youngster. “So you’re saying the runes failed during normal use?”

“Yes!” Pok replied. “I’ve been through everything and haven’t figured what went wrong. There are no burnt out runes as far as I can tell.”

Anika shut out the conversation once more as she examined the lines. She had to grab a lantern to get better lighting in the corners of the room, but as far as she could tell the man was right and, at least within the room, the runes were all fine. She straightened herself and sighed. "He's right about the runes," she said and turned to face the pair. "They all seem fine to me. At least in this room. The control circle is intact."

"Have you tried powering things up?" Anjali asked and gave Pok a questioning look.

"The captain ordered me not to," Pok said, unable to hide how much that show of mistrust gnawed at him.

"Well, he didn't tell me not to, so I'm going to give it a little test, all right?" Anjali walked over to the round table and gave the young man a look that asked for approval. She didn't need it, but pretending Pok had a say in matters kept him feeling like he was part of the solution instead of the problem. With a nod from him Anjali pulled out a wax pen from her bag and drew the activation rune in the empty circle in the middle.

Anika stepped up closer to see what was being done. The pencil left a black marking on the table that would be hard to accidentally ruin. It was a mixture of wax, ash and other ingredients. It was commonly used for runes that needed some staying power without being outright carved into something.

The innermost circle of runes lit up in a pale blue glow.

Anjali took a moment to examine the runes before moving to the second most inner ring and touching a few of them. More runes lit up in the circle and the light started to slowly creep out the lines leading all around the ship.

Pok came next to Anika to see. He looked to be as curious as she was.

The pale glow of the runes lit up the room in an eerie blue. None of the three paid much attention to it nor to the footsteps of the men on the deck above. They were all too busy trying to find anything amiss in the intricate web of runes.

Anjali touched a few more runes in the circle. She waited for a moment before touching a few more. The lines running to the starboard side of the ship went dark. A moment later they lit back up, but then the opposite side went dark. That side lit back up a moment later.

“Well, there’s definitely something wrong on both sides,” Anjali said. “That small outage we just saw would be real bad mid flight.”

“Guess we’ll have to trace down both lines and inspect everything on both sides,” Anika said.

“That’s thousands of runes,” Pok said. “Some in hard to get to places. It’s going to take ages. Besides, I’ve already gone through most of them.”

“Most,” Anjali said. “Not all. You need to check them all every time something like this comes along. It’s usually not that obvious where the problem is. Maybe one rune has a scuff here and you pass it thinking it’s not going to cause any problems, but then in a nook somewhere there’s another rune with a slight scuff and those two scuffed runes are somehow connected. That’s where you get the problem.”

“It’s all connected,” Anika said and gave Pok a stern look. “You know that. These things are some of the most complex magic commonly in use. It usually takes a ship wizard a year or two to fully get to know the particulars of their ship. There’s a lot of room for something to go wrong.”

“Right,” Pok admitted, his head sinking in shame for not standing by the basics that were taught to every single wizard looking to work ships.

“The good news is we can probably fix this pretty easily once we find the problem spot,” Anjali said in an attempt to make the young man feel a bit better. “That said, we need to examine the runes on both sides of the ship. Why don’t I take the port side and you two take the starboard side. That way we can get this done quick.” Saying that she activated a few runes on the circle so that the energies would keep flowing, making it easier to spot any problem spots, but kept the levels so low that it wouldn’t break anything or cause the same shutdown her earlier test had done.

“Sounds like a plan,” Pok admitted and gave Anika a look.

She smiled briefly and grabbed a lantern. “Come on then. Let’s get to work.”

The pair followed the runes out the room and along the path they ran towards the side of the ship. The control room was surrounded on all sides by rooms that attempted to isolate it from any breach the outer hull might suffer. The walls were thick and there was plenty of iron to give additional support. The



doors separating the areas were thick and fitted so well that any water making it inside would only slowly trickle through. Anika threw herself into examining the runes. So much so that she paid no attention to Pok and what he was doing.

So she missed how he drew down the large wooden beam that blocked the door from opening from the outside.

“Nothing her..” was all Anika managed to say as she was standing up from examining the runes on the floor. She felt the pain in the back of her head before everything went dark.

## Chapter 6

Torim looked down at the piece of parchment and the address written down on it. He then looked up at the building across the street.

He cursed.

It wasn't the sort of place he could just march into and demand answers. The high walls surrounding the estate made the statement to keep out along with the sturdy looking gate. The guard standing there did not seem any more welcoming to random guests.

It wasn't the house of a noble, at least there was that, but a wealthy merchant. On a second thought Torim decided a noble would have been preferable. They tended to have some semblance of honour and code they adhered to. The wealthy merchants tended to follow only one rule and that was what ever made them the most coins.

Vance had given him the information he'd asked, but it looked like it wouldn't lead him anywhere. He'd spent a day just observing and trying to find some way in the place. Violence wasn't an option and going in stealthily carried the risk of being found out and thought a thief. He'd considered dipping into his stash of items and trying to enter by claiming to be selling something, but that had a low chance of success and wouldn't really give him much of an opportunity to ask the tough questions.

He had then found out who the place belonged to. It wasn't a name he was familiar with which made it unlikely the merchant had anything personal against him. It was entirely possible it was all Douggy and his doing, but why was the merchant involved in that case?

As far as Torim could deduce the only reason would be money. The merchant had bought the item Douggy had robbed from him. There was a slim chance he might know something about his former partner, what his plans were. So as unlikely as it was to offer him much information, he had come to the conclusion that simply asking for an audience was the best way forward.

With confident steps he made his way to the gate and greeted the guard.

“What business do you have here?” the guard asked.

“I would like a meeting with Zolej Draust,” Torim said.

“To discuss what?” the guard asked, more bluntly than was perhaps appropriate. He had no way of knowing who Torim was and how important a matter he had in mind.

“A certain item that was recently sold to him,” Torim said, not wanting to tell everything to the guard, but he knew he had to give him something. “I figured he might be interested to know that it is stolen.”

The guard didn't express any emotion at the revelation, but he did reach for a knocker on the gate and made three loud thuds with it. A moment later the gate cracked open and a young woman peeked out. The guard explained the situation only turning to ask Torim for his name so the message could be delivered to the master of the house. The gate quickly closed again.

“Wait,” the guard ordered him.

Torim did as told. It suited him just fine. It was an uncomfortable silence between the two. The guard kept a close eye on him. The short spear in his hands looked well maintained as did the leather armour he wore. He looked like the sort of man who could use the weapon he had. Most might have missed it, but he seemed to also have a caster stashed on his belt, hidden in a pouch. The only reason why Torim noticed it was because the pouch had not been completely closed and the familiar looking handle he could see at a glimpse was enough of a hint.

It made sense. A spear for the obvious intimidation and keeping at bay any low level threat, but if the danger got real the man had some real firepower to use. As long he wasn't surprised even a wizard would find it hard to get past the man.

The gate opened, this time enough that someone could enter. The same young woman now stood there, smiling.

“Master Draust welcomes you, Torim. Please, follow me.”

He did as asked. The gate led to a gravel laden path that wound up to what could only be described as a mansion. Only two stories tall, but wide enough that, including the garden, the city could have put four of the high rising

buildings in the same lot of land. In a city where land was at a premium very few could afford that. Looking to the side, Torim could see other buildings rising high above the mansion. He was willing to bet a few gold coins that there was some sort of magical field that could be activated to prevent anyone from looking in and to give the occupant of the house a view without his neighbours.

He turned his attention to the woman guiding him. Her skirt was long enough that its hem almost dragged along the gravel. It wasn't a fancy skirt, but it was made of good quality cloth meant for rough use. It accentuated her hips and made her waist seem smaller. Over her shirt there was a cloth corset that was there more for appearances than anything else. A white piece of cloth was wrapped over her head. Her black hair was tied in a ponytail that slithered out from underneath the cloth.

"Quite a place," Torim said in an attempt to strike up a conversation. He didn't need to lie. It was quite a place. They arrived at the mansion. It was made of red brick like much of the housing on the island. White wood was used around the windows and doors to create some variety.

"Master Draust is very proud of it," the woman said without looking back. She guided him up the three steps that got them to the front porch and the door leading inside.

"Must be nice to work in a place like this," Torim said. "My work usually takes me to much more rundown places."

"Master Draust is very generous with the pay," the woman agreed as she opened the door. She briefly stopped and glanced back at him with her dark brown eyes. "What is it that you do?"

Torim grinned. "I find old, forgotten things. And sell them to the highest bidder."

"Ah."

It wasn't the reaction Torim had hoped for. He followed her in in silence.

"Wait here," the woman said and disappeared through a door directly opposite to the entrance.

Torim looked around the large hall. Doors led further into the house on the left and right as well. Usually there would have been a stairway leading to the

second floor, but that was missing. Torim found it curious. It was a departure from the norm and people who made such decision in such a visible way often turned out to be interesting in other ways as well.

There was a comfortable looking two person seat next to one wall. It looked too expensive for Torim to risk sitting on it. On the opposite wall there was a large painting. Again, it was unexpected in its subject matter. Most would have chosen something impressive in both its subject matter as well as quality. A battle of some sort or a depiction of their favourite god. The painting Torim was admiring was a simple scenery. A river running through a valley. There were no people in it. Just the magnificent scenery the painter had captured with great detail. Just looking at it had a calming effect on him.

It must have saved the merchant from angry people a couple of times.

A voice pulled him out of the picture and the brief moment of serenity it had offered him. "Master Draust is waiting for you in his study. Please, follow me."

Torim turned to see his guide standing in the doorway she had gone through. He did as told and followed her through the house. They walked past a large room, obviously reserved to host parties and dances. The next room looked like it was meant for more private functions and relaxation. There were comfy chairs and a fireplace along with mats that looked like they could swallow your entire foot if you stepped on it. The walls had plenty of decorations as well as a few well placed shelves of books and expensive looking decorative items.

There was but a single door they could go through and it was the one the woman guided him to. She opened it and stepped aside, giving him room to enter. With a slightly wary attitude, Torim did so.

He had been in many similar rooms. Wealthy buyers often wanted to meet where they felt safe and comfortable. A study was something many of them had and could make them feel like that. So he wasn't that impressed with the large desk opposite to the door nor by the bookshelves lining the walls. The large window behind the desk gave a good view of the garden just outside it. He gave the man points for that.

"Torim, was it?" the man sitting in the chair behind the desk said. He didn't bother getting up.

“Yes,” Torim replied and examined his host. Zolej Draust was a small man. His shoulders weren’t broad, but rather narrow. There wasn’t much muscle on him, making his arms look like little twigs. His cheekbones shone through his skin. Had he not been so energetic looking it would have been easy to think he was mortally ill.

“I hear you are claiming an item I recently acquired is stolen?” Zolej motioned for him to take a seat in one of the chairs across from his desk.

“Unfortunately that is the case,” Torim said and nodded a thanks as he took a seat. It was a well padded chair with a high back and arm rests. He could see himself getting comfortable in it.

“Who was the item stolen from?” Zolej asked and leaned back in his chair. There were a couple of papers in front of him. Off to the side there looked to be a thick book, possibly an accounting book.

“Me,” Torim said and stared at the man expressionless. He wasn’t mad at the merchant for buying it. He was mad at the man who had sold it.

Zolej did not seem phased by the revelation. “Are you here to reclaim what, you claim, is yours?” There was no hint of worry in his voice. It probably wasn’t the first stolen item he had bought.

“I’m after the man who sold it to you,” Torim said. “The manner in which it was stolen from me has left a bad taste in my mouth. There are some things I wish to.. discuss, with the man who did it.”

“Douggy,” Zolej said with a sigh. “Douggy, Douggy, Douggy. I always knew that some day dealing with him would land trouble at my doorsteps. And here you are.” He motioned towards Torim.

“I’m not here to give you trouble, master Draust. I only want to know whether you would happen to know where to find Douggy.”

“Usually people who have had items stolen from them want them back,” Zolej said, sounding wary of his claims of only wanting information.

“I will admit a part of me considered retrieving the item in question, but once a caster is fired at you, that’s your main concern. You want to make that right,” Torim said, hoping that revealing a more personal reason for wanting to find his former companion would ease the merchants mind.

“Ah. It was that kind of a robbery,” Zolej said, seeming more understanding to Torim’s position now.

Torim simply nodded.

“Unfortunately I don’t know where Douggy might be,” Zolej said. “You must understand. He wasn’t a man I sought out. He visited me when ever something of interest became available. I assume you have went through his usual spots. Those are about all I might have been able to offer you.”

“Are you certain?” Torim asked and gave the man another stern stare. “There is a lot going on around this and you seem like the sort of man who might have a finger in it.”

“I assure you, I have no clue as to what you are implying,” Zolej said. “All I did was buy an item from a man who has often delivered me with quality artefacts.”

The answers he was getting were not very uplifting. Torim considered his options. He could push the merchant, but doing so in his own house would only lead to getting thrown out. Not to mention it would sour the already questionable relationship between the two. Now that Douggy was gone, he needed to be mindful of possible future opportunities. Keeping the merchant on his good side might leave him with a potential buyer for future items.

Though he couldn’t fully dismiss the idea the merchant was lying to him. Douggy wouldn’t have betrayed him without good reason. Lots of coins. The man sitting across from him could well have been the source of those coins.

But he couldn’t outright accuse him of it.

The best Torim could hope for was to get to the man’s nerves. Maybe if pushed he would go out and lead to more clues. That was what Torim ended up putting his bets on seeing as nothing else seemed to be gaining much traction. Future businesses be damned. There were always willing buyers if you had the right goods.

“I must admit it is not only the stolen item that concerns me nor is it simply finding Douggy. Before trying to kill me my former partner made it clear someone had paid him to kill me.” Torim kept a close eye on the merchant. The man had as expressive face as a stone statue. There was no betrayal of emotion. Must have

served him well in his line of business. Seeing no reaction, Torim continued. "I would be lying if I said I wasn't interested in finding out who wants me dead. Enough so to be willing to pay for it. Knowing Douggy it can't have been cheap. Saying that, maybe Douggy isn't so well off. I imagine who ever paid him can't be too happy that I'm still walking around."

Zolej yawned as if the conversation was beginning to bore him. "Killing is a nasty business. I take no part in it, I assure you, but I would agree that if someone paid to have you killed they would be annoyed to know it has yet to be done."

"You say so, but Douggy told me the person who paid him for the item also paid to have me killed," Torim said, risking it all. He knew the question was likely to end the conversation.

The merchants reaction was less intense than Torim had anticipated. The man simply leaned back in his chair and crossed his hands on his belly. "I assure you I know nothing of it. Douggy did mention his original buyer bailed on him so perhaps that is who you need to search out. Now, if you're not going to be making any claims on the item I have purchased I would ask you to leave. I have many things waiting for my attention."

It had not been much, but the almost direct accusation had gotten a reaction out of the man. Torim was happy. He had gotten what he'd come for. "I have no claims on that item. I hope it brings you joy and thank you for your time." With that, he stood up and walked out the room. The woman that had guided him was waiting in the next room, ready to show him the way out. They walked in silence up until the gate.

"Have a good day," the woman said as she pulled the gate shut.

"Thank you," Torim managed to reply just before the gate closed. He gave the guard a slight nod and received one in return. Walking off he couldn't help but glance back. The guard was keeping an eye on him. Not wanting to raise suspicion, Torim walked a bit on the street before turning a corner.

He made his way back through side streets and set himself up at a corner that offered a good view of the main gate as well as the servants entrance on a side street. He'd scoped out the place before entering and knew there were only



those two ways in and out. He leaned against the corner of the red brick building and settled in for a wait.

He hoped his words had been enough. And that he was right about the merchant. It didn't take long for his hopes to come true. A carriage rolled around the corner and stopped at the servants entrance. The small gate opened and a figure quickly climbed onboard. There was no mistaking the chubby figure of the merchant.

Torim smiled.

The carriage rolled onto the main street and turned left and headed away from the mansion. Torim quickly followed. He kept a brisk walking pace. It was all he needed to keep up with the carriage. They weren't used for speed in the city. Mostly they were for comfort and to save the boots of those using it. The streets were so crowded at times that walking was a faster way to get to where you wanted to go.

It was easy to keep the carriage in sight. Even on the less crowded streets it couldn't keep too fast a pace for fear of running over someone. The city guard did not look kindly on reckless carriage drivers. If it managed to pull ahead a bit it would eventually hit a more crowded street and Torim would catch up.

It wasn't short trip. It took them from the western point of the island, past the middle point and half way to the eastern tip of the island. It was a long enough trip that the sun was starting to dip down towards the horizon when it finally looked to be over.

The carriage came to a halt in front of a tall building. Red bricks, white wooden frames around the doors and windows. Torim watched the merchant climb out and head inside the building. The carriage moved on, no doubt making a round around the block and then positioning itself down the street to wait for Zolej to come back out.

A carriage sitting outside a building like that was bound to attract attention and it seemed like that was the last thing Zolej wanted.

It wasn't a bad part of the city. It was the sort of place where someone working at the docks or assisting at an artisan shop could afford to rent a place. It was an area where the middle of the society mostly lived. With that in mind

Torim didn't have as much reservations about entering the building soon after Zolej did. The door led to a stairway that wound up all the way to the top floor. He could still hear the merchants footsteps as well as the wheezing of his breath. He listened closely and started climbing while making as little noise as possible. As he did so he reached into the pouch on his belt and pulled out a low powered cartridge for his caster and loaded it in. It was cheap and because of it didn't punch much power. All it would do is let loose a fire-bolt. Enough to kill a man, but not damage the building that much.

Nothing like the powerful shot that had been aimed to kill him.

He heard a door open and close a floor above him. He hoped it would be easy to find the right one There were six doors on every floor. The apartments weren't big so they were tightly packed. Torim reached the level and went for the first door. He dug out another item from his pouch and put it on his ear. It fit snugly and it had a small trumpet like extension that he pressed against the door.

What ever was going behind the door he could hear like he was standing right there. Another item Anjali had built for him that came in handy far more often than he had initially thought.

It was the wrong door so he moved to the next. It wasn't until the fourth one that he heard the familiar voice of the merchant.

"I was supposed to remain anonymous and out of it all!" Zolej complained.

"I know. Unfortunately our initial plan ran into some trouble," a voice replied. Torim had hoped it would be Duggy, but he wasn't so lucky. It was someone he didn't know. Another person to track and keep an eye on.

"I'll say. The man walked into my mansion and asked questions! Questions!"

Torim smiled at the indignation the man was showing for such a simple thing.

"We'll deal with it. We have a man hunting him," the other voice assured. It was a man. He had an accent that made Torim believe he was from the southern kingdoms.

"Why is he so important to kill? He's just another grave robber," Zolej asked, sounding curious. "I didn't ask before because I didn't care, but the man came to my mansion. When he was supposed to be dead."

“The crown was only a part of the puzzle,” the other voice said. “Douggy is tracking down the final piece, but his former partner has all the same information. We don’t want him getting to it first. That would be trouble for us. More delays.”

Torim frowned. Information he had not expected. Was there more to the crown? He had thought it a simple relic with no real connections to anything too important. Sure, it had belonged to someone important in the past, but to his knowledge it didn’t have any magical powers or other uses than being worn as a sign of wealth and power. He must have missed something about it. He made note to get back to the research he had done with Douggy. There had to be a clue there that he had missed, but his partner had picked up on.

“Don’t talk to me about delays,” Zolej snapped. “I’ve had to deal with far too many of them. Don’t forget who has provided so much for this endeavour.”

“Your efforts are greatly appreciated and will be rewarded when the time comes,” the voice replied. “It’s almost done. We need that one last item. Then we can begin with our real plan.”

“I can’t wait,” Zolej said, his voice wavering with excitement. “When I become the minister of finances I will be rich. The deals I can direct my way.”

“Just don’t forget that the country will needs its share,” said the other voice.

Torim could imagine Zolej swallowing hard and quickly fixing the look of greed that was no doubt on his face. “Of course. Country comes first and supporting the rule of our master.”

“Good.”

The rest of the conversation wasn’t as interesting as Torim had hoped for. They mostly turned to the current businesses of the merchant and the movements of his goods. It was obvious it had something to do with their plan, but it was too shrouded in technical details and knowledge of the past for him to make much sense of it. He made note of a few place names and times that might be worth checking out.

As it looked like the conversation in the room was coming to an end he parted from the door and stashed his item back in its pouch before going to the floor above. It was out of sight, but allowed him to see the entrance to the

apartment.

It wasn't long before Zolej walked out. Torim caught a glimpse of the second person. Man with black hair and an equally dark beard. His clothes looked like a commoners, but were obviously made of finer materials. A quick glance might have fooled someone, but even a second look would have given it away. He had a golden ring piercing through his nose on the left and a larger silver looking ring that wrapped around his lower lip.

He wasn't an easy man to miss.

He was an unfamiliar face to Torim. He remained in the stairway for a bit after the man closed the door and returned to the apartment. It gave Zolej time to leave as well. He didn't want the merchant seeing him come out the building. He briefly considered remaining in the stairway until the man in the apartment left so he could follow him, but given the time of day it seemed unlikely he'd be headed out any time soon. It was also entirely possible he was the sort of person people came to see instead of him going to see others.

Either way, Torim had something he could do and that was going through the research he had done with Duggy. There was something there and he was going to find it before his former partner had the chance. That seemed like the best way to even the score with him and possible run into him.

Whatever Zolej and the man in the apartment had planned was not his main concern.

## Chapter 7

Anjali rubbed her eyes. Reading runes in the lamp light was not the easiest thing on them. With a sigh she crawled back out from the nook she had stuck her head in. It was starting to become apparent what was going on. She had seen enough signs of it while going through her side of the ship for the past few hours.

Someone had made subtle changes to some of the runes. Most changes were done in the hard to reach places to better hide them. A quick glance might not have been enough to spot most of them. What was obvious was the fact the changes were not down to wear and tear. They were deliberate and made with a purpose.

Someone was sabotaging the ship.

Given that there were only two people onboard that could have done it and one of them was dead the guilty party was not that hard to deduce.

“He’s a damn good liar,” Anjali muttered to herself and cursed Pok. The bumbling buffoon was not that at all. He was, in fact, quite ingenious in the way he had sabotaged the ship. To what end he had done it was a question that needed to be asked, but that was something the captain would need to do.

Before that she would need to get Anika away from the man. She hoped her student had not discovered what she had and tried to confront him about it. Given how the changes had been made the man was no apprentice. He knew enough about magic and runes to be dangerous.

Anjali grabbed her lantern and started heading back towards the central chamber where all the runes gathered in. She figured that was the best place to start looking for the pair. If they were already done with their side that would be where they’d be. If they weren’t there then it would be easy to start searching from their side of the ship.

She passed some crew. For a brief moment she considered grabbing one of them by the sleeve and telling them about what was going on, but she feared that might tip off the young wizard. She didn’t want that nor was there much the crew could do. If it came down to fighting it would all be up to her and Anika. The crew

would just be in the way. At least that was what she told herself. Assuming it would become a fight of magic instead of muscle.

She found the central room empty.

She then headed towards the side of the ship the pair had started investigating. She went through room after room without finding anything. In passing she checked a few of the spots she thought the most likely to contain alterations to the runes. She found identical changes to the ones she'd spotted on her side. It confirmed her suspicions.

It was towards the stern of the ship where she found Anika. It was a storage room for food. There were several barrels there along with sacks filled with flour. The young woman was laying behind two barrels, barely in view, and Anjali would have missed her had she not been following the runes and trying to get a peek at possible changes.

The sight of blood on her face made Anjali worry. She quickly moved aside the barrels so she could have better access to her. She kneeled down next to her and pulled her head in her lap. She was breathing, so there was that. The blood seemed to be dried and not flowing freely any more. It had trickled down from the top of her head. She'd be cursing to untangle her hair from it all.

"Come on Anika. Wake up," Anjali muttered and gently slapped the woman's face. Her hands and legs were tied with rope so Anjali started undoing those. The knots were tight so she had some trouble getting them loose. She managed to free her arms and as she reached out and started working on getting her legs loose, Anika let out a groan.

"Anika. How are you feeling?" Anjali asked as she worked on the knot. A part of her was now regretting not telling the crew of her suspicions. She heard footsteps on the deck above. One good yell and she could get their attention.

"My head hurts," Anika managed to say.

"You're going to have one hell of a bump," Anjali said as she managed to open the knot and get her feet loose. She brought herself back to a seated position and looked down at her. Her eyes were now open. It was obvious she was in pain.

"What happened?" Anika asked, confused.

"You tell me," Anjali said, though she had a pretty good idea what must have

taken place.

"I.. I don't know. One moment I was with Pok, investigating the runes and the next it all went dark." Anika looked confused as well as in pain. She started to sit up and put a hand on her head. She grimaced as she touched a sore spot. "Someone must have hit me. Is Pok all right?"

"He's the one that hit you," Anjali said with confidence. "He tied you up and hid you here, behind a couple of barrels."

"Why would he.."

"Because he's been sabotaging the ship," Anjali said without letting the younger woman finish her sentence. "He probably figured you'd see the modifications he has made and come to the same conclusion I did. So he took you out. Lucky he didn't kill you."

"Too many people trying to do that already," Anika muttered. She groaned and stood up. She was a bit wobbly on her feet, but remained upright.

Anjali stood up as well. "Best we inform the crew. Maybe he's still onboard. we'll need their help to search the ship."

Anika nodded and followed her mentor out of the room. Anjali grabbed the first crew member they came across and told him of the situation. The man started spreading the word.

"Any idea what his modifications are for?" Anika asked as the pair stepped on to the main deck. The fresh air felt cool after the stale air below. The crew gave them a look, but continued on with their duties, though it looked like quite a few were going below deck in search of the traitorous young wizard.

"Hard to say," Anjali said and walked over to the railing that separated the ship from the docks. She peered around the crowded piers, thinking the young wizard might have slipped off. It was unlikely she'd spot him in the crowd of people, but it was better than doing nothing. "The changes are subtle so I doubt it's anything too drastic. Not like he's changing the controls to summon something."

Anika shuddered. "A summoning circle that size could bring in some horrible beings."

"Indeed," Anjali agreed and did her best not to think about it. If it was

summoning then things were far out of their league. It would require some powerful wizards from the Towers to put their efforts into stopping what ever would be called into the world. "Don't think we have to worry about that. More likely the changes are for something else. Something to do with this ship and controlling it. Could be to allow someone from the outside to control it."

"To what end?" Anika asked and leaned on the railing. Behind her the crew seemed to be more agitated. There were grumpy looks and snapping conversations while the men rushed around. No one seemed to be loading up goods any more.

"We'll have to ask him if he's caught," Anjali said.

A brief moment of silence passed between them, until they started to hear some screaming and a commotion under the deck. The ship shuddered. The two women exchanged looks. Worry was the primary emotion on both of them.

They turned around just as a few members of the crew scrambled up to the deck. They looked spooked.

"The kids gone crazy!" one of the men shouted and scrambled to get away from the hatch he'd gotten up from. He didn't get far before a bolt of fire shot out from the hatch and hit him in the back. The flames fanned out, engulfing much of his back. His clothes started to burn along with his hair. The man screamed and ran to the railing and jumped into the murky waters of the docks.

Anjali grabbed her caster. She loaded in a cartridge as quick as she could. With a side glance she could see Anika doing the same with hers. They were both capable of fighting without them, but the convenience and the fact using a caster didn't strain them in any way made both of them go for that first.

Pok emerged from the hatch. He looked much less timid. In fact he looked like the sort of person who had discovered they had strength others didn't.

It was a dangerous look on a wizard.

There were glowing runes on his clothes. A quick glance from Anjali told everything she needed to know about them. Protection runes from fire and other elements. Attacking him would be tough. At the very least it would take more than one spell to break through his protections. She raised her caster and pointed it at the man.



“Pok! Stop this madness!” she yelled at the man. It made him stop and turn to regard her. At least it gave the crew some time to run away from him. Anjali gave Anika a glance. She hoped she was doing what she hoped she was. If she wasn’t they’d be screwed.

“You! This would have worked if it weren’t for you nosy whores!” Pok spat out the words with such contempt that it was hard to believe he had been the meek apprentice they had spoken to only a few hours ago.

“Calm down,” Anjali encouraged the man. She hoped things wouldn’t get to an outright fight. She feared the ship would be badly damaged in that case. Not to mention there was still crew around that wouldn’t be able to protect themselves from the magical forces that would be colliding.

“Calm down? Calm down!?! After you ruined a year of my work?” Pok was visibly shaking with anger as he shouted. “You have no idea the trouble I went through to alter those runes. To do it so that old bastard didn’t notice. And when he did I had to kill him. Didn’t count on there being some minor effects from the final changes. Didn’t expect the captain to call a pair of nosy cunts like you.”

Hearing the man admit to killing the old ship wizard so easily made Anjali think there was little point in talking to him. His mind wouldn’t be swayed. Even if she spoke the most persuading words possible the man had travelled down the road too far to turn back. His fate had been decided. Her only hope in buying time was for the crew to escape and maybe for help to arrive in the form of the city guard and the wizards who worked with them. “We just did what our client asked and tried to find out what was wrong with his ship.”

Pok laughed. “Of course you did. You’ve forced my hand. I was supposed to wait until the final item, but now I have no choice. I must ensure my work survives.” With those words the man launched a bolt of fire towards Anjali.

It was the moment Anika had been waiting for. The runes she had been discreetly drawing in the air flared up with a bright red light. They floated in front of her and Anjali.

The bolt of fire struck the runes and disappeared.

Anjali pulled the trigger on her caster. The pin came down and stamped the shell she had loaded in. The roaring cone of flame that shot out engulfed Pok and

rushed past him, hitting the ship railing. It quickly burned a hole in the wood. The deck along the path turned black and started to smoke.

The effect of the shell wore off and Anjali popped open the caster and pulled out the spent shell. It let out a metal ring as it fell to the deck. She quickly reloaded with another shell.

Next to her, Anika aimed and pulled the trigger on her caster. It wasn't really a shell meant for attack, but she hoped it would work. A narrow stream of water shot out of the caster. It closed the distance to its target with incredible speed and cut straight into Pok's shoulder. The man let out a yelp of pain. Blood started to stain his clothes. He rolled away from the stream of water. Anika tried to keep up with him, but she didn't want the stream of water to hit anything vital on the ship. She knew the stream of water would easily damage the mast or other wooden structures.

That was what it was meant for. To cut things. It could fell a large tree with just one shell. It could cut stone, though not much with the time the water stream remained active. Even steel could be cut. It had plenty of uses, but cutting human flesh was one rarely used. The power of the stream quickly died down as distance to the target crew. Anika had to admit she was surprised it had been powerful enough to cut through clothing and cut flesh enough that there was bleeding.

At least it had forced Pok to dodge. That was precious time he wasn't activating any spells.

Pok hid behind one of the masts just as the jet of water died down. There was a trail of blood on the deck.

"Nice hit," Anjal said and snapped shut her caster. She didn't want to shoot at the mast. Fixing that would be a nightmare. It might even be the end of the ship if the damage was too bad. It was the sort of cost she wasn't willing to risk.

"Thanks, but we can't really do anything to him now," Anika said and emptied her caster. She reached for another shell, but stopped when she felt the ship shudder. A quick glance down the length of the ship told her all she needed to know. The runes were glowing.

What ever Pok had done to alter them, he was about to make use of it.

“We have to stop him!” Anika yelled over the creaks and shudders of the ship. She had a hard time staying standing. The entire deck was shaking and shifting.

“Might be too late,” Anjali said and observed the ship closely. What she saw, she didn’t like. She made a decision.

“This is where we get off.”

Not waiting for a response, she grabbed Anika by her arm and dragged her along. She rushed to the gangplank hoping it would still be there. It was, though it looked less stable because of the ships movements. She risked it and stepped on and rushed down, hauling the younger woman behind her.

“Slow down. I’m going to fall,” Anika complained. She tried not to look down at the murky waters of the docks. Glancing back she could see the runes on the outside of the ship shining bright. They should have had a bluish hue. Instead they were dark green. The women stumbled onto the pier and turned to regard the ship. A crewman jumped off the stern and landed hard in the water. Ropes were quickly thrown from the pier to haul him on dry land.

The ship started to rise up from the water. No regard was given to the vessel above it. The mast quickly hit its bottom. The creaks made Anjali worry it would snap. The ship above was tilting, its crew shouting at the vessel below while holding on for dear life.

“We should have taken the shot,” Anika said. “Losing a mast wouldn’t have been that bad.”

“I’m starting to agree,” Anjali said and watched as the ship stopped rising. There were loud snaps and the runes flared up brighter. As they watched, planks came loose and started re-arranging themselves. The entire ship transformed in front of them. The main mast remained in place, but the two shorter masts fell towards the stern and bow and slid back to meet up with the main mast. The planks making up the hull rearranged themselves around those three beams. In the end what was left was a huge wooden sphere with three masts poking out of it.

For a brief moment the sphere remained floating in the air. Then it started moving out. The ship above it was rocked further before the mast came free from

it. Anika and Anjali watched helplessly as the sphere floated higher into the sky and started heading out of the docks and the city. The crew that had made it off the ship watched in equal shock as their long time home left them behind in a barely recognizable shape.

“Definitely, should have taken the shot,” Anjali managed to say as the ship was only a small dot in the horizon.

“Captain Johaug is going to be mad at us,” Anika said and glanced around in fear the man might be close by. He had hired them to fix his ship and instead they’d lost the entire thing.

“We were hired to fix some runes, not prevent someone from stealing the ship,” Anjali said in a firm voice.

“Why would someone steal a ship the way he did?” Anika wondered. “Just modifying the runes must have taken a long time.”

“Making a ship from scratch takes time. Just the woodwork from the shipwrights can take a year or two. Add to that the runes and it could be three years before you’re off the shipyard. If he spent a few months modifying runes to get a ship that’s time well spent.”

“But what use does he have for one?” Anika asked.

“Beats me, but can’t be anything good,” Anjali replied and sighed. “But it’s not our problem. We know what happened with the runes and since the ship is gone we can’t fix it. We’ll have to see if captain Johaug is willing to pay us anything for the work we did.”

The pier around them was still stunned silent. Slowly a chatter started to break the silence. The other piers went back to work and the usual noises drowned out the uneasy silence that had lingered in the area.

“Well, it looks like we’ll get to hear what the captain thinks,” Anika said and tugged at Anjali’s sleeve to bring her attention to the captain that was walking towards them from the start of the pier. He did not look happy. He stopped to question some of the crew and pointed at the empty slip where his ship should have been. The crew were quick to point at the two women.

“This’ll be interesting,” Anjali muttered barely loud enough for Anika to hear. She holstered her caster and started to mentally prepare for the coming

conversation.

Captain Johaug stomped his way to them. “What the hell happened? I had a ship before I left!”

“I understand why you’re upset, but this is not our doing. Blame your ship wizard apprentice. He killed your ship wizard and spent a lot of time altering the runes on the ship. He’s the reason why you had trouble on your way here and he’s the one who stole your ship.” Anjali spoke with a firm voice and pushed on despite the captain opening his mouth a couple of times. She wanted to give her explanation without being dragged off the trail.

Johaug did not seem any less angry, but the focus of it seemed to shift from the women to the devious apprentice. “Damn Pok. Can’t believe he did such things. Stealing the ship. Why do that?”

“Why he did it we don’t know, but it seemed our investigation forced his hand. He wasn’t quite ready to do it. Could be he wanted to do it with all the crew on board while you were high in the sky. We don’t know what the magic of those runes would have done to living things.” Anjali gave the captain a sympathetic look. “Probably best it happened here at the docks where the crew could get to safety.”

Johaug nodded. “Seems like everyone made it off without major injuries. Just some singed hair, burnt clothes and a few bruises from falls. That’s good. The owner isn’t going to be happy though.”

“I’m sure they won’t be, but it’s not your fault,” Anika reassured the man. “Pok took out the one person who could have prevented this. Just remind the owners of that. One person died because of this.”

“The ship is still recoverable if you can find Pok. Given how valuable the ship is I’m sure the owners will have no trouble putting out a good bounty. Not going to be many places for the young man to hide if that happens,” Anjali pointed out.

“Hard to hide a ship that size,” Anika agreed.

It was obvious Johaug had his doubts about it all, but he looked defeated. Realistically, there was little he could do about the situation. He grabbed a pouch from his belt and handed it to Anjali. “Your payment as agreed. Maybe you didn’t fix the problem, but you did find the reason. Just wasn’t what any of us

expected.”

Anjali took the pouch. She didn't bother opening it or counting. The weight felt about right. If a few coins were missing, she wasn't going to complain. They were lucky to be getting paid at all. She had expected there might be some argument over the matter. “Thank you. I'm sorry things turned out the way they did.”

“Not your fault,” Johaug said with a heavy voice. “Shit. Got to go tell the owners and see where we go from there. Not looking forward to it.”

“Good luck,” Anjali said as the captain turned to leave. He waved a hand as thank you and kept going. Some of the crew followed him, no doubt curious to hear what the owner was going to do. In all likelihood they'd all be out of a job until they could find the ship.

“That went better than expected,” Anika said.

“It did,” Anjali admitted and gave the younger woman a look. “How are you feeling?”

“Head still hurts, but not too badly,” Anika replied and felt for the big bump that had formed in the back of her head. She winced when she found it.

“Come on. Let's get back to the shop. I have something there that'll help the pain.”

Anika followed Anjali out of the docks. Despite what had just happened, everything looked to be as if nothing out of the ordinary had taken place. Ships were loaded and unloaded. Workers rushed along the piers and carts filled with goods rolled in and out.

The two women left behind the buzzing crowds as they headed back to the shop.

## Chapter 8

Over the years Ramyn had seen a lot of change. One of the few buildings that remained as it had been through the centuries was the library run by the monks of Salvius. Originally it had been a temple of theirs, but times had changed and the library they had spent centuries collecting and looking after had become a bigger draw than any altar they could offer. So they had dedicated the entire building to the library and moved the worship to a new place. The building had been expanded many times and it now held the biggest collection of books the world knew. It was a destination anyone seeking information could not pass on. Scholars from all around the world congregated there to research and exchange ideas.

Torim was no stranger to the place. It was where he did most of his research. The history section was comprehensive and there were rare books there that would have been hard, if not impossible, to find anywhere else.

It was a place where lost treasures could be found.

Walking through the entrance hall and past the double doors landed Torim in the main hall of the library. There were bookshelves in neat rows. Tables were dotted here and there so people could examine books in peace and comfort. A few of the tables were occupied by people looking for information. Some were obviously wizards looking for something the Towers couldn't offer them while others were purely scholars. Torim could spot a southerner by his clothing. A long way from home, but he was far from the only one. There was a dwarf at one of the tables. Seeing one of them in a library was rare.

Rays of sunlight came through the painted glass windows above. Torim always found himself just staring at the windows for a moment. A part of him wanted to see how much he'd get on the market for them. His usual conclusion was that they were priceless and no one was likely to buy them because of how well known they were. Why even bother? He often reminded himself with that question. Anyone could walk in for free to see them.

Knowing the area well, Torim headed past the first hall of books and deeper

into the library. The soles of his boots tapped loudly against the stone floor. He walked straight through the first hall and went through a doorway leading into a second hall. This one was two very tall stories with an open centre that revealed a domed ceiling. The round room had a ring running along the edge of it as a second floor. There were four stairways leading up to it. Even from the floor below he could see bookshelves that rose high up towards the ceiling. There were movable ladders here and there that could be used to reach the books on the top shelves.

“Torim!”

The familiar voice made him turn to the right to meet the source of it. Torim smiled when he saw the robed figure. “Efren. You’re looking much better.”

The man smiled. “I am. Much better. Not having to wipe my nose every ten minutes.”

“I’m sure the books appreciate it as well,” Torim said, remembering well the last time he had visited. Efren’s nose had been so runny that some of the clear goo had dropped down onto books. The man had been dismayed.

Efren chuckled. He could take a good natured jab. He stroked his cone shaped black beard. “Most of all my mind rests easier. Not having to worry what might fall onto the precious pages in front of me. But what brings you here? I took it that you found what you were looking for the last time you were here. Or are you already hunting for the next treasure?”

Torim had made no secret of who he was to the man. If Efren frowned upon his grave robbing ways he had not made it known. A thought entered his mind. “We hit a bit of a snag on the whole thing. Douggy said he’d come around and check something. Have you seen him?”

“Douggy? Rare for him to come around,” Efren noted. “It’s why I remember it. He was here a few days ago. Going through the two books I pointed to you the last time you were here. I was going to talk to him, but he seemed in a hurry so I let him be.”

It was as Torim had suspected. His former partner was ahead of him. A few days. It wasn’t as bad as he had feared. “Well, at least he didn’t lie about going through the books. Didn’t find the right thing, though, so here I am.” There was



no need to tell the monk about their falling out. He would only worry and in the worst case get drawn in the middle of it somehow.

“I guess there’s a reason why he doesn’t come here very often?” Efren said with a wry smile. “Perusing through tomes of text isn’t for everyone.”

“Douggy is a master at finding people to sell to, but he’s not much of a researcher,” Torim admitted. “Anyway. I’d better get to the books. We’ve lost enough time as is.”

“Good luck,” Efren said and continued on with his duties. He had a tome in his hands and he walked out the room, no doubt to return it to its proper place or to deliver it to someone who had requested it.

Torim headed for the closes set of stairs and walked up to the second floor. The ring running around the room was wide enough that there was plenty of space for tables and chairs as well as some extra shelves that weren’t straight against the wall. The first time he had needed Efrens’ help in finding the books, but now he knew exactly where to go. He had to walk almost half way to the next set of stairs to get to the right spot. He then had to find one of the movable ladders to reach what he was looking for.

The ladders were attached to the top of the shelves so they wouldn’t fall back, but you could slide them along with ease. There were small wheels at the bottom that made it even easier. As long as you remembered to lock the wheels you were as secure as possible when climbing them. They were quite tall so some people were hesitant to use them. In those cases they simply asked one of the monks to fetch what ever book they were looking for.

Dragging the ladder to the right spot, Torim started climbing it. The shelves were as tall as a two story building and he had to climb almost half way up. He then hoped he’d remembered the spot just right. There was limited reach from the ladder. To his relief he found the two books just to the left of the ladder. He quickly grabbed them and made his way down and to the nearest desk.

The first tome told the story of emperor Glavius. It was his crown that they had been after. Some considered much of his story to be made up. Mere legends from times past. No one questioned that the man had lived and ruled. They questioned whether he had done all the things he claimed.

Torim firmly believed he had done it all.

It was that belief that had led him and Douggy to the crown. They had been so focused on that single treasure that Torim had not considered there might be more things to find. Now that he perused the pages of the book he wondered how he'd missed so many obvious references. There was much more treasure to be found. The problem was figuring out which one Douggy was after.

Torim spent hours going through the books. He had to fetch some others to get more information about certain items. By the time his stomach was growling for the second meal of the day he had a fairly good idea of what was being sought. The trouble was that still left him with three possible items and as far as he could tell they were all in different places, quite far away from each other. He wouldn't have time to get to each one of them.

Not before Douggy got to the one he was after.

There was a sword. Glavius had had it forged by the skilled smiths of the dwarven kingdom. It had been meant as a gift for his son, but never arrived since the collapse happened. There were few records of where the blade ended up in the turbulent times that followed. Some sources claimed it remained with the dwarves. Others claimed it had arrived in the city right before the floating islands came down and was buried in the rubble.

After going through all the information he had available, Torim had come to the conclusion it was likely the sword was buried somewhere in the rubble. The dwarves weren't ones to miss a delivery. If they'd kept the sword they would have made efforts to hand it over to the rightful owners. Especially since the payment had already been handed. He'd found a recount of events from someone who had been there when the order had been made.

The second item was a bracelet. Again it was something emperor Glavius had had a hand in. It was a gift he had given to his wife on her twenty-fifth birthday. There were a few mentions of her wearing it to certain events, but not very much to go on. She had died in the great collapse and it was mentioned she had been buried with all her jewellery. It was possible the bracelet was still there. Unfortunately, her grave was far from the city. She had been a noble from another kingdom and she had been buried in her family tomb.

The third item was a ring. Glavius had gotten it from his father at the age of ten. Out of all the items it was the most interesting as it was told to have magical powers. What those powers were varied from source to source. Some said it afforded protection from the elements while others claimed it could be used to shoot a bolt of lightning. In either case it was a potent item for such small size and easily the most precious of the three. Given what little Torim had heard of the plans it seemed a magical item was the most likely to be sought after.

The crown possessed some magic as well, after all.

The problem was where the ring was. It was on the hand of Glavius. He had died during the great collapse. Only his hand had been found. It had been preserved and put on display for a while. People had flocked to it. Some to hate on what remained of the worst emperor Ramyn had seen, others to pay homage to someone they respected. For a decade the hand had been on display before someone stole it. After that it was unknown where, exactly, it had been, but it surfaced two decades later in the collection of a nobleman. It was returned to the state of Ramyn and put on display again. That only lasted five years until it was pulled from the public. Where it was now was not a matter of public record. It could be stashed in some warehouse of the state or it could just as easily be in the personal chambers of the emperor.

Either way, the books were not going to tell its location.

The ring seemed the most likely target, but also the most difficult to find. It wasn't abandoned and forgotten in some tomb or under a pile of rubble. It was somewhere living people were looking after it. That always presented more problems. Thankfully it also meant someone knew where, exactly, it was. He would just need to find that person.

With a sigh Torim slammed shut the books and prepared to put them back in place. As he climbed the ladder to the empty spot on the shelves he gave the matter at hand some more consideration. By the time he was done it was obvious to him that he would go for the ring. No reason to head to another kingdom that was far away. If that was what Douggy was doing he would have too much of a lead anyway. Digging in the ruins below the city was hard work and it would take time. It was something he could quite easily check for and dismiss. That left the

ring as the only really viable option. He hoped it was what Douggy was after.

“All done?” Efren asked as Torim was climbing down the ladder. He had put the last book back in place. The monk was holding two books in his hands and looking up at him.

“Found what I was looking for,” Torim said.

“Glad to hear our collection was once more helpful to you,” Efren said.

“If this pans out I promise a good donation come collection time,” Torim said as he set his feet on the floor.

“It will be appreciated,” Efren said with a slight nod and a smile. “It is the donations that allow us to grow our collection.”

“Have you ever heard of the hand of Glavius?” Torim asked. He trusted Efren enough that he wouldn’t have loose lips about any questions posed to him. At the same time the man had vast amounts of knowledge and connections that could be called upon. He was a good starting point for any search.

Efren frowned. “I have. A bit ghoulish that, in my opinion. Preserving someone's hand for display.”

“Any idea where it is now?” Torim asked. “Last mention is it’s back with the government, but it was taken off display a long time ago. No clues after that.”

“It’s hard to say,” Efren replied. “It could be sitting in storage somewhere. That’s what happens to most items that were once on display. You could try asking one of the museums. Another possibility is that the government has sold it. They need money at times and selling items like that can be an easy way to get some from some rich person.”

“Sounds like I’m still far from finding it,” Torim said with a sigh. “The museums don’t particularly like me.” There had been some incidents over some items in the past. Museums had been after them, but Torim had sold to a private collector. There was some animosity over the fact he was selling items instead of simply handing them to those interested in preserving them and putting them on display for the public.

“There is someone you could talk to,” Efren said after a moment of thought. “A friend of mine. He knows a lot about the time period and the emperors of the time. I’m sure he would have some idea where such an important item might be.”

“That does sound promising,” Torim said with some brightness to his voice. Being able to avoid the museums would have been ideal for him.

Efren happily gave him the name and address. Torim thanked him and promised to add some extra to his donations if things panned out with the new lead. With new information on hand Torim headed out of the library. The sun was high in the sky, starting its descent towards the night. The central market was still busy. There were stalls everywhere, selling all the things the world had to offer. There were exotic fruits and vegetables, spice shops that you could smell from across the square, decorative items and even jewellery. Just about anything you could think of could be gotten at the market and the amount of people there reflected that. There were the southerners along with dwarves, elves, halflings and even a few trolls that towered over everyone else. They were given plenty of space.

An angry troll would make your day worse just like an angry dragon would.

Torim walked past all that. He thought about going to meet the man Efren had pointed him to, but decided it would best to wait until morning. The man lived outside the city. Getting there would take hours and by the time he'd get there it would be late. He could only hope he'd be there. Efren had mentioned he was the sort who travelled occasionally and when he did the trips tended to be long ones.

On his way out the market he grabbed some food from a stall he passed by. Strips of meat were wrapped in a thin bread with a mix of vegetables and a sauce that had some heat to it. Not the best meal he'd ever had, but it killed the worst of his hunger. He kept walking and headed for Anjali's shop.

Why there, he wasn't quite sure. For a good time her shop had been nothing more than a place to get convenient items to help with his living. Somewhere along the lines it had gotten to be more than that. He found himself going there when he didn't have anything to buy. Talking to the woman was refreshing. She had opinions that countered his own. It made for a stimulating conversation often times. And she didn't seem to mind him coming in from time to time. If things were busy she was still considerate of him and talked where she could. After Anika had started she had had more time for that.

Not that there was anything romantic about their relationship. It wasn't like that. Of that Torim was fairly certain. There was no attraction between them. There was more of that coming from her young shop helper.

The fact their shop had been ransacked had given him pause. It couldn't have been a coincidence. Somehow they had gotten involved with Douggys plans and it put them in danger. Giving them a warning about his most recent finds seemed like the fair thing to do given that they were already involved in some way.

The shop wasn't looking as bad as the last time he'd visited. It was obvious the two ladies had put in a lot of work to fix it all. The broken big display window had been covered so that the shop wasn't exposed to the outside elements. Getting a big window like that was a big cost and time consuming. There was a new door already so there was some progress. Torim pushed it open and entered. He half expected the door to be locked, but it wasn't.

The inside of the store was much better off. The floor wasn't filled with broken glass and wood splinter any more. The broken display cases had been moved away and replaced with temporary tables. Getting the glass fixed on the display cases would take some time as well. There was merchandise on display like nothing had happened.

The back of the store still had some repairs to do. The door frame leading to the back was still smashed to pieces. The counter separating that space from the front of the store was still singed black in many places. It would require some woodwork to completely fix. There was still the scent of burned wood in the shop. It was obvious something had taken place there, but at the same time the place looked ready for open business.

"Torim!"

The young woman sat behind the counter and smiled at him.

"Anika," Torim greeted her. Examining her it was obvious something more had happened. She looked like she had gone through the ringer. "You all right?"

Anika laughed. "It's been a day."

At least she still had her humour. When that was gone was the time to worry about someone. "Nothing too serious I hope," Torim said and made his way to the

long counter. He leaned against it to be more comfortable.

Anika turned a bit and pulled back her hair to show the big lump in the back of her head. She turned back around and smiled. "It's not that bad. Still a bit sore."

Torim raised an eyebrow. "I bet. What happened?" seeing the young woman with such an injury gave him a bad feeling.

"Anjali took me on a job. A ship was having trouble with its flight runes and we were supposed to find the problem and fix it. Turned out the apprentice wizard on the ship had murdered the ship wizard, modified the runes that made the thing fly and then stole the whole thing right in front of us. He knocked me out so he could enact his plan in time since he feared we were on to him. He was right of course. Anjali had spotted what he'd done. It turned into a brief fight on the ship deck before we ran away."

Torim tried to make sense of what Anika was saying. She was talking so fast and excitedly that it was hard to follow, but he got the gist of it. Just as he was about to say something, Anjali popped out from the back room.

"What brings you here, Torim?" the woman asked and made her way to the counter. She looked tired. There were pouches under her green eyes. Even her dark hair was a mess even if she had it tied behind her head in a ponytail.

"Found some clues about what Douggy is up to," Torim replied. "Seems he's involved in a lot more than just trying to kill me. There are some shady people working on something big and the crown was part of the puzzle. They're still searching for one more item and they've got Douggy after that. I know what he's looking for so I have good chance of catching him."

The two women exchanged looks.

"Didn't Pok say something about one more item?" Anika asked.

Anjali nodded. "He did, but it can't be about the same thing."

"Pok?" Torim asked.

"The apprentice I mentioned," Anika replied.

A brief silence grew between the trio.

"It can't all be connected," Anjali said shaking her head.

"It could be," Torim said. "Was the ship one where you'd worked before?"

“They’ve come to me several times,” Anjali admitted. She did not look pleased with where the thinking was taking them.

“Could be the attack on your shop was to prevent you from going to investigate that ship,” Torim suggested. “They didn’t want you around to expose their plans. That failed so things went the way they did. They got their ship for whatever they need it for.”

“So we were going to get dragged into this no matter what,” Anika said.

Torim felt a small amount of relief for that. He had feared the attack on the shop had been because of him. Not that it made it much better, but at the very least the guilt wasn’t solely on his shoulders. “Looks that way,” he said. “But what are they after? Seems like an awful lot of effort just to keep you from investigating that ship. Not to mention anyone could have found out the runes were tampered with.”

“On the other hand, someone looking at the ship for the first time would have had a harder time seeing the alterations,” Anjali pointed out. “They were well hidden in places most wouldn’t even look into.”

“And why did they attack me at my apartment?” Anika asked.

“Well, we were both there,” Anjali noted. “Probably waited for that moment to make their attack. They could have made their attempt any time you were alone. They wanted both of us.”

“They attacked you so near to the Towers?” Torim asked, surprised. While he had not visited Anika at her place he knew the general area she lived in. It wasn’t the sort of area you did anything criminal without having a whole bunch of wizards and city guard after you. That the attacker had seemingly gotten away with it made him worry.

“Yeah. For a moment we thought we got him, but they didn’t find a body so he likely got away,” Anjali said and sighed. She ran a hand through her hair. Her narrow shoulders slumped down. “I just wanted to run a magic shop. Not get involved in stuff like this.”

“Life doesn’t care about what you want. It chugs on regardless,” Anika said and put a hand on her friend’s shoulder. Anjali put a hand over hers and gave it a squeeze.



“Well, I’m going to track down that lead I got. Means going outside the city tomorrow, but that’s no big deal. Want to come with?” They were involved. Offering them to opportunity to help end the madness seemed like the only right thing to do to Torim. And having two people with casters watching his back was never a bad thing.

The two women exchanged looks. Anika looked ready to go. Anjali was obviously more apprehensive about it. She had obligations and enough life experience to know things could get ugly real fast. Not that they weren’t already.

“Probably not wise for all of us to go,” Anjali finally said. “I can’t let my shop be closed more than it already has been. Got bills to pay and not selling items means no money coming in.”

“I can go,” Anika offered. “You’ve got items to make anyway. I’m not very good at those and some of them are beyond my abilities.”

“I don’t know,” Anjali said reluctantly. “It’ll be dangerous.”

“Any more dangerous than me being here alone?” Anika asked. “No telling when that man makes another attempt. At least out there Torim would be there to keep me safe. Right?” she gave the man a pleading look for help.

While the look she gave was ostensibly for coming along for a trip outside the city there was more to it and it didn’t go unnoticed by Torim. He was aware how the young woman felt about him. He suspected there were some ulterior motives behind her desire to tag along, but calling her out on them in front of Anjali seemed like a sure way to hurt her feelings.

“I don’t mind if you tag along,” Torim said as diplomatically as he could. “It’s not going to be a pleasure trip, keep that in mind. We’ll be riding hard just so we can make it there and back on the same day.”

Anika smiled. “I know. Don’t worry. I won’t slow you down.”

Anjali looked ready to give up. “Fine. You two go. I’ll stay here and try to get the shop running again. Be careful. We don’t know when another attack might come our way. If there’s something I’m certain of is that they haven’t given up on killing us. Not after the effort they’ve already put into it.”

Torim nodded. “Best to be careful all the way.” he turned his attention to Anika. “We’ll meet here tomorrow, first thing in the morning, all right?”

“I’ll be here,” Anika said excitedly. She genuinely looked like she’d just been accepted to study at the Towers. Torim couldn’t help but feel like she was still oblivious to the danger she was in. Despite everything that had already happened to her.

“Tomorrow then,” Torim said and pushed himself off the counter. “I’m going to go get some rest. You two should too.”

“We will,” Anjali assured him. “Be safe.”

“You too,” Torim said as he walked out the shop. He headed for his home without any detours. Sleep was very much what his body needed to deal with the coming day. Riding had never been one of his favourite things to do.

He wasn’t looking forward to it.

## Chapter 9

Anika woke up in the back room of the store. She and Anjali had decided it was safer to stay there, together. It wasn't the most comfortable of places to sleep, but there was a long wooden bench there that could double as a bed. A couple of blankets to soften it and there were more unpleasant places to sleep. Anjali had taken a place on the floor and padded it with more blankets.

She reached back behind her head and gave the bump a touch. It was still sore and touching it made a pain run through her head. She winced and sighed. She wished she'd had time to visit a healer, but things looked to be too busy for that. The bump wasn't impeding her life in anyway nor was it life threatening. Anjali had done her best with it, but her skills were elsewhere.

She could hear the steady breathing of the shop owner. She was curled up on the floor. The blankets she'd laid out were tossed around and she was basically just sleeping on the hard wooden floor with a bunch of blankets under her head for softness and one draped around herself.

Anika grinned at the sight. She'd never thought her to be a restless sleeper. Glancing at the work desk she noticed the clock. It was a little past five in the morning, still an hour away from first thing in the morning.

While the expression sounded imprecise it was actually quite strictly defined. First thing in the morning meant the time just before most shops opened. Bakeries and other places that offered breakfast and food opened up at five in the morning. At six, most other shops started to open. First thing in the morning referred to six in the morning when most of the life in the city came to view.

It meant she still had an hour or so before Torim would show up.

She stretched before getting up from her makeshift bed. She put on a fresh set of travel clothes. Trousers made of good quality cloth and leather. A practical shirt with long sleeves completed the outfit. She tucked pouches on her belt and put on the holster for her caster. Given the events of past days she wasn't going anywhere without it.

Done with her preparations, Anika gingerly made her way out of the back

room. She didn't want to wake up Anjali. She needed the rest. She grabbed two containers from under the counter. They were for storing food. Made from metal, they were sturdy and had several different compartments, allowing her to carry home anything from soup to cooked pieces of meat. They were insulated and with an activations rune they could be made to either keep the food warm or in the case of a drink, keep it cold.

She left the shop and headed down the street. The bakery wasn't far away, only a five minute walk. The streets were empty and moist with dew. It had been a cold night, it seemed. Few people were about, but some of the early risers were already headed for work or breakfast. Some had a long way to walk so they were up and about early.

The area around Anjalis' shop was mostly residential, but the street level had plenty of shops. Mostly them were artisan shops making smaller items, but not jewellery or anything else of high value and low demand. Anika passed a shop selling baskets and other smaller items used to carry things. There was a shop that sold furniture in the form of basic stools and chairs. She passed all of those without paying them much attention. She was guided by her nose to the bakery.

She entered the shop and enjoyed the scent of freshly baked bread and the warmth of the hot ovens. The night chill still lingered and she had started to wish she'd put on a jacket. She consoled herself with the fact it wasn't a long walk.

There weren't many people in the shop so she was done quickly with her purchases. A fresh loaf of white bread with a golden crust she knew would offer a satisfying crunch when bitten into. There was also hot stew that had been baking along with the breads since late night. It was a thick mixture of meat, peas and beans along with some carrot and rutabaga covered in a thick brown sauce. It was a staple of the bakery and had a good reputation. It wasn't the first time she was having it for breakfast. She had bought enough for Anjali as well and she'd activated the runes on the containers she had brought with her. The food would remain warm even if her employer decided to have the stew for lunch.

The bakery also sold some cold drinks for those looking to buy food so she grabbed two servings of a light ale. It wasn't the kind to get you drunk, but it had a bit more taste to it than just pure water.

Happy with her purchases she made her way back to the shop. The temperature was slowly climbing up as the first rays of sunlight made it past the tall buildings. The shop had a warmth to it that felt welcoming after the streets. Anika made her way to the counter and put down the two containers and the loaf of bread. It took her a moment of searching to find the spoons. They'd been stored in a drawer under the counter, but somehow been knocked out and were now laying in a corner on the floor. She quickly cleaned them before pulling a seat next to the counter. She tore off a big piece of bread. Steam rose from the still warm loaf. She opened up her container and pulled out the two pieces inside. One held the cold ale and the other the hot stew. She opened up the ale container and took a small sip. It was refreshing. With a small smile she opened up the second container and dug out a spoonful of the stew. She had to blow on it a couple of times just to cool it down to an edible temperature.

The first taste of it made her mouth water. She didn't need to chew much. Even the pieces of meat broke down with just the touch of her tongue. She chased down the stew with a big bite of the bread. The crunch of the crust contrasted nicely with the soft inside.

"Good morning."

Anika turned to regard Anjali. She was standing in the doorway, ruffling her hair. "Good morning. I got us some food."

Anjali smiled. "Thanks. Can't deny that I'm hungry."

Anika watched her grab a stool and take a seat next to her. She grabbed her container and opened it up before pulling a chunk out of the loaf of bread.

"It was a cold night," Anika said and waited for the older woman to take the first bite of stew before continuing her own meal.

Anjali grunted and took a bite out of the bread before sipping some of the ale. It seemed she wasn't in a mood to talk.

A brief moment of silence passed between the two.

"I wonder how far away we'll have to ride from the city," Anika pondered.

"Worried about your butt?" Anjali asked.

"No," Anika replied with a slight blush to her cheeks. "Just how long it will take. Whether we'll make it back before dark."

Anjali spooned some more stew in her mouth before making another jab at her. “You mean you’re wondering how long you’ll have time to be alone with Torim.”

Again, Anika blushed and looked away from her. “That can’t be helped,” she said in a defensive tone. “It’s part of the mission.”

“You just remember the real reason you’re going there,” Anjali reminded her and gulped down some cool ale.

“Come on, Anjali. I’m not some desperate wench. I’m not going to throw myself at him the first chance I get,” Anika protested and gave her employer a miffed look.

“Could have fooled me,” Anjali replied with a smile that told she was just teasing her and wasn’t being serious.

Not wanting to give her any more reason to tease her, Anika ate in silence until she finished her meal. It wasn’t the first time she was being teased for fancying Torim and there were plenty of times she had been discouraged from pursuing it. Anjali had given plenty of reasons and many of them made sense. Torim wasn’t the most reliable of men and his profession carried with it risks that she was now feeling first hand.

Still, she couldn’t deny the attraction she felt for the man.

Knowing all that she made herself a promise. Even though the trip would have been the perfect opportunity to get more close to the man she decided it would be best to just keep it about the reason they were going out in the first place. Make it back safe and with more information and that would be the absolute best outcome she could hope for.

She went to the back room and cleaned out the container with some water in the sink that was there. The water from it drained in a back alley through a pipe. She dried it with a piece of cloth and then put it back where she had gotten it from. Anjali was still at the counter, eating her meal. Anika glanced at the clock in the back room. It shouldn’t have been long before Torim arrived.

“What’s your plan for the day?” Anika finally asked just to kill the little bit of time that was left.

“Going to make a few items,” Anjali replied. She was dipping her bread in

what remained of the stew. “Still quite a few that need replacing. More that need fixing. Probably going to visit the glass shop as well. Need those display cases fixed. They should have everything by now so I’m going to see if I can hurry them up.”

“The display window is going to take some time I guess?” Anika asked and gave the covered window a look. Some of the frames needed fixing as well, but that was something to be done when the window arrived.

“Maybe next week they said,” Anjali replied. “We really need to start making some money again to cover it all. That ship payment really helped, but the books are still showing red for all of this.”

“Don’t worry. The shop has a good reputation. The customers will come back as soon as we’re fully open again,” Anika tried to reassure Anjali as much as herself. The shop had become like a second home to her and the shop owner like a second mother. While what she said was true and the shop had its regular customers the competition was hard. Just a few streets down there was another shop where people could get most of the same things as in their shop.

Their conversation was halted as the door opened and Torim stepped in. He had a good set of travel clothes on him. Not that different from what Anika was wearing. Trousers with leather patches where the wear and tear was the most severe. A loose shirt that had a few too many buttons open that gave a good view of his chest.

“We’ve been waiting for you,” Anjali said.

“Well, I’m here,” Torim said with a grin.

Anika could sense the conversation was headed down a road with high tensions. “We should get going then,” she said quickly in an attempt to keep the two from getting in their usual jabs and quips. “How long a trip is it going to be?”

“A couple of hours of riding once we’re out of the city,” Torim said. “Add in the time getting out of the city and it’ll be pretty late when we get back.”

“We should buy some food on the way then,” Anika said and took a few steps towards the door, hoping the man would get the hint.

“We can do that on the way to the stables,” Torim said and started to follow her. “I reserved two horses for us yesterday.”

“You look after her,” Anjali said as the pair was at the door.

Torim glanced back. “I will,” he promised.

Anika let out a sigh of relief once they were out the door. The pair started to walk in silence. Anika glanced at the man next to her from time to time. She noted the caster on his belt and the various pouches. He seemed prepared for trouble. Looking at her own belt she could tell the same was true for herself.

The stable wasn't that far off. Just a couple of blocks towards the southern docks. They passed several places selling food. They ended up getting their supplies from many places. Bread from a bakery, a small pot of honey from another shop, some dried meat from the butcher, a container of ale from another and a couple of fruits from a food stand. Plenty to last them a day or even two if they stretched the food.

The stables had their horses already saddled and ready to go. All they had to do was put down the payment for the day and stash their shopping into the saddlebags. They were on their way of the city as most of the shops opened for business. They avoided the worst of the morning rush on the central island. They knew the tunnel leading under the river would be crowded so they went with one of the ferries. There was still a line to get on, but all in all they were across the river quicker.

The southern part of the city sprawled out inland quite a ways, but there were far less people on the streets. It wasn't as densely populated as the central island. The buildings weren't as tall, there was more space between them and the streets were wider. All of that led to faster progress and they were out of the city in no time.

The slow trot of their horses allowed for a conversation. It didn't seem Torim was in a hurry and Anika trusted that he had chosen a pace that would let them return on the same day. The scenery quickly dwindled in the buildings it had and grew in open fields. There were a lot of farms on the outskirts of the city. Some historical estates that belonged to nobles. A gentle breeze from the sea and sunlight from a clear sky made for a pleasant weather to ride.

“So, who are we going to see?” Anika asked after a while of riding in the countryside.



“Darlan Rothpol,” Torim replied and glanced at her. “I got his name from a friend. The item we’re looking for is the hand of Glavius.”

Anika frowned. “Wasn’t it stolen?”

“Not that I know of,” Torim replied. “Last record I found had it in the hands of the government. After they took it off of display it’s a mystery where it went. No records, at least not in the library of Salvius.”

“If there’s no record of it there then there probably isn’t a record,” Anika agreed. She knew full well the extent of that library. If it didn’t have information on something then it likely wasn’t very important information or it was something no one actually knew.

“Still a mystery why they want the hand,” Torim continued. “Obviously for the ring on the finger of it, but why? As far as I can tell it’s not something that couldn’t be made fairly easily these days.”

“That’s not exactly true,” Anika replied and adjusted in her saddle. The bouncy ride was starting to tire her muscles. She didn’t ride that often and it was starting to feel like it. Still, a vague memory had been jostled in her mind. “I remember a professor at the Towers talking about the ring. He called it a masterpiece of rune crafting. Apparently it has certain special properties that we still don’t fully know how to replicate.”

“Interesting. What kind of properties?” Torim asked.

Anika shrugged. “The professor didn’t go into much detail since he was talking past the course topic with it, but he did imply the ring could be used to complete all sorts of bigger rune constructs because of its properties. The materials used in it are high quality so even though it’s small it has a significant potential and the special way the runes are engraved on it expand that potential even further.”

“So, combine the ring, the crown and the ship they maybe stole and what can you do?” Torim asked.

It was a tough question and Anika gave it some thought before answering. “Honestly, I have no idea. This stuff is on a scale I’m not familiar with. All I can do is guess and that’s pretty useless since they could be using the things for just about anything. It could be a weapon of some sort that they’re building or

something that will help everyone. Make their lives easier.”

“Somehow I don’t see them trying to help others,” Torim noted.

“Neither do I,” Anika admitted.

“We can probably assume it isn’t going to be anything good,” Torim said.

“Best we find that ring first, then,” Anika noted.

The exchange ended there and the pair rode on in silence. They took a small break after an hour. The road they were on was surprisingly empty. Only a couple of wagons had rolled past them and even those looked like local farmers moving on their own lands.

It was a few hours later that they arrived at their destination. It was a large estate with an iron gate closing off the entrance. A wall made of stone surrounded the entire area, high enough that even on horseback neither of the two could see above it. Peering past the metal bars of the gate they could see a gravel laden path leading to what could only be described as a mansion. It had two stories to it and judging by the amount of windows there had to be at least six big rooms in a row down the length of the building.

There was no one at the gate who they could greet so for a moment they wondered how they’d get in, but then Anika spotted a rope just beyond the gate itself. She dismounted and reached to pull it. There was no sound so she pulled it again. There was no sound of a bell ringing again so she turned to regard Torim.

“Guess it’s not working,” she said.

“Let’s wait a bit,” Torim said. “Could be a bell rang inside the mansion and someone is coming.”

Anika turned to look at the mansion. For a while it looked like no one would be coming, but then the front door opened and a figure emerged. Anika raised a hand to wave at them and got a hand wave in acknowledgement that they’d been seen and heard. With that information in mind she made her way back to her horse and mounted it. She also moved the horse so that Torim would be the one the person coming for them would speak to.

It also meant he’d be between her and any danger that person might pose. She had to remind herself that they had no idea how the owner of the place would react to them so it was best to be overly cautious.

The person coming to the gates turned out to be a young man.

“Yes?” the man asked as he arrived at the gate. He looked a little bit annoyed that he’d had to walk all the way there.

“Greeting. Is this the residence of Darlan Rothpol?” Torim asked and gave the man a disarming smile. Anika couldn’t help but find it attractive. She had to remind herself of the promise she’d made to herself about keeping it professional with the man during the journey.

“It is. You wish to see him?”

“We would,” Torim agreed. “I am Torim and my companion here is called Anika. We would like to talk to him about the hand of Glavius.”

The young man frowned. “Very well. I will let you in to wait, but I can not guarantee he will meet with you. He has been withdrawn to his study for a long time now and isn’t keen on being disturbed.”

“We understand,” Torim assured the young man as he opened the gate and let the pair in. Out of politeness they kept their horses at a walking pace and stayed behind the young man as he led them to the mansion and its main entrance. They dismounted and tied off their horses before following the young man inside the mansion.

The entrance hall was much like many others in such large residences. There was a pair of stairs leading up on either side of the hall. Opposite they could see a wall made of windowed doors that gave view to what looked to be a well tended to garden. Doors on either side led to others parts of the house.

“Please, wait here while I go ask the master,” the young man said and pointed the pair to a comfy looking couch.

“Thank you,” Torim said and headed for the couch. Anika didn’t feel like sitting. The ride was still making her behind regret ever taking on the journey. Instead she paced around as the young man disappeared up the stairs. She examined some of the paintings that hung on the walls. She expected to see battles, but instead there were mostly beautiful sceneries of the city of Ramyn as well as some of the countryside around it.

“Going better than expected,” Torim said from the couch.

“He hasn’t agreed to meet us yet,” Anika reminded him.

"I'm sure he will," Torim said with confidence. Where the man got it from Anika could only guess. She felt a tiny breeze of cool air from what looked to be a wooden grate in the wall. Curious, she got closer to it to find out what was making the air flow. She couldn't see anything obvious behind the grate. Just what looked to be a tunnel of sorts that continued along the wall and branched in different directions. The cool flow of air was constant and didn't fluctuate that much. It was obviously intended to work like it was.

"Curious," Anika muttered to herself.

"I see you are interested in my air circulation system," came a voice from the top of the stairs. Anika looked up to see who was talking. The man had a cane that he leaned on with his left hand. The top of his head was balding. White hair still ran down the sides of his head in long, thin strands. His face was wrinkled like a dried prune and his back was hunched down. Still, he looked to be in a good shape for someone his age. As he walked down the stairs there was little wavering and his steps were quick.

"It's fascinating," Anika said, excitedly. "How does it work? The cool air, I assume you're using runes of some sort to trap ice elementals or something and then using air elementals to push the cool air around the house."

The man chuckled as he reached the bottom of the stairway. "Very good, young lady. You should study at the Towers."

Anika blushed slightly. "I already am."

"Hoho! Good. You are quite correct on how it works," the man said. "In the basement there are two containers. First is the air elemental. That container is connected to the second one, containing the ice elemental. There are control runes to adjust how strongly the air spirit moves the air and how much cold the ice elemental puts out. The rest is just a matter of running these paths all over the house. Keeps the house nice and cool during the hot days." The man used his cane to point at the grated vent.

"Very impressive," Torim said. He had risen from the couch and walked over. "I assume you are the master of the house?"

"Indeed I am. Darlan Rothpol." He examined Torim with keen eyes, trying to weight the sort of man he was. "And you are?"

“Torim. The young lady is Anika. We came here in the hopes to gain some information on the hand of Glavius.”

“Ah,” Darlan said, his expression growing more mellow. “The hand. It is an interesting item. Come. The lobby is no place to talk about it.” He started climbing back up the stairs. Anika and Torim followed. They went left at the top of the stairs, down a corridor that had six doors, three on either side of it. It was the second one on the side of the garden that they entered.

The room was fairly large, easily fitting the large desk, the book cases lining the walls along with the seating arrangement in the middle of it that could accommodate ten people for a comfortable discussion. Darlan walked over to the central seats and motioned for the pair to follow.

Anika found the seat comfortable. The chair had a high back, the seat had a soft cushion on it. It was the sort of seat her behind could appreciate after all the riding.

“Now then, what is it that you want to know about the hand of Glavius?” Darlan gave them an inquisitive look with a small smile. It was obvious he was pleased someone had come seeking his expertise on the matter.

Anika listened half-heartedly as Torim gave a brief explanation of what had led them to come to him. Lots of details were left out and the danger they were in was downplayed, but the urgency of the matter was still presented to the man. Her attention wandered on the books that lined the walls. She could see some history books, collections of works that told of herbs and all sorts of other knowledge. It was obvious that if the man had read all of them he was very knowledgeable about many things.

“So the question we have is, what happened to the hand after it was taken off display?” Torim finished his explanation with the question they sought the answer to. Anika turned her full attention back to the conversation.

Darlan sat silent for a moment. The expressions on his face changed from a deep frown to a brief smile and then again a frown. “There are three theories about that. One is that it is gathering dust in storage somewhere. I’ve always found that an unlikely case. Such an item will always be in demand. Someone wants to look at it or have the bragging right to owning it. If the state still held

possession of it we would know it.”

“Too bad. If the state had it things would be much simpler,” Torim muttered.

Darlan nodded in agreement. “The second theory is that the state sold it. In private. To a collector that approached at the right time with the right sum of gold. The item isn’t that meaningful to the state that they’d pass up on getting more gold in their coffers for it. That they would sell it in private without telling anyone seems unlikely. If someone showed interest in the item the state would have been wise to setup a public auction to get the best price for it.”

“Could have been sold to someone with the right connections,” Torim pointed out. “A bit of grease in the right peoples hands and there would be no need to go public with anything.”

“A possibility,” Darlan admitted. “The third theory is that it was stolen after taken off public display. It’s possible the state feels too embarrassed to admit that has happened so no one knows about it.”

A brief silence took over the room.

“Which theory do you believe in?” Anika asked, breaking the silence.

“I don’t need to believe,” Darlan said with a sly smile. “I know the truth.”

Both Torim and Anika leaned forward in their seats in anticipation to hearing it.

“It was stolen,” Darlan said. “It took a lot of tracking down to find out who stole it and where it ended up after that. The black market trails are dangerous and difficult to follow, but I managed it, in my youth. So I know than a petty thief from Ramyn stole it. Not that it was difficult. The thing was in a storage where many had forgotten it. He just nabbed it when no one was looking and walked out. The difficult part was selling it.”

“A famous item like that is a double edged sword,” Torim agreed.

“Just needs the right buyer,” Darlan pointed out. “Certainly, that can take time and connections many lack, but in the end there’s always someone willing to put down the gold. That held true for this as well. The item was sold, the thief got rich as did the broker.”

“Who bought it?” Torim asked, impatiently.

“What will you do with that information?” Darlan asked. He eyed the pair

with intensity. Enough so that Anika shifted in her seat because it got uncomfortable.

“Well, as I said, there are other people looking for the item and we can’t let them have it,” Torim started. “We would warn the current owner so he can keep it safe. We don’t really care who has it as long as it’s not the people looking for it. They are the sort who are willing to kill to get what they want.”

“I see,” Darlan said, falling silent for a moment to consider what had been said.

“If the people after the item get it I fear they may use it for something that will rock the entire nation,” Anika said, joining the conversation. “It is a powerful magical item and it can be used for all sorts of things. Most of them unpleasant.” While she didn’t have any actual information on what it could be used she hoped the words would help convince the old man to reveal who had the item. He did not seem like the sort who ignored threats to others lives.

“I did promise never to tell,” Darlan muttered with hesitation. It was obvious he was struggling on what to do.

“We can’t force you to tell us anything,” Anika said. She got a slightly miffed look from Torim for saying, but she ignored it. “At the very least you should warn the person who has it. The other people looking for it will not be as nice as we are.”

Darlan gave her a look with narrowed eyes. “You believe they would come here and force me to talk?”

“Wouldn’t put it past them,” Anika said and looked the man straight in the eyes.

Darlan sighed. “The item is owned by baron Ranaly.”

Torim cursed.

“What’s the matter? You know him?” Anika asked. She only knew the baron by name and reputation. There were stories of him floating around that were less than savoury. Based on those he would not be an easy person to approach, but the reaction from Torim seemed to indicate he knew more.

“Unfortunately, yes,” Torim said. “I’ll tell you about it on our way back to the city.” He turned to regard Darlan. “You are certain he has the item?”

The old man nodded. "As far as I know. It's possible he has sold it, but I doubt that to be the case. It holds special meaning to him."

"I bet it does," Torim muttered. His expression softened as he continued. "Thank you for the information. You might want to leave the area for a bit so that things have a chance to settle down. Wouldn't want you running into the others looking into this matter."

Darlan frowned, but finally nodded. "I have been holed up in my study for a while now. Perhaps it is time to take to the field once more. I have been planning an expedition of sorts. Nothing as demanding as in my youth, but an outing an old man can enjoy and experience some of the thrills of youth."

"Sounds like a fine plan," Anika said, fully hoping the man would travel far away and be safe. She gave Torim a sideways glance. He looked ready to leave. He stood up so Anika followed his lead.

The farewells were short and quick and the pair rode out of the mansion gates quicker than either of them had anticipated.

"That went good," Anika said, unable to hide the relief in her voice. She had expected it would take more time and that there would be some sort of trouble with it all. She had half expected their adversaries to show up and there to be a big fight. She was glad her fears had proven unwarranted.

"Better than expected," Torim agreed. His horse let out a whinny and he had to grab the reins a bit tighter to keep it on the road. "Let's hurry. Put a few miles between us and the mansion and stop for a meal."

Anika nodded. The pair rode on in silence for a good while. The road was empty. There seemed to be more traffic in the sky as more than once a large shadow passed over them and when they looked up they could see a merchant ship push through the air above them, sails full of wind and the runes glowing to keep it in the sky.

They found a sheltered spot to take their rest once Torim was satisfied they'd put enough distance between them and the mansion. A large tree offered shade and there was a fallen tree to use as a seat not far from the bigger trees trunk.

"So what's the story with the baron?" Anika asked as she took a bite out of the dried meat. The log under her offered a comfortable seat. Torim was sitting



right next to her with only a saddle bag separating them.

“You’ve heard the stories about him?” Torim asked and poured some honey on his piece of bread and took a big bite out of it.

“Some,” Anika replied. “I know his reputation with women is questionable. Stories of whore houses, crying and beat up women being ferried off his estate and even rumours that he sometimes kills and tortures poor women he’s picked up from the street.”

“All of that is true, as far as I know,” Torim said. “I had the displeasure of selling him an item. It was supposed to deliver the item at his estate. So I went there, item with me. Got called in and shown to a room. It was like entering a torture chamber. There were two women shackled onto the wall by their wrists. One with her back to the wall, the other with her face. What I could see of either one was that they’d been whipped. They had red stripes all over their bodies. Bad enough that blood was trickling down from several places.”

Anika swallowed hard and put down the piece of dry meat she’d been eating. Somehow it didn’t seem that appetising any more.

Torim continued without paying her much attention. “And there was the baron. Sitting in his chair with a grin on his face, his feet resting on the back of a woman who was on the floor on all fours. The whip was on the table next to him along with all sorts of other tools used to inflict pain. He was naked and it was obvious he was enjoying it all.”

“What did you do?” Anika asked, unsure what she would have done if she’d walked in on something like that. Likely the baron would have been burned to a crisp by a spell of some sort. Or she’d have been too taken back to do anything.

It wasn’t always easy to know what you would do in a given situation.

“I conducted my business with him and left as quick as I could,” Torim said. Judging by his voice it was a decision that he wasn’t proud of. “Me getting involved wouldn’t have made much difference. There was plenty of security around the baron. Best I could do was swear I’d never deal with him again and that’s a promise I’ve kept. Not looking forward to breaking it.” He looked down at the piece of bread in his hand and took a bite out of it.

Watching him Anika could see the tension in his jaw and the look in his

eyes. Everything he was saying was true. There was no faking the clear disgust he had for the baron. She couldn't help but smile briefly at it. It was a glimpse into the true man he was that she had not often seen.

"We don't necessarily have to deal with the baron at all," Anika said and took a bite of the meat. It still didn't taste as good as it had before the story.

"What do you mean?" Torim asked. "He has the hand."

"We could just steal it," Anika suggested. "No need to deal with him unless he happens upon us in which case dealing with him might actually be a good thing."

Torim gave her a look. "And if he catches you I doubt anything he'll do to you will be pleasant." He shook his head. "He's a baron. And he's wealthy. Trying to steal from him is likely to see us caught. He has guards and anything valuable and important will not be easy to find nor steal."

"So what are we going to do?" Anika asked. She had not been that serious with her suggestion. Stealing wasn't something she had experience with and she knew they'd need someone who had such experience to pull it off. Torim probably knew some, but it looked like he was against the idea so she didn't push further on it. Knowing Anjali she would have opposed such a plan as well.

"We'll take our time and think of a plan," Torim said. "No point in us trying to decide what to do right here and now. That's how people end up dead."

"Anjali might have thoughts to offer too," Anika said, letting out loud her inner thoughts. The shop owner often had good ideas on how to proceed. It was one of the reasons why she had sought to apprentice with her.

"I bet she will," Torim said and gobbled up the remainder of his meal. He started putting away stuff so they could get on the road quicker.

Anika hurried and finished her meal as well. She didn't want to hold up the man and she had to admit that getting home before it got dark would have been nice. A few minutes later they were back on the road.

The way back was uneventful. The sun was creeping towards the horizon when they arrived at the outskirts of the city. The closing night had Ramyn abuzz. Farmers were making their way out after having delivered or sold their produce. Artisans and other workers were rushing back home. The ferry across

the river was busier than it had been in the morning. It made sense. People had been pouring in the city all morning and day and now they were looking to go back where they came from.

The pair had to wait almost half an hour for their turn on the ferry. It didn't help that one of the ferries looked to be out of service. There were people working on it. Anika was no expert, but it looked like the ferry had sprung a leak somewhere or something had hit it and caused a hole. It wasn't that uncommon on the river. The stream of water carried with it logs and other things that could cause damage to any vessel unfortunate enough to be hit by it.

By the time they were across the river and had returned their horses the sun was starting to dip below the horizon. They walked to the shop together, hoping Anjali would be there so they could hash out what had happened and get the ideas flowing on what to do next. They were happy to see light coming from the shop. The surrounding buildings made the street darker than it really was, making a source of light more visible.

Anika pushed open the door and walked in. "We're back," she said happily.

"Welcome back." Anjali was sitting behind the counter, tinkering with what looked to be a pendant of some kind. She finished what she was doing before looking up. "Did you find what you were looking for?"

"We did," Torim said as he entered and closed the door behind him. He turned over the sign telling anyone looking to enter that the shop was closed.

"You don't sound too happy about it," Anjali noted.

"We're not," Anika said as she leaned against the counter, opposite to her. Torim joined next to her. He told the story of what had happened and who had the hand of Glavius.

"So what's the problem?" Anjali asked. "We know who has the item."

"That's the problem," Anika said. "Have you not heard the stories about the baron?"

"That's your worry?" she asked, looking amused.

"Yes. I've seen it myself," Torim said with a grim voice.

Anjali snickered. "No need to worry about that. The baron is a friend. He'll be happy to see me."

Torim and Anika exchanged surprised looks. Then they both turned to regard Anjali with suspicion.

“How can you be friends with a man like that?” Anika asked, feeling like she had been let down by her mentor.

“Well, calling him a friend might be stretching it a bit, but we get along,” Anjali said. As she saw the looks she was getting she decided it was best to elaborate a bit. “The reputation of the baron is largely fabricated for various reasons I’m not going to get into.”

“But I’ve seen it first hand,” Torim said in protest. He was not willing to think he’d be so easily fooled.

“No doubt while conducting some shady business?” Anjali asked and forced a reluctant nod from Torim. “You saw what he wanted you to see to keep his reputation and augment it. He is very, very good at what he does.”

Torim shook his head. “I’m unconvinced.”

Anjali shrugged. “You’re free to come with me and see for yourself. I assure you, he will be happy to help us.”

“Fine. I’m too tired to argue right now. We’ll talk tomorrow. All right?” Torim said and sounded both tired and frustrated.

“Fine with me,” Anjali said. “I’ll have to reach out to the baron and see when he’s available. Might not be tomorrow so we probably have some time to talk things out.”

Torim nodded. “I’ll drop by tomorrow.” With those words he left.

Anika watched the man walk out. It was obvious he was not happy. Whether it was because the baron had apparently fooled him or because Anjali somehow knew him was hard to tell. Looking at the shop owner she couldn’t help but feel curious about how she knew the baron. Just as she was about to ask Anjali gave her a look,

“You look tired as well. Maybe you should get some sleep as well. We can talk tomorrow.”

The words triggered a long yawn from her. “You’re right. I’ll get some sleep.”

Anika walked to the back room, stripped and buried herself under the warm blanket. It wasn’t long before she was fast asleep.

## Chapter 10

Anjali watched Anika walk into the back room. She waited for a bit and continued to tinker with the pendant in front of her. After a bit she peeked into the back room to ensure the young woman was asleep. The steady breathing told her she was.

Satisfied she would not be following her, Anjali grabbed her caster and ensured she had shells for it in her pouch before leaving the shop. She opened and closed the door as silently as possible and looked either way down the street. It was largely empty. Just a random passer-by walking back home from their daily job.

She started up the road, towards the eastern side of the city. She glanced back a couple of times to ensure no one was following her. The fact the baron was involved in the mess had taken her by surprise. His reputation was what it was, but she knew him better than that. Arranging a meeting with him would be a challenge none the less, despite how easy she had made it out to be.

There were old contacts she'd need to dust off to get that done.

Walking the streets was fast now that there weren't crowds of people blocking the way. The only problem that arose as the light grew short were the drunks. They could get obstructive at times. They'd whistle after her and some even tried to stop her to chat her up, but the sight of her caster was usually enough to drive them away.

Still, she stuck to the streets that had lights on them. Even with a caster there was no point risking it by taking the dark alleys, even if those might have offered a significant shortcut. It helped that some of the alley ways were obviously occupied by people doing all sorts of stuff. She witnessed a couple of shady deals going down as well as some women of the street going down as well – one by her own will and another by the fist of a man.

A part of her wanted to intervene, but it was no time for that. She hastened her steps.

It wasn't long before she arrived at her destination. It was the bottom floor of

one of the tall red brick buildings. There were two doors. One leading to the upper floor off to the side and in the middle, the door leading to the tavern. A sign above the door had a cat with an arched back. It looked like it was hissing at something.

Anjali took a deep breath and pushed open the door. A breath of warm air hit her at the same time as the loud chatter and laughter of the customers did. The smell of smoke mixed in with all sorts of booze combined with the various smells of sweaty bodies that had not been cleaned in a while assaulted her nose like a raving band of barbarians.

It made her sneeze.

She got a few looks from the people at the tables as she made her way to the counter.

“Haven’t seen you in a long time.”

Anjali smiled at the man behind the counter. “Been busy, Gangy.”

“So I’ve heard. Got your shop blown up.” The bald man gave her a long look as he polished a mug with a rag. He soon put the mug down and grabbed a tankard and started filling it with ale.

“Yeah, been a rough few days,” Anjali agreed. She had to admit Gangy had not changed much over the years. Having no hair on him protected him from signs of age, but he also seemed to be able to avoid the wrinkles that usually came with age. His arms still looked like they were used to hard work and if anyone at the tavern got rowdy they’d get tossed out the door head first.

Gangy put the full tankard of ale in front of Anjali and looked at her, assessing her. “You going to be ok?”

Anjali grabbed the tankard, took a sip and smiled at her friend. “I’ll be fine. Still some damage to be repaired, but I’ll be back in business in no time.”

“That’s good,” Gangy said with a nod.

“But there are other matters afoot,” Anjali said and took another gulp of the ale. It was very good. Strong hoppy taste. Not the usual watered down stuff people got. It was made to be enjoyed. “I need to get in contact with the baron.”

With a raised eyebrow, Gangy leaned in closer to her. “Now why would you want that?”

“Like I said. There are things afoot. He’s in the middle of it all whether he knows it or not. Just going to give him a heads-up and offer to help if needed.”

“Dangerous, then?” Gangy asked. Anjali knew the look in his eyes. She hoped to keep the man out of it, but it might prove difficult if he got too interested.

“Possibly,” she admitted. “I just need you to contact the baron and tell him I need to see him. The real him. Not that facade he puts up. And expect there to be a few people with me.”

“He’s not going to be happy about that,” Gangy noted. “You know how he is about you.”

Anjali sighed. “I know. I keep telling him no, but he doesn’t want to give up.”

“You’re not the sort of woman you give up on easy,” Gangy noted.

Anjali just smiled at the remark. She took it as a compliment which it was without a doubt meant as. It didn’t make her relationship with the baron any less convoluted. “He’ll have to get over it some day. For now, I just need to talk with him. The sooner the better.”

“I’ll let him know,” Gangy said and pushed himself off the counter. A few people had arrived at the counter and he went to fill their orders. Anjali sipped her ale and waited for the man to come back. She’d walked all the way there. Might as well enjoy a few drinks and talk about old times. It was something she had done many times before, but the stories never got old. There were plenty to cycle through, after all.

The tavern wasn’t full, but it wasn’t empty either. Halfway full might have been a good guess. There was chatter and loud laughter, but it was all in good spirit and there were no signs of trouble.

“So, what have you gotten yourself into?” Gangy asked as he returned to her.

“Best you don’t know,” Anjali said and sipped her ale. “And I mean it. I know how you like to get involved in things. This isn’t the place for that.”

“You know you can always come to me for help,” Gangy said with a frown. He was obviously not happy about being shut off.

“I know and I appreciate it,” Anjali said with a brief smile. She gulped down the last of her ale. “You’ve helped me so many times before. Like that time in

Merek.”

Grabbing the empty tankard, Gangy smiled. “Merek. That town is a mess. Those coastal bastards can be crazy.” With those words he started to fill the tankard again.

“Didn’t know that back then,” Anjali noted. “Just graduated from the towers. My master had sent me there to fix a small ship because he was too busy here. Not really the sort of town a young woman should go in alone, unprepared.”

“You can say that again,” Gangy said as he put the full tankard in front of her again. “You chose the wrong tavern to enter that day.”

“I arrived late. Didn’t have much choice,” Anjali said and grabbed the tankard again. She took a sip. It was a different ale. Darker in colour, more bitter, but still enjoyable.

“The first time I saw you I thought to myself she’s going to cause trouble,” Gangy said and leaned against the counter again. “You stood out from the crowd too much. Clean clothes, brushed hair, didn’t smell like shit.”

Anjali laughed. “You smelled me, did you?”

“You walked past,” Gangy replied. “Most people that did that there made you hold your breath. Someone not doing that stood out.”

“Probably why I got in trouble,” Anjali admitted. “Not many women at that tavern. Plenty of drunk sailors. Shouldn’t have been surprised when some of them got too chummy.”

“And drunk, frustrated sailors can get violent when denied,” Gangy added. “Didn’t take long for a fight to break out over you.”

Anjali sighed. “I didn’t even give them a hint of being open to such advances. They just decided to fight over me on their own. Just bad luck I got caught in the middle of that. That hit really left a bruise.”

“I saw that hit. Would have downed an experienced fighter. No wonder it sent you to the floor. Not that any of the men fighting noticed that. They were too busy stomping on each other. Made it pretty easy for me to slip in and pull you out to safety.”

“A more seedy person might have taken advantage of that,” Anjali noted and gave the man an appreciative look. Ever since that incident he had been a great



friend and always worth the trust she had placed on him. There were many incidents where he had saved her hide. She had saved him more than a few times as well. Not that they'd been adventurers or anything of the sort. They had just come across each other during their normal jobs. That their normal jobs had often turned dangerous was pure coincidence.

"Good things I'm as clean as a pigeon," Gangy said with a sly smile.

"They tend to shit everywhere, don't they?" Anjali asked with a grin.

The man gave her an angry look that quickly melted away into a sigh. "You never could let someone have a moment to themselves."

"Come on, Gangy. You know yourself. You're not beyond doing some questionable things."

"There are limits to what I will do," Gangy replied. "You know that."

Sensing that the conversation was losing its light hearted nature, Anjali nodded. "I know you well enough. It's why I'm sitting here."

"Look, I'll talk with the baron tomorrow. I'll send you a message once that's done. He'll probably be happy to meet you. Its been a while since the last time, after all."

"I appreciate it," Anjali said with a smile. It was often like that with Gangy. Things would start friendly enough, but then for some reason or another the conversation would sour and he'd get snappy and want you gone. It was the way their relationship had always worked. When they'd worked together it had often been a thing of convenience and necessity rather than genuine desire to work together. Still, that forced time together had created a bond.

They both knew the other could be counted on in a tough spot.

She gulped down the last of the ale. Gangy grabbed the empty tankard, but instead of filling it again, he started cleaning it. It was the sign the conversation was over. "I look forward to your message," Anjali said as she stood up.

"You'll have it before noon tomorrow," Gangy said with a nod.

Anjali walked out the tavern. She didn't pay for the drinks. She never did. It would have offended the man.

Now that she thought about it, their relationship was weird. It went from warm to cold so quick and then back again. She knew that if she went back an

hour later Gangy would greet her with the same sort of warmth he had done just now. She also knew he'd be giving just as cold a farewell not soon after.

The night had grown darker during her two drinks. The streets were largely empty now and the alleys she had avoided earlier were even more uninviting. The only good news was that even the thugs had likely found themselves a tankard full of drink and a warm place to enjoy it. Still, she didn't waste any time and kept a brisk pace while walking back to the shop.

She had to remind herself that Anika and Torim didn't need to learn all the details about her past. There were things buried there that were best kept from them and anyone else. She hoped the baron would be discreet enough not to mention too much when they met.

A part of her felt ashamed for thinking so much about how to keep things from her friends. Another part reminded her that she had done nothing that warranted feeling shame. There was nothing wrong with wanting to keep your past to yourself.

She arrived at the shop and carefully opened the door. She tried to make as little noise as possible so as not to wake up Anika. To her relief she found the young woman sleeping in the back room, just as she had left her. Not wanting to wake her, Anjali quietly undressed and slipped under her own blanket on the floor. The soft padding of her travel mattress made the floor a bearable place to sleep.

The ale she had enjoyed had made her drowsy and she was soon fast asleep.

## Chapter 11

"I'm glad to see you're open again," the man said as he passed the coins over to Anjali.

She smiled and nodded. "Me too. Thank you for your purchase."

"The wife's going to love it," the man said, smiled and walked out the store. The pendant he'd bought had been beautiful, but it also had some protective properties to it. A perfect gift to please the wife as well as give the husband some ease of mind should their loved one come across some danger.

"First sale since the incident," Anika said from next to her.

Anjali glanced at her. "Feels good, doesn't it?"

"It does, but there's still a lot to do," Anika pointed out. There were still bits of the shop that needed repair. Still, the decision to open the shop despite all those deficiencies had proven to be the right decision. While the customer that had just left had been the first one to buy something, there had been several people that had dropped by in the three hours the shop had been open for. Some had promised to come back after giving their intended purchase some thought. While most probably wouldn't be back, some would be.

"Small steps," Anjali said. "These coins are going to help with it." She stashed them into a safe box below the counter. It was a sturdy box made of thick metal and there were runes carved on it all around. When it was locked it would stay locked unless you knew the rune to open it. For a shop like hers it was a fairly standard thing to have. When an item was sold it usually meant a fair bit of money was exchanging hands. In this case it was fifteen gold coins. It was a hefty sum for the sorts of people who'd think about robbing a shop.

"Wonder where Torim is," Anika said and leaned against the counter.

"He'll be here," Anjali replied and started tinkering with another item. Not a pendant this time, but a small box shaped metal container that could be used to light fires. One push of the button on it and a flame would come out the small hole it had in the opposite corner to the button. Right now the button was stuck and wouldn't go down. It had been damaged during the incident. Fixing it

shouldn't have been a big job, but there had been no shortage of distractions since then.

The door to the shop opened again.

Anjali looked up from the item she was working on. She recognized the man who walked in. She watched him walk over to the counter and offer her a note without saying a word. She took the folded up piece of paper and gave a nod of thanks. The man returned the nod and turned to leave.

"Who was that?" Anika asked. Glancing at her Anjali could tell the silent exchange had peaked her interest.

"A reply to my request to meet the baron," Anjali said and unfolded the piece of paper. There was a time and place written on it. She folded the paper back up and stashed it in her pocket.

"When did you make such a request?" Anika asked.

"Last night."

"Why didn't you tell us?"

"Because I've promised to keep certain things private," Anjali replied and gave the younger woman a look. Strictly speaking it wasn't a lie, but it wasn't the whole truth either. She had made promises, but nothing that would have prevented her from bringing Anika with her to meet Gangy. "The baron has agreed to meet with us tonight. That should be enough."

Anika gave her an appraising look. "How do you know him? You promised to tell."

"We should wait for Torim," Anjali said.

"No. Tell me now."

Seeing the expression on her was enough to tell Anjali she'd get no peace from her until the question was answered. With a sigh, she relented. "I haven't always kept this shop. I've worked for others and in doing so I've been to places all around the continent. It was during those travels I met the baron."

"What was he like?" Anika asked. "Was he like his reputation?"

Anjali smiled briefly. "He didn't have a reputation back then. He was just a young nobleman out travelling the world. You could say he was trying to be an adventurer. An explorer. He often talked about Elwar Soran and how he wanted

to travel to other worlds like he had done. He wanted his name recorded in the history books for something great he had accomplished.”

“Sounds like a typical young man,” Anika said. There was a slight hint of surprise to her voice.

“Yes. That’s very much what he was back then,” Anjali said, the memories that poured into her mind of that time bringing a smile to her face. “As to how I met him, well, my master had sent me out for a job he was too busy to do. It happened quite often, especially with jobs that were outside the city. He wasn’t keen on travel.”

“What sort of job was it?” Anika asked.

She had to stop to think for a moment. It was a long time ago. “There was a ship stuck in the Wroth harbour. Can’t remember the specific problem, but something about the runes on the ship had gone awry. So I was sent to fix it. No idea why. Plenty of competent people in Wroth who could have done it. Probably my then master owed the ship captain a favour and they decided to cash it in to save some money. Anyway, I went to fix and there he was. The baron.”

Anjali gave the younger woman a look as she caught her breath. Just remembering it was enough to put a weight on her chest. “He didn’t call himself baron back then. He was just a passenger on the ship. Everyone called him Ranaly. Best I could tell he was just exploring the world at that point. While I worked on fixing the ship he took an interest in me. We talked a lot. He made some advances.”

“Did you..”

Anjali was quick to shake her head. “I turned him down at every turn. Didn’t stop us from getting along fairly well, though. When I had the ship fixed the captain offered to take me back to Ramyn since that was where they were headed. I accepted. During the trip down river we ran into some river pirates.”

“Haven’t heard of those being around in a while,” Anika noted.

“They were rare even back then,” Anjali admitted. “It was a hard fight to keep the ship. Ranaly helped a lot with it. Saved me a couple of times. I saved him once or twice too. It was what gave us a bond. When we got back to Ramyn we kept in touch and over the years we ran into each other every now and then in

various circumstances. Calling him a friend might be a stretch, but he's someone I know pretty well."

"Sounds like he'd like you to be more than a friend," Anika noted with a grin.

"He keeps trying," Anjali admitted. "And I keep turning him down. I think it has become more of a game between the two of us than a serious thing."

"But why does he have the reputation he does?"

"That's not for me to say," Anjali replied. "All I can say is I know that's not the real him and he's not actually hurting or killing women on a whim."

"Sounds shady," Anika said and pushed herself off the counter to walk around the shop for a bit.

"Lots of things sound like that, but turn out not to be," Anjali said. She was going to say more, but the door to the shop opened and Torim walked in. He looked like he hadn't slept much. Both women gave him long, concerned looks.

"You all right?" Anika asked as he rounded a display case to stand next to the man. "You look like you haven't slept at all."

"I'm fine," Torim muttered. He focused on Anjali. "So, we meeting the baron or not?"

"Just got a message for time and place," Anjali replied and showed the folded up piece of paper.

"And you're certain we can trust him not to kill us?" Torim asked as he leaned against the counter and read what was written on the paper.

"As certain as I can be about that with anyone," Anjali said.

"Shouldn't we get moving then? Going to take some time to get there," Torim said and nodded towards the piece of paper Anjali still had in her hand.

"We should," Anjali agreed and stashed the piece of paper in her pocket. She put away the item she'd been tinkering with and instructed Anika to do a few things in preparation of closing the shop. Twenty minutes later she was locking the door and the trio headed out.

The baron lived where every noble did. In the past they would have been on the first of the floating islands above the city, but since the crash they had congregated to the western end of the island. Of course, some had abandoned the city and moved on to their country homes. There was not room for everyone on

the island and the land prices in the west had risen so high that even many noble families had scoffed at it and deemed it too expensive.

Unlike the areas where commoners lived, the western tip was not populated by tall buildings, but rather large areas walled off behind which there were mansions that rose no taller than two stories. They weren't as large as in the olden times, but still presented a huge departure from what most people had to live with.

"What a waster of land," Torim muttered as they walked on the paved street. On either side of them there were walls. They could see some tree tops rising above the stone structure meant to keep curious eyes from peering in.

"They're nobles. Of course they're wasteful," Anjali replied.

"Just think how many people could be housed here if all of the mansions and gardens were replaced with taller buildings," Anika said. "Would do wonders to lower the rents."

"Exactly why it's not going to happen," Torim said. "No landlord wants the rents to go down."

"No noble wants to give up heir mansion," Anjali corrected.

"Lots of them are renters," Anika reminded the two. "They make money off of it."

"Fucking parasites," Torim muttered.

Anjali frowned. The man had been grumpy when he entered the shop. He seemed to be even more so now that they were closing in on their meeting place. What ever was bothering him was unlikely to be resolved so she could only hope it wouldn't doom their meeting. She was fairly certain Ranaly would be receptive to their story, but he could still throw them out if he was given a reason to. A grumpy Torim seemed the sort who might provide him with more than one of those.

They arrived at the right mansion. It wasn't the biggest they'd passed by, but it wasn't the smallest either. They didn't go through the main gate, instead ducking to a side street where the servants entrance was. A knock on the wooden door in the wall and they soon had a servant asking what their business was. Anjali showed the piece of paper and they were quickly invited inside.

The servant guided them through passages and paths that kept them out of sight and away from the main parts of the mansion. Judging by the downward staircases they used the meeting would be taking place underground. The way was lit with enchanted lanterns that produced light, but none of the smoke or heat that traditional sources of light did. They passed several doorways that had guards standing near by.

Finally the servant led them into a well lit room. A breath of warm air washed over them as they entered. Then came the scene in front of them. A long table filled with all sorts of food and drink. Several empty seats and one with a man sitting in it. There was a naked woman on his lap. He seemed to be busy groping her breasts. Along the walls there were chains. Two of them had people tied to them. Both women. One looked like she had been whipped quite badly. There were marks on her back and what looked to be some dried blood.

“Anjali!” the man pushed the woman off his lap, stood up and walked over to her. He had short, curly, brown hair that looked like it didn’t need much maintenance. His clothes were made of fine fabric and his green eyes looked to be genuinely happy to see her.

“Hello Ranaly. It’s been a while,” Anjali said with a brief smile and dodged the hug the man tried to give her and instead turned it into a firm hand shake.

Ranaly grinned as he shook her hand. “Still playing hard to get I see.”

“Always for you,” Anjali said with an equally wide grin. She gave the three women in the room a look. “Still playing games with your reputation?”

Ranaly smiled briefly. “An unfortunate necessity.” She gave the three women a look. The one that had been on his lap went to release the two chained up ones and they left the room. As the one with the whip marks passed Anjali gave her back a closer look. From a distance the wounds looked real, but from close up it was obvious at least the blood was faked on. The scars may have been real.

As the women closed the door behind them, Ranaly shifted his focus on the two that had come with Anjali. “And who are your companions?”

“This Anika. She’s my apprentice,” Anjali said. Anika gave the man a nod. “And the grumpy looking fellow is Torim.”

Ranaly returned the nod from Anika. He seemed to eye her for what seemed



an inappropriately long time. He then turned his attention to Torim. "Your name sounds familiar and I'm certain I have seen you somewhere."

"I once sold an item to you," Torim said, leaving the matter at that.

"Ah, yes. That. Quite right. I hope you are not judging me by what you saw back then. I assure you, it is simply for appearances and everyone involved is quite safe and well."

"Appearances to benefit who and what?" Torim asked.

"Answering that would lead you to people who actually do what I pretend to do. Not the sort of people you want to meet," Ranaly said with such weight to his voice that arguing seemed pointless. "But enough about that. What brings you here?" he turned his attention to Anjali.

"The hand of Glavius," Anjali said, thinking it best to get straight to the point. "We were told you have it."

Not replying, Ranaly motioned towards the table and the seats around it. He walked to his own seat and sat down, waiting until the trio had taken seats before talking. "And who told you that?"

"Does it matter?" Anjali asked.

"Not really. Just curious. But yes, I do have it. Why is it of interest to you?"

The trio exchanged looks. Anjali kept talking since she knew the man best. "We believe some people might be looking to steal it. The sort of people who would barge into my shop and shoot it up with a caster. The sort of people who tried to kill my apprentice at her apartment."

Ranaly leaned his chin against his hands. "That does sound concerning, but I can assure you, this place and the item are well guarded."

"I would advice against underestimating these people," Anjali said. "They need that item and I don't think there's anything they wouldn't stoop to to get it."

"I do appreciate the warning," Ranaly said. "I will let the guards know and beef things up."

"Would it be possible for us to see it?" Anjali asked. The real goal was gaining possession of the item or at the very least having Ranaly include them in guarding it in some capacity. That way there might be a chance to catch someone trying to steal it and ask some questions. Whether that was something Torim and

Anika wanted was not something she had asked. It simply seemed like the only way to remain a part of the events.

Ranaly started to open his mouth to answer, but a low rumble made everyone in the room go silent. They could feel the ground above them shake and vibrate. Some dust fell onto the table from the ceiling.

“Sounds like we were too late to warn you,” Torim said and reached for his caster as he stood up.

The door to the room slammed open and a servant rushed in. “We’re under attack!”

“By who?” Ranaly demanded as he stood up.

“We don’t know. There’s at least three of them. Using casters and magic. They broke through the front gate and are making their way to the main building.” The servant took a deep breath in an attempt to calm down.

Anjali stood up and got her caster out as well and loaded it with a shell. “We’ll help.”

Ranaly nodded a thank you. “Let’s go then. You. Go gather all the guards you can and secure the treasure room. That’s their target.” The servant did as told without question and rushed out ahead of the four.

“They’re using casters,” Anjali reminded them all.

“And they’re not afraid to shoot to kill,” Anika agreed and made certain she had a shell in her caster.

“Who are they?” Ranaly asked as they made their way up the stairway. While he didn’t have a caster on hand he wasn’t unarmed. He had a short sword in hand. Not that it would do much good against someone with a caster, but it was better than nothing. Just meant he would need to be careful about when and where he made his move.

“We don’t know,” Torim said. “All we know is they want the hand of Glavius and you have it. There’s nothing they won’t do to get it.”

“Well, my mansion isn’t without its defences,” Ranaly said and hurried up. The ground shook again. There was a roar that didn’t come from any human source. Ranaly grinned. “There he is.”

“Who?” Anjali asked as they reached the top of the stairway. There was a

door immediately to their right that led outside. The corridor itself continued on to the left and right as well as straight ahead. Ranaly rushed to the door and opened it.

“My little surprise,” he said and walked out.

The trio exchanged quick looks before following him out. They had a view of the front of the mansion and the grounds between it and the main gate – or what remained of it. The gate had been blown away and was just a pile of twisted metal on the ground, half way to the mansion. A bush and tree were on fire to the left of the gate. Anjali could make out three figures close by the blaze. They seemed to have casters in hand that they were pointing towards the mansion.

Her gaze went towards the mansion. There was a big creature with four legs pacing around in front of the main door. It was big enough that its back almost reached the second floor. It was covered in what looked to be scales. Its tail ended in a wide paddle like end that had bony spikes protruding out of it. One swing and it would kill just about anything. Even from a distance she could see the sharp claws on its paws and as it growled it exposed its long and sharp looking teeth.

“What the hell is that thing?” Anjali asked. “And why do you have it?”

Ranaly laughed. “For protection, of course. One of the fools must have already made it to the treasure room and taken the obvious bait. It activates and defends what I’ve instructed it to.”

“So it’s a summoned creature?” Anika asked. She was unable to hide her excitement over witnessing something like that.

“Yes. I don’t know what it’s actual name is. I just call it Hagfar. Cost me a lot to get it,” Ranaly replied. As they watched one of the three figures shoot out a caster shell. A cone of fire headed straight for Hagfar and hit it on its side. It let out a roar, but as the flames subsided it looked to be completely unharmed.

“Worth every coin,” Ranaly stated as the creature turned to face those who were attacking it. It took a couple of long leaps before lunging at one of the shadowy figures.

A blinding blue light shot out from off to the side and hit it in the side. There was enough force behind it that Hagfar was thrown through the air and away

from its intended target. The air was filled with a smell that only lightning could produce. As the four watched, small bursts of electricity crackled between the scales of Haghfar. It roared in obvious pain and slumped to the ground, twitching as if it had lost control of its muscles.

“Dammit,” Ranaly muttered.

“Time for us to step in,” Anjali said and aimed her caster. “Spread out and find cover.” She pulled the trigger as she had one of the attackers in sight. The distance was uncomfortably long so she suspected the round would not do much damage, but at least it would draw attention and stop the attackers from advancing without opposition. The cone of fire shot out, roared past the downed Haghfar and struck the hooded figure that had shot the lightning.

As soon as she had pulled the trigger, Anjali had started constructing her defences. She was on the move and reloading her weapon the moment the shell had been spent and ejected from the caster. She had a new round in before the opposing side had even reacted. And she had moved on from where she had fired her shot.

Anika had moved towards the mansion with Torim in tow. The pair fired off their casters at the attackers. Water and air. Not the most effective attacks, but looking for her next target, Anjali could see the wind had had enough force to knock one of the hooded figures off their feet. The water attack had not done much besides making everything it had hit wet. Maybe it had distracted someone for a moment.

She could see Ranaly making his way to Haghfar. It seemed dangerous, but at the same time she could understand the move. The big creature would offer protection against most attacks. Even if it was still twitching on the ground it was obvious it wasn't completely out of the fight yet.

She lost sight of it all when flames engulfed her. Had it not been for her defences she would have been burned to ash. Now, all she felt was a slight heat and had to hold her breath as the flames were burning up all the air around her. She kept running to get out of them and took a deep breath as soon as she was in the clear. There wasn't much cover to be had in the open yard, but she did find a bush behind which to hide. She hoped the flames had obstructed the view of the

attackers and they weren't aware of her position. She put a new shell in her caster and popped her head up enough get a glance over the situation.

Two of the hooded figures were advancing towards the mansion. Anika stood in their way. As she watched, her apprentice fired off a caster round. The ground rumbled and started to shift in front of her. Where there had been flat ground there was now a wall as tall as a person. It had a slope to it that would deflect some of the force any attack against it would have. It didn't cover the entire way to the mansion, but it offered protection for her.

She seemed to be doing fine on her own so Anjali shifted her focus to Hagfar and Ranaly. There was still lightning crackling between its scaly skin, but much less frequently. It was starting to get back on its feet. Ranaly was standing next to it, doing something that was hard to tell for certain from a distance, but it seemed to be helping the creature recover.

She caught a glimpse of Torim running past the two, caster pointed towards the third hooded figure. He fired off a shot. A cone of fire shot out. He kept running towards the hooded figure that was now engulfed in the flames. His caster popped out the spent shell and he loaded up another one while running. He didn't seem to need it as he closed the distance to the hooded figure and crashed straight into it.

Casters and magic wasn't very good at close range.

A good fist was often better.

Judging by the swings, Torim had good ones and the hooded figure didn't manage to put up much of a fight. He soon had the threat taken care of. He gave the seemingly unconscious figure a couple of kicks just to be certain.

Then the pair was engulfed in flames.

"Torim!" Anjali cried out before she even knew it. To her relief the man soon emerged from the flames, running straight towards the wall Anika had managed to put up. The flames behind him died down, revealing the charred corpse of the hooded figure he had knocked out.

She tried to find where the shot had come from. It wasn't either of the two figures headed for the mansion. There was a fourth attacker somewhere. It took her a bit, but she spotted a figure near the crumbled front gate. She could swear

it was a familiar figure.

“Pok,” Anjali muttered. Why the young wizard had returned was obvious, but it was a great risk given what he had done. The ship owners must have put a sizeable bounty on his head. She checked the shell in her caster. It was a water one with limited range. Not something she could use to hit the young wizard. She checked her pouch for something more appropriate. To her disappointment there was nothing. If she wanted to hit the man she’d need to get closer or use some of her own magic to do it.

She decided to dig into her own magic to do it.

It wasn’t a time to hold back.

She started drawing runes in front of her. The slight blue shimmer soon started to obstruct her vision. She hastened her moves and soon had her web of runes ready. Knowing that, she stood up and made sure Pok was still where she had first seen him. She was happy to see the man still hiding behind the half crumbled wall. She directed her magic toward Pok.

It was a combination of wind and fire. The wind allowed for faster speed and distance while the flames were the primary source of destruction. The cone shot out fast and struck the wall and the man behind it. She had to cut the attack short when a torrent of water hit her and threw her to the ground. Her protections couldn’t do much against physical force. All they did was dampen the blow somewhat, preventing any bones from breaking, but she’d still have a few bruises from hitting the ground.

It took her a moment to gather herself and roll away from the spot she’d landed in. She fully expected another attack to follow and she was right. A jet of flames struck the spot she had been in just a moment after she’d rolled away. The edges of the flames licked her clothing as she rolled further away. She kept rolling on the ground, hoping she would go unnoticed. She struggled to get on her feet and then started to run towards the wall Anika had managed to put up.

As she looked around, she saw Anika fire off a caster round. Lightning rushed forward and struck one of the hooded figures. The lightnings stopped mid air. Runes cast a bright blue glow. The defences stopped the attack.

“Fucking mess this is,” Anjali said as soon as she reached the wall Anika

had built. The young woman was right next to her as she climbed over it.

“Dangerous mess,” Anjali noted as she examined the singed sleeve of her shirt. Her protections were losing their powers. There was only a limited amount of hits they could thwart. Having gathered herself again, she peeked over the wall to see what was going on.

Hagfar was back on its feet. Ranaly had mounted it and the terrifying looking pair was trotting towards Pok, who was still alive and moving around the remains of the gate and the wall. With his sword in hand, riding the beast, Ranaly looked truly terrifying.

Torim was now rushing towards the pair of hooded figures that had been headed for Anika and her wall. Her lightning attack had halted them and forced them to seek cover. Now they were hiding behind a tree, seemingly shoving each other to try and better fit behind the tree trunk.

“Looks like they’re not getting along that well,” Anjali noted as she ducked down behind cover again. The situation was looking good for them. “Saw Pok lurking around the gate over there. Took a shot at him, but seems he made it.”

“Ranaly is on him right now,” Anika said with a grin. “Little weasel going to get what’s coming to him.”

Even while looking in the other direction, the bright flash of light almost blinded Anjali. She blinked furiously to regain her vision. Even while her eyes were closed there was a white light instead of the usual blackness. Before she could fully recover, something flew over her and crashed into the mansion. Regaining her vision she could see a huge hole had formed into the side of the building. Amongst the rubble and wreckage she could see what could only be the foot of Hagfar poking out from under loose stone and wooden beams. Not far from him Ranaly was coughing on all fours and trying to get up.

“What..” Anjali started to say when she saw a figure emerge from a room adjacent to the wrecked area. It quickly hopped through the opening and started running towards the gate. It was holding something in its hands. Even with the fast movement Anjali could make out the hand encased in glass.

“That was some spell,” Anika said from next to her. She was standing, looking back at the destruction at the mansion with a sort of mix of wonderment

and fear. A spell that could send something like Hagfar flying through the air for such a distance was no joke.

“Yeah, and they’ve got the arm,” Anjali said and pointed at the man running towards the gate. Looking over the area it looked like his companions had noticed him and were beginning to cover his escape while retreating.

“Douggy!”

The shout from Torim caught Anjali by surprise. The figure with the hand stopped and gave the man a look. He then tipped his non-existent hat and continued running. She could tell Torim had lost sight of everything else on the field. He started rushing towards his former partner, his caster pointed straight at him.

Anjali trained her own caster at one of the hooded figures and squeezed the trigger just in time. Torim was about to get shot in the back with who knew what. The jet of flames was enough to save him and force the hooded figure to turn and run.

“Torim!” Anjali shouted. “Don’t be rash!”

The man didn’t listen to her and instead kept running towards his former partner while shooting off rounds with his caster. Flames, earth, water, air – everything was thrown at the escaping traitor, but somehow he kept making progress and getting closer to the crumbled gate.

“Shit,” Ranaly muttered as he staggered next to Anjali. He patted his arms, sending clouds of dust floating around him. Other than that he seemed to be all right. The only visible wound was a small cut to the left side of his forehead.

“They’ve got the hand,” Anjali said and pointed to the escaping Douggy.

“Shit.”

“You already said that.”

“Shit.”

“What do we do?” Anika asked. “Our casters aren’t going to work from this distance. At least not the shells I have.”

“We can’t let them escape with that hand,” Anjali said in a firm voice.

“They won’t,” Ranaly said with determination and started to rush towards the escaping thieves. The two women watched him climb over the wall and run.



“Can they do anything besides rushing ahead without a plan?” Anika asked.

“I’m sure they could if they stopped for a moment,” Anjali replied in a dry voice. She coughed and tried to come up with something while keeping an eye out for anything she could do to help the two men rushing ahead.

The situation looked hopeless.

Dougy was very close to getting to the gate. Torim wasn’t making much progress with the remaining hooded figure doing its best to distract him. Ranaly was too far away to catch up and then there was Pok who was casting spells to slow both of them down.

A shadow passed over the pair.

Anjali looked up and cursed the moment she saw the bottom of the ship. It wasn’t the ship Pok had stolen, it was far too small for that, but it made obvious the way the thieves planned to escape. The ropes being thrown down made it that much more obvious.

Before she could say anything, Anika had already trained her caster at the ship and pulled the trigger. The jet of air was enough to rock the ship and shove it off course, but it did nothing to stop it from moving onward towards those it sought to help.

Pulling out her own caster, Anjali sent a jet of flame against the ship. By then its defences were fully up and the flames did nothing but obstruct their vision for a brief moment. The pair watched helplessly as the ship made its way to the gate, picking up Dougy along the way. Pok was next and finally as the ship turned they picked up the remaining hooded figure. All three of them were quickly hoisted up with the ropes and the ship started to head away from the scene.

“Well, that’s that,” Anjali said, feeling helpless as she watched the ship fly off.

“Looks like it,” Anika agreed, unable to hide the dismay in her voice.

## Chapter 12

“It’s not over yet,” Ranaly said in a grim voice. “They’re not getting away with doing this to my mansion. No one steals from me and gets away with it.”

“They flew away on a ship! How the hell are we going to catch them now?” Torim asked, obviously frustrated that his former partner had been so close yet gotten away.

They were all standing in front of the damaged mansion. Hagfar had managed to get up again and getting out of the wreckage had caused even more damage to the mansion. Looking at the hole in the wall and the destruction around it it was a small wonder the upper floor had not yet collapsed on top of it.

“If we had a ship of our own we could chase after them,” Anika noted. She had dirt on her face that she was trying to wipe away with her sleeve. Her hair had come undone and was in a tangled mess from all the sweat and dirt. She wasn’t oblivious to the glances Ranaly was giving her.

“Where are we going to get a ship?” Anjali asked. “The docks are far away.”

The expression on Ranaly lit up.

“I’ve seen that look before and I don’t like it,” Anjali said.

“There’s something we can use to follow them! Come!” Too excited to see if anyone was indeed following him, Ranaly rushed off inside the mansion. The trio did follow him through the hole in the wall and along the corridors as the man rushed to the back of the mansion and out into the garden beyond. He seemed to be headed for what looked to be a shack of some sort that a gardener might use to store his tools.

Ranaly wasted no time ripping open the door to the shack and diving in. It looked like too small a place for all of them to pack into so the trio waited outside. It wasn’t long before Ranaly emerged, dragging with him a wooden board. It had a sleek shape to it, a straight cut back that narrowed to the front, almost like a miniature ship, but there were no sides to keep you from falling off. In the middle there was a slot.

Dumping the board on the ground, Ranaly went back into the shack and

soon emerged with a pole that had a canvas wrapped around it. He gave Anjali a look. "You know what this is, right?"

Anjali looked reluctant to admit it, but she did. "You kept it? It didn't work the last time I saw it."

Ranaly grinned. "It does now. Here. Put it together. There's another one I've got to drag out." He handed the pole to Anjali.

"What is that?" Anika asked. Curious, she crouched down next to the board. The runes on it were barely visible, but looking closely they could be made out. She couldn't help but feel intrigued by it.

"Something I hoped to never see again," Anjali said with a sigh. She took the pole and propped it up against the ground. She unfurled the canvas that turned out to be a small triangle shaped sail with thin supporting poles tucked inside. She slipped the pole into the slot on the board and activated a couple of runes at the base of it to firmly attach it to the board. "This is a flying board. Or at least that's what it's supposed to be. Never seen it do anything but crash."

"Who made it?" Anika asked, her eyes glowing with excitement. It wasn't every day something new like that came across her path.

"I did," Anjali admitted. "On his request." She nodded towards Ranaly who was dragging out a second board.

"I didn't give up on it," Ranaly said as he set down the second board. "I had a few others look at it. Some improvements have been made. They work now. We can use them to chase that ship if it hasn't gotten too far away yet. These will be faster and more nimble."

"Maybe small enough to go unnoticed even," Torim said.

Anika wasn't paying much attention to the conversation. Seeing new ways runes were used was far too interesting. The second board had more visible runes so she inspected it, trying to figure out the logic behind how it worked. There were some patterns she had no clue as to what they did, but the basic operation didn't seem that far off from what made the large ships soar through the skies.

"So who's going to fly these things?" Anjali asked. "I'm not going to do that. I've seen what happens."

"They're perfectly safe now," Ranaly assured her and hopped onto the newer

board now that it was put together. "It's very easy. Just hold onto these handles here, turn the sail to change direction and shift your weight to the side you want to turn to." He showed the handles on the sail and how to stand so you had the best balance as well as how to tilt. He did all of that on the ground, but it didn't seem too hard.

"I'll go," Anika volunteered since it looked like both Anjali and Torim were having serious doubts about getting on one. "Looks fun."

"There we go. We'll go after the ship and report back," Ranali said.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" Anjali asked and gave Anika a concerned look. No doubt it was partly because of who they were going to chase, but a part of it had to be the unconventional transport they'd be using. She did not seem at all confident that the things would fly.

"I'm sure," Anika assured her as she climbed on the board and tried to get comfortable with it. The handles on the sail frame were comfortable and sturdy. She took the stance Ranaly had showed and tried tilting the sail and shifting her weight to turn. It didn't feel like it would be that difficult to control the thing.

"We better get started," Ranaly said and took out a small wooden peg that he pushed into the base of the sail. He tossed another one to Anika and she put hers in as well. The runes on their boards started to glow. The sails had their own set that started to glow as well.

"Pull the sail back to lift off," Ranaly instructed and did as he said. The board lifted off the ground.

Anika followed suit. She half expected the board to tilt as soon as it rose from the ground, but to her surprise it was as stable as standing on solid ground. Still, she couldn't help but tense up. She fully expected her calves would be killing her by the time the flight was over.

"Be safe," Anjali yelled from the ground as the pair rose higher to find a good stream of wind.

Anika gave her a wave and focused on controlling the board. It was easier than she had anticipated. It responded to her movements quickly and with surprising accuracy.

Ranaly motioned to her to climb higher.

She did as told and followed the man higher up into the sky. Looking down a feeling of uneasiness washed over her. It was one thing to soar through the sky on an actual ship with high sides to give you security. Right now the only thing separating her from a high fall was the grip she had on the sail.

Wind caught their sails soon and pushed them onward. The speed was so high Anika started to feel a bit afraid. It was her first time on one of the boards so controlling it wasn't yet ingrained in her muscles. She made small corrections that felt natural as the wind tossed her and it all seemed to work out well. With the wind behind them the pair soared above the city.

Ranaly motioned towards the south. Anika looked that way and spotted the ship. It was easy enough to tell it was the same one that had flown right above their heads. She shifted her weight and turned the sail slightly to set a course towards it.

"We shouldn't get too close," Ranaly shouted as he got near her. It was hard to hear him over the gushing wind, but the words came through.

"Follow from afar," Anika agreed as she shouted her reply. She didn't want to face all the enemies alone when they'd had trouble dealing with them with much more help at hand.

The pair kept their distance. They had to slow down in order not to catch up with the large ship. It was incredible how fast the boards could go. Being so small it was unlikely they'd be spotted either, especially since they remained lower than the ship. Someone up the mast was unlikely to spot them speeding below.

The ship went past the southern docks and flew over the countryside. It then turned to the east and headed for the sea. The city was left far behind them in no time. Once it was safely out of sight the ship turned again, this time heading north.

"Sure are trying hard to make sure no one is following them," Anika shouted as she moved closer to Ranaly. The wind was making her hair flutter all around her, sometimes getting in her face, but she didn't dare let go with even one hand. Tumbling down to the ground was not an appealing prospect.

"Good thing they haven't spotted us," Ranaly replied.

The conversation ended there. Neither one wanted to shout too much.

Following their target didn't take much effort from them. At times they went extremely low to keep from being spotted. The wooden boards likely blended in quite well with the ground below and the sails weren't that different in colour. The runes certainly were the most visible part, but the light didn't carry far even in the dimming light of the day

Anika only hoped they wouldn't be flying through the entire night.

To her relief it looked like the ship wasn't heading all the way to the mountain range of the north as it turned west. It looked like they wanted to avoid anyone in Ramyn seeing where they were headed. They headed for the hilly area between Cerena and Ramyn. It was a sparsely populated area with rolling hills and plenty of places to hide even a ship as large as theirs. With the hills it became easier to stay out of sight, but at the same time it added a danger of their enemies comrades spotting them. Anika had no doubt they were getting close to a base of some sort and more bad guys.

Her suspicions were confirmed when the ship started to descend and disappeared behind some hills that were almost tall enough to be called mountains. They formed a valley where the ship disappeared.

"Be careful!" Ranaly shouted from next to her and headed in.

Anika followed him. They kept close to the grass covered ground. There were few bushes and even small trees here and there, but largely the landscape was flat and void of any cover apart from the hills themselves. Ranalyd set his board down along the side of one of the hills, far down enough that he wouldn't be visible from the other side. Just as Anika set her own board down next to his, he started walking up the hill. She ran up to catch up to him.

"We need to be careful," she said to the man. Not having to shout made everything around her seem so quiet. Even the slight breeze on ground level felt like nothing after the rush of air she had had to endure during the travel. She could feel the skin of her cheeks tingle as the constant airflow over them ceased.

"I know," Ranaly assured her and crouched down as the top of the hill came closer. In the end the two were crawling along to get a peek over the top.

The valley that opened up before them was quite large. There was a small pond off to the opposite side. Several buildings were built next to it. Many had

smoke coming off chimneys, telling that they were occupied. The ship had landed right next to the buildings. A bit further away was what remained of the ship Pok had stolen. It was obviously being torn apart and quickly. Next to it was something large that was covered by thick tarps propped up by a wooden frame. People were coming in and out of the shelter, often carrying things when they entered and coming out empty handed. What ever was inside was big. The shelters was a good hundred feet long and at least half that in width though estimating that fro their vantage point was difficult.

“Well, guess we found their base,” Anika said as they watched the valley.

“Sure did,” Ranaly agreed.

“Too many people there for us to do anything,” Anika said, hoping saying it out loud would serve to deter the man from suggesting anything foolish. Even with Anjali and Torim, four people would not be enough to take on the entire base. Just a quick glance made her think there were at least a hundred people there.

“Wonder what they’ve got under that cover,” Ranaly said. He did not look pleased that it was starting to seem like they wouldn’t be getting much more out of the site.

“Can’t be anything good given who they are,” Anika noted dryly.

They observed the base for some time more. Enough to see Pok and the rest depart from their ship and walk into one of the buildings. They were welcomed by a figure at the door. Judging by how Pok acted it looked to be someone in charge. It became obvious who ever that person was, he was pleased when the hand was presented to him. Enough so that he gave Pok a quick embrace, like a master who was proud of his apprentice.

“Let’s go back,” Anika said when Pok disappeared inside the building. It looked like there wouldn’t be much more to see there and the longer they stayed the more likely it would be someone would spot them.

Ranaly grunted. “I wish there was something we could do.”

“Better we come back with more strength,” Anika said hoping the words would be enough to persuade the man to abandon any foolish ideas of going down to the valley to try to sneak around. She knew that would be a recipe for

disaster.

“Let’s go,” Ranaly agreed and the pair crawled down the hill back to where their boards were. “This is going to take some arranging.”

“What is?” Anika asked as she grabbed the sail of her board and checked to make sure it had not been damaged in any way. She had laid it onto the ground as gently as she could, but she figured it was better to be safe. Finding out mid air that something had torn would not be a fun time.

“Destroying that base,” Ranaly said and activated the runes on his board by plugging the key back into the base of the sail.

“Is that what we’re going to do?” Anika asked. There was no way just the four of them would be able to do it.

“It’s what I’m going to do. And I’m going to get my hand back.” There was enough determination in his voice that Anika had no choice but to believe the man. At the same time she could understand the reasons for it. He was a noble after all, and someone had just smashed his mansion and stolen property from him.

That was the sort of thing noble houses had gone to war for in the pages of history.

“Well, I hope you find help,” Anika said and activated the runes on her board.

Ranaly gave her a look that sent chills down her spine. “The reputation I have may largely be a show, but there is truth to it. I may have grown over complacent and thought no one would dare to fuck with me given my reputation. I guess it’s time to remind the world just what I can do.”

With those words he rose to the sky. Anika quickly followed, not wanting to get separated, but she kept her distance.

Flying back to the city took a lot less time since they didn’t have to follow someone making distractions. Still, it was dark by the time they got the city lights in view.

They continued to fly back home in silence.



## Chapter 13

“Where the fuck are they?” Torim asked as he paced around the room.

“We don’t know how far they’ll have to follow that ship,” Anjali said and took a sip from her steaming cup. The tea had a bitterness to it that was counter acted by honey. It was a pleasant drink with the two combined.

Torim glanced at the woman sitting by the small table and sighed. How could she be enjoying tea at a time like this? Douggy had been within his grasp and gotten away. Not only that, the mysterious group had gotten what they came for and in the process severely damaged the house of a well known noble. He’d seen the passers by through the broken gate. The rumours must have been giving the gossip mongers continuous orgasms.

“They better not be going too far on their own,” Torim finally said and stopped pacing around. He took a seat on the other side of the table. There were cups and a small platter with drinks and pastries for the two to enjoy. The staff at the mansion had been very accommodating for the pair. There were even workmen already assessing the hole in the wall that was in the next room over. No doubt they would have it fixed in no time. Maybe not for a few days, but certainly quicker than you’d expect.

“I wouldn’t worry,” Anjali said and took a bite out of a bun with large crystals of sugar on top of it. “Anika has a level head on her. She won’t plunge into danger without good odds of getting out.”

“I’m not worried about her doing something stupid. It’s the master of this house I worry about.”

“Ranaly can be daring at times,” Anjali admitted. “But he wouldn’t put Anika in any danger. If there’s one thing you can count on him to do it’s looking after people he’s close to.”

“Well, he just met Anika,” Torim reminded her.

“She’s my apprentice. He won’t do anything to put her in danger because of her connection to me,” Anjali replied with a confident voice.

Torim wished he could have shared it, but he didn’t know Ranaly much at

all. Even if he had, he doubted he would have trusted him with the safety of Anika. A part of him wondered why. It wasn't like she meant anything special to him. She was Anjali's apprentice. Sure, he'd spent some time with her and her company had never bothered him.

He shook his head and grabbed a layered biscuit from the tray. It was coated in fine sugar with a red jam oozing from between its pale yellow top and bottom. He took a bite out of it. The biscuit itself wasn't that sweet, which balanced it quite well with the sugary ingredients. "I just hope she comes back safe."

Anjali smiled. "Didn't know you were such a softie."

"I'm not!" Torim snapped back at her. He focused on finishing the biscuit and then grabbed one of the sugar coated buns and started on it. There were layers of cinnamon inside it as he bit into it. He poured himself some wine to wash down the bun. It was a sweet white wine, not something you drank to get drunk, but something to enjoy in exactly the setting he was in. Glancing outside through the window he could see it was starting to get dark.

"I doubt they'll be flying during the night," Anjali said. "Those boards. They can't be on them all day like the people on the ship can. They'll have to give up on the chase at that point."

"The questions is will they make it back here today," Torim agreed. It made sense. The crew on the ship would be able to take shifts and rest. On a board like that you were either fully into it or you crashed.

The pair fell silent. They heard some hammering coming from the room where the hole in the wall was. No doubt the workmen were putting up something temporary to keep the inside of the house from being exposed to the elements too much.

A few servants walked into the room and asked if they needed anything. One spent some time tidying up while the other took empty trays and plates away and a few moment later brought in something salty to eat, as Torim had asked.

He was quick to grab one of the sandwiches. It was a dark bread with a sticky crust from the syrup that had been brushed on it. Between the two slices of bread there was some oven roasted carrots, onion and meat along with a helping of the cooking juices to moisten the whole thing up. For a sandwich it

was luxurious. On his first bite he got a hint of spice from something that had been brushed onto the meat. He couldn't quite tell what it was, only that he liked it.

He was mid bite when the door to the room swung open and Anika and Ranaly walked in.

"You're back!" Anjali stood up and rushed over to Anika. "You all right?"

"I'm fine," the younger woman assured her. "A bit sore from using the board though. I feel like I'll be lucky if I can walk tomorrow."

"There are more enjoyable ways to get that feeling," Ranaly said and walked over to the table. He grabbed a sandwich and bit into it with the sort of hunger a starving person would have.

"So, where they did they go?" Torim asked, hoping to steer the conversation back on topic. He finished eating his sandwich and took a sip of the sweet wine. It now tasted almost too sweet.

"The hills between Cerena and here," Ranaly replied and took a seat where Anjali had been before. He poured himself some wine and took a long gulp.

"They've got a whole base set up there," Anika said and made her way to the table. She grabbed a bun to nibble on. "Lots of people there. Far too many for us to take on so if we want to get that hand back it's going to be tough."

"I already told you, the amount of men in that base isn't going to be a problem," Ranaly said with a determined voice. He sounded impatient, like he wanted to already be out recruiting.

Anjali knew that voice. She had heard it plenty of times before. When it had made its appearance there had always been bodies. There had been cruelty. It was the voice of a man willing to do anything to get what he wanted. It was the voice that had played a part in building his reputation.

"How many are there?" Anjali asked, hoping the answer would be far too many and that they'd get to drop the entire matter because of it.

"A hundred at least," Anika said.

"Shit," Torim muttered.

"It's not a problem," Ranaly assured them.

"There's four of us," Torim reminded him. "Five to one aren't odds I'm willing

to take.”

“Anyone with money can have an army,” Ranaly said with a shrug. “I happen to have money and now that I’ve been slighted in this way I’m willing to spend it.”

“Where are you going to find the men?” Torim asked. “Not like you can just walk into a bar and hire a reliable bunch.”

“I know the right people,” Ranaly assured him with a confidence that seemed warranted. “I’ve used them many times before and they’ve always delivered.”

Anjali shuddered. “Not *them*?”

Ranaly grinned. It was not a pleasant one. “Yes, *them*. We’ll march on that base and lay waste to it in minutes, kill anyone that resists and get back what’s mine. It’ll take a day or two to get them together, but we can wait that long.”

“Who’s them?” Anika asked with the half eaten bun in her hand. There were crumbs on the floor telling how messy her nibbling had been.

“Yeah, who’s them?” Torim joined the curious.

“Yondals’ Company,” Ranaly said in a grim tone.

Torim and Anika exchanged looks. It was obvious the name meant nothing to them.

“They’re mercenaries, of sorts,” Anjali said, hoping to give the pair some grasp of what Ranaly was proposing to drag into the mess. “Most people have probably never heard of them and that’s a blessing on them. They work for wealthy merchants and nobles like Ranaly. They solve problems and fight the unseen wars that go on behind the scenery of the normal society. They’re a brutal bunch. Hell, I would go so far as to call them savages.”

“Yondal would take that as a compliment,” Ranaly said with a brief smile.

“I’m sure he would,” Anjali agreed.

“As I recall he quite liked you,” Ranaly continued.

“Can’t say the feeling was mutual,” Anjali replied.

“Aren’t you popular in certain circles?” Anika noted with a grin.

Anjali sighed. “Believe me. I wish I wasn’t. I’ve tried my best to get away from it all, but here I am again.”

“Don’t act so coy,” Ranaly said. “I seem to recall many times you were enjoying the things we were doing. The excitement of adventure and the ever

looming threat of not making it out alive. Yondal even commended you on how cool you played things that one time.”

“Hush now,” Anjali said quicker than she had perhaps wanted to. She had been trying hard to keep the shop owner separated from the adventures of her youth. Ranaly was one of the few people who could spill it all. Some things were best left in the past.

“I’d love to hear more,” Anika said with a grin. “Finding out you have another side. It’s.. unexpected.”

“I don’t have another side you need to learn about,” Anjali said and gave Ranaly the sort of look she hoped would keep his mouth shut.

Ranaly let out a cough and moved on. “Well, I better get going and contact Yondal. I have twenty men on retainer with him and they’ll be available within a few hours, but getting more will take a day or two. Depends on their work situation. I’ll let you know when I have the men. Then we can talk strategy on how we’re taking down that camp.”

“You’re assuming we’ll help?” Torim asked.

“I would think so. Why would you abandon this now?”

“He’s right. They might still come after us,” Anjali said. “Especially since we were here tonight to cause them trouble. No doubt they will think us an even bigger nuisance.”

“I’m not giving up on paying back Douggy,” Torim agreed and looked ready to go after the man on his own.

“We should all be careful,” Anika said. “It’s obvious we’re all targets now. Not to mention they were obviously building something at their base. They were tearing down the ship Pok stole and carrying bits of it inside a covered work area. We didn’t get to see what it was, but it can’t be anything good.”

“Let’s hope they don’t finish it before we get to wreck it,” Ranaly said. “You’re welcome to stay here during the wait. Now, I really must get going. Yondal can be hard to track down at times.”

The trio said their farewells to the noble and watched him walk out. With just the three of them in the room, the mood became a bit more liberated. To two of them Ranaly was still a stranger and Anjali had her own reservations about

being completely open in front of him.

“Well, do we stay here?” Anika asked.

“I really don’t want to have the shop closed for a few more days,” Anjali said.

“I have things to prepare,” Torim added.

“I guess we’re leaving then,” Anika said with a sigh and grabbed a cookie from the tray. She quickly munched down the sugary treat.

“You can stay if you want to,” Anjali said. “I’m perfectly capable of running the shop on my own.”

“Probably best we stick together,” Anika countered. “Alone we’re much more vulnerable. At least when it comes to sleeping we shouldn’t do that alone.”

“Is that an invitation?” Torim asked and gave the young woman a look.

Anika blushed. “I didn’t mean like that.”

“I certainly hope so,” Anjali said and gave both of them a stern look. She felt like a mother scolding her children.

“It makes sense. We should look after each other,” Torim said in an attempt to move away from his remark. “Maybe we should accept his offer and at least sleep over here? Would be safer for all of us.”

Anjali wanted to object. A part of her was itching to leave it all behind her. Ranaly and his mansion was a reminder of a past she had tried to put behind her. At the same time she couldn’t deny the reality of the matter. Sleeping alone in her shop would make her an easy target. The same went for Anika and Torim as well. Given what had taken place a new attempt on their life seemed likely. So, begrudgingly, she had to agree to stay the night at the mansion.

Given that it was already getting late in the day they decided to stay for the night. Anjali let the staff know and they quickly had rooms ready for each of them. The offer to draw a bath was welcomed by Anika and she talked Anjali into joining her. So the two women left Torim to enjoy what remained of the food on the small table and followed a servant through the mansion, to the opposite side where the damage had taken place.

The bath was its own room. The pair had expected a traditional bathtub made of porcelain or even metal, but instead they found it sunken into the floor, lined with decorative tiles and filled with water that made the room fill with

steam.

“Luxurious,” Anika noted as she looked around the room.

“Can’t disagree with that,” Anjali said. It wasn’t just the bath that was decorated. The walls were made of similar tile and the roof had patterns in it made up of different kinds of tiles. There were several benches along the walls. One of them had soft looking towels on it while the far wall from the door had small stools and basins filled with water and bottles filled with what Anjali assumed were different kinds of soaps and oils.

“Do you know the etiquette for a bath like this?” Anjali asked as she made her way to one of the benches.

“No,” Anika admitted and followed her.

Anjali smiled. “Well, first, we need to get naked. Grab one of the small towels and then wash yourself over on those stools. Only then is it appropriate to enter the hot bath. You can dip your small towel in the cold water of the basins and put it on your head to help you stay cooler. The water is going to be hotter than you’re used to.”

Anika hesitated while Anjali walked over to one of the benches and started taking off her clothes. Glancing back she could tell the young woman wasn’t feeling comfortable.

“No need to be shy,” she said and gave Anika a reassuring smile. “Nobody is going to barge in here while we’re here. If they do I’ll set them on fire, I promise.”

The smile she got back from Anika was uncertain, but at least she started moving again and walked over to the bench. She started to slowly undress.

Thinking it best to give her space, Anjali finished getting naked and walked over to the washing area with a small towel in hand. She sat down on one of the stools and used a big ladle to scoop water from one of the basins and poured it over herself. It took a bit of sniffing to find the right soap, but when she did she quickly dabbed some onto a long handled brush and scrubbed herself all over before rinsing it all off. By the time she was done cleaning up, Anika had managed to get naked. She had one of the big towel draped in front of her as she made her way to the washing area.

Wanting to make her as comfortable as possible, Anjali took her small towel,

dipped it in the cold water basin and walked over to the hot bath. She dipped her toe in to try how hot it was. It was just on the edge of being too hot to even consider going in. She slowly eased herself in and sat down on the step that ran along the edge of the bath. It was the perfect height to allow her to rest her back against the wall while getting the water only slightly above her chest. She draped the wet towel over her head and let out a sigh of relief.

It was rare to experience such luxury. Usually bathing for her involved a quick dip in barely warm water. She closed her eyes and enjoyed the warmth surrounding her.

“That’s so hot.”

Anjali opened her eyes and glanced to her side. Anika was standing by the pool on one foot while shaking her other to try and cool the toe she had tipped in.

“Just ease yourself in slowly,” Anjali said and closed her eyes again. She heard the deep breath the young woman took, followed by the small ripples of water hitting her as she lowered herself in.

“Put the small towel on your head to help cool you down,” Anjali reminded her without opening her eyes.

“How can people enjoy this?” Anika asked.

“How could they not?” Anjali asked, her voice now drowsy. She could feel every bit of tension in her body melting away with the warm water. “Deep breath, close your eyes, lean back, enjoy.”

A silence took over the room. It was hard to tell how long it went on.

“This is actually pretty nice,” Anika admitted, her voice relaxed and soft. Anjali opened her eyes and gave the young woman a look. The scent of vanilla made its way to her nose. It made her think of a bakery, but coming from the young woman it brought a warmth of home to her mind. She looked more relaxed than she had ever seen her.

“It’s not every day you get to enjoy something like this,” Anjali said and sighed. She wished that wasn’t the case. Though she had to admit to herself that Ranaly would likely happily let her use the bath when ever she wanted to. The question was what he would want in return. Probably something she wasn’t willing to give the man. She decided it was best to shove such thoughts out of her



mind.

“Where is this style from? It’s not Ramyn,” Anika asked and lifted a leg out of the bath and wiggled her toes before lowering the leg back into the warm water. She did the same with her other foot.

“The Five Cities,” Anjali replied and closed her eyes again. “They’ve been doing it like this for centuries. Can’t blame them. The winters there are harsh and cold. I can imagine how nice it feels to slip into a hot bath like this after a cold day.”

“Doesn’t have to be a cold day for it to feel nice,” Anika said and sighed. “Do the servants fill this? Would be easy to automate this with runes..” Her voice trailed off before she could finish the sentence.

“Don’t think about it too much. Just relax,” Anjali said, though it seemed pointless since she had already stopped mid sentence. Still, it was one of the things she appreciated about her. The endless curiosity to how things worked and how to improve it so that it would be more efficient or easier for the people using it. It was the sort of quality a good magician needed to have.

The two sat in the bath in silence for a while more.

It was starting to get too hot so Anjali stood up and got out. The air in the room felt cold on her wet skin. She glanced down at Anika. The young woman had her eyes closed and a relaxed expression on her face. “Don’t stay in too long. It might make you dizzy.”

“I won’t,” Anika muttered.

“If you need to, take a cooling break.” Anjali walked over to the washing basins again and poured some cold water over herself. The cold snapped her body wide awake again. It almost made her shiver. After spending a bit more time cooling, she returned to the hot bath again.

Anika soon climbed out to cool off. She lingered around the hot pool instead of going for some cold water.

“This whole thing is so crazy,” she said and crouched by the pool. She drew around the water with one finger. “We just wanted to run the shop. I was aiming to graduate. Hoping maybe afterwards I’d still get to work at your shop and do more to help.”

“That can still happen,” Anjali assured her. “I was always planning on offering you a job once you graduate.”

“Really?” Anika sounded both surprised and pleased with the news.

“Of course. You’ve been valuable to the shop and I need the help to make the business grow. Things may be rough right now, but we did well prior to all of this. We’ll get back to that once things are settled.” Anjali gave the younger woman a look. The way she was crouching down and staring down at the water made her almost want to reach out and hug her. She looked so vulnerable and in need of some comfort.

Anika smiled and stood up. “Let’s get things sorted then.” She dipped back into the pool for a moment before getting out again. She went for the towels and started to dry herself off.

Not really wanting to get out, Anjali remained in the pool for a few more moments before climbing out. She went to pour some cool water over herself before grabbing a towel to dry off. Once dressed the pair went looking for their rooms. They ran into a servant in the corridor that showed them the way. They both had their own rooms. They were nearly identical with the large beds, windows giving out into the back garden and plenty of seats to hold a conversation with guests. Both rooms even had vanities with high quality mirrors.

They both said their good nights and went to their own rooms.

Anjali spent a moment in front of the vanity brushing her hair. Nothing too much. It would get tangled during the night anyway. She then spent a moment by the window, looking out over the garden. There were lights that lit the area. Even in the dark it was a pleasant sight to behold. A part of her wished she could enjoy such a view every night before going to sleep. Her shop and her own apartment didn’t really offer much more than a brick wall to stare at.

With a sigh she decided the price for such luxury was too high.

Slipping between the bed covers made her appreciate how soft the mattress was. Soon, she was fast asleep.

## Chapter 14

Torim was starting to feel like the situation was slipping out of his control. Walking the busy streets he had time to mull over what had happened last night. Douggy had been so close. He had only barely slipped away from him. At least that's what he told himself. Just one or two things going his way and his hands would have wrapped around the throat of that treacherous snake.

The pot had been knocked over by the fact Douggy now had friends. Powerful and crafty friends. It didn't help that now there was a noble spoon in the pot as well. While Ranaly would undoubtedly prove useful, having him involved made Torim feel uneasy.

When nobles got involved things rarely calmed down. Quite the opposite. They had the tendency to spiral out of control completely.

Worse was the fact the whole matter had gone from him getting revenge into something much bigger. Torim grunted in frustration and got some odd looks from people passing by. He hurried his steps.

All he'd wanted was to get payback for his business partner betraying him. Now it had turned into a whole affair with stolen magic items and a sinister group working on doing who knew what. All that was just annoying fluff to him. Fluff he couldn't get rid of by himself. He needed help.

That fact annoyed him even more.

"I've made it alone for so many years and with Douggy a few more and now there's all these people butting in," he muttered to himself and continued walking. He wasn't headed home nor to the mansion of Ranaly. There really wasn't any destination he had in mind. He was just walking to vent the frustration. Every once in a while he muttered to himself. Sometimes a passer by would hear him and give him a look.

Torim didn't care.

The first drops of rain pulled him out of his thoughts and forced him to look around. The sky was covered in dark clouds. The street was familiar to him so he knew several places close by he could duck in to wait out the rain. The street was

fairly close to the centre of the island. People around him were rushing to beat the worst of the rain. He decided it was best to follow suit. A quick jog and one door opening later he was inside a warm tavern. The rain hit hard only moments after he'd gotten a tankard of ale and a sandwich filled with left over meat and roasted vegetables. The seat by the window offered him a good view of the street.

"Really pouring," came a voice from behind him.

"Sure is," Torim agreed. It was true enough. The rain was so heavy he could barely make out the buildings on the other side of the street. Anyone caught in it for even half a minute would have been soaking wet.

"Mind if I join you?" the voice asked.

Torim glanced back. It wasn't anyone he recognized. The woman seemed harmless enough. By the way she was dressed she could have been looking for some financial transaction involving her taking off the dress she was wearing. He had no intention of doing so, but he didn't mind having a conversation. Maybe it would take his thoughts off the troubles haunting him. He nodded towards the seat opposite to him.

The woman slipped into it and gave him a smile. "My name is Jenny."

"Nice to meet you," Torim replied with no intention of giving her his name. The rain rattled against the window as a gust of wind passed through the street.

"You should leave it be," Jenny said.

Torim frowned. "Leave what be?"

"Douggy, the whole affair surrounding it. Leave it be."

"Now how would someone like you know about that?" Torim asked. His free hand inched closer to the holster of his caster. He tried to remember what he had loaded it with, but couldn't. Still, firing off a round seemed like a risk worth taking if things got bad.

"The people I work for know a lot," Jenny said with a mysterious smile. "No need to go for your weapon. I'm not here to hurt you. Just to warn you."

"You work for Douggy?" Torim asked. He didn't trust her promise of no harm and wrapping his hand around the grip of the caster made him feel more at ease. A quick glance around the tavern didn't really make anyone stand out to him. It was entirely possible the woman was there alone or that any companions she

might have had were good at hiding.

“An interested third party,” the woman said and leaned more forward, giving Torim a good view down her dress. “They are concerned that your intervention in this matter will make things.. worse.”

“Too bad for them,” Torim said with a small smile. “I have no intention of letting this thing go and I doubt those with me are going to say anything different. We’ve been betrayed and there have been attempts at our lives. Property has been damaged and stolen. That’s not something you let slide.”

Jenny looked like she understood and felt sympathetic, but the words coming out of her mouth did not fit that. “You really should take this warning seriously. It comes from some very powerful and important people.”

“Are you now threatening me with consequences if I don’t sit down like a good boy?” Torim tried to sound amused and boost his confidence by taking a sip of his drink, but it fell flat.

The woman frowned. “Nothing of the sort. The concern these people have is for your well being as well as that of your friend. You are trying to get involved in something very dangerous.”

Torim snorted. “We’re not trying to get involved. We’re trying to get uninvolved and the only way to do that seems to be to break some skulls.”

“It is unfortunate that you see things that way,” Jenny said and stood up. “I have done my duty and delivered the message. I hope you think about it and change your mind.”

Torim looked up at the woman. “And if I don’t?”

Jenny shrugged. “I know not what my employers think. I just do what I’m paid to do.”

“Great. Another mystery group on my ass was just what I needed,” Torim muttered. Jenny gave him a smile before walking away. She left the tavern and ran past the window. The rain had already soaked her wet in that short distance.

A long gulp of his ale had Torim feeling refreshed. For a moment he considered following the woman, but the prospect of being soaked wet wasn’t that appealing. Besides, she seemed like a professional. Tracking her without being noticed was likely a hard feat.

One thing he was certain of.

Things had just gotten even more complicated.

With a curse he wolfed down what remained of his sandwich and drank the last of his ale to wash it down. Impatiently, he waited for the rain to die down even a little bit. It took longer than he liked, but when it had gone from pouring to a slight drizzle he ventured out and rushed through the streets towards the place he had been avoiding all day.

The gate to the mansion was still broken. Ranaly had ordered workers to repair it and they had no doubt been busy at work before the rain had started. There was no point working in the rain. You couldn't lay bricks in that weather.

As he walked through the broken gate the guards stationed there gave him a nod. They knew him already. The hole in the mansion wall had been patched up already. It was ugly and temporary, just some boards nailed to the wall to keep the wind out, but there were workers buzzing around the area. They had a roof over them so work could continue even in the slight rain that still came down from the sky.

With no objections from anyone Torim walked right into the mansion. He tracked in mud with him as he searched the rooms for the people he needed to talk to. It wasn't long before there was a servant tracking him and wiping up any mud his boots still left on the stone floors. By the time he found the people he was looking for his boots had dropped off all the mud.

"Good. You're all here," Torim said as he entered the dining room. Anika and Anjali were there with plates in front of them. What looked to be cooked lobster was on them along with some melted butter and greens. Ranaly sat at the end of the long dining table with the two women on either side of him.

Ranaly frowned as he looked at his boots and the servant that was trailing him with a dirty rag in hand. "You could have cleaned your boots before coming in."

"I could have, but I didn't," Torim replied and took a seat not that far from Anjali. "I was approached."

"By who?" Anjali asked. The lobster on her plate had been ripped in half and she was slowly picking away at the tail of it. The butter glistened in the light

coming from the lamps in the room.

“I don’t know,” Torim admitted and told the trio of his encounter with Jenny. The more he told the more curious they all seemed.

“Hard to say who she worked for,” Ranaly admitted when Torim finished his story. “I know several powerful groups within this city and even more within this country. Some might be aware of what is going on, but I can’t think of a reason for them to get involved.”

“Maybe it’s the government,” Anika suggested. “All this destruction can’t have gone unnoticed by them. Maybe this was their way of telling us to let them handle it.”

“They’re not the sort of people who are subtle about their wants,” Ranaly countered. “I’ve been on the receiving end of their attention and they’re not going to send a nice lady to talk to you. They’ll smash down your door and point casters at you until you do what you’re told.”

“Could be the Towers,” Anjali suggested.

“Why would they be involved?” Ranaly asked.

“They blew up my apartment near the Towers,” Anika said. “The towers own it. It’s meant for students. It’s the sort of thing they would take an interest in. Someone damaging their property and attacking a student.”

“They’re also the sort of people who might send someone like her to deliver a warning,” Torim mused thinking back to the woman. Whether she was a wizard or not was impossible to say, but she did look the sort who might work for one.

“Someone stealing a rune powered ship would also get their attention,” Anjali reminded them all. “Those things are valuable and one being stolen isn’t an every day occurrence. Not to mention how it was done. Pok was an apprentice. The Towers must have signed off on him being there and for him to do what he did.. there must be questions among the Towers.”

“I don’t think she was with the government. The Towers sound more plausible,” Ranaly agreed. “Not that I think it matters much who she worked for. We’re not going to let this matter go, are we?”

“More wizards involved is never a good thing,” Torim muttered, but went unheard by everyone else but Anjali. She gave him a stern look before turning

away.

Anjali and Anika exchanged looks that made it obvious they were willing to let the matter drop, but didn't really have a choice since their lives were in danger. Ranaly looked more determined than they did. "They blew up my mansion and stole from me. No one gets away with that. I don't care what other parties are interested in this. I'll have my retribution."

"Same goes for me," Torim agreed. "You can't let someone get away with trying to kill you."

The two women sighed almost at the same time. "I hate it, but I have to agree with that," Anjali said.

"Me too," Anika agreed.

"Still, we should be extra careful. We don't know what this new party might have planned." Ranaly had a measure of worry in his voice and the thoughtful look he had on told he wasn't completely dismissing the concerns that had been raised. "I'll make some extra arrangements just to be safe. That shouldn't delay us too much. We'll be ready to strike tomorrow."

"The mercenaries are ready?" Torim asked.

"Tomorrow," Ranaly replied and continued enjoying his meal.

"How do we know they will still be where we saw them?" Anika asked as she picked at the lobster in front of her. She was done with the tail and was now trying to figure out how to get at the meat in the claws.

"The first thing I did was send someone to keep an eye on them," Ranaly assured her. "If they move, we'll know about it."

"Assuming your spy isn't caught," Torim pointed out.

"Assuming that, yes," Ranaly conceded. "They're good at what they do. It shouldn't be a problem."

"It did look like they had a lot to do still," Anika said as she gave up trying to get into the claws. "The ship was still being dismantled. That'll take days even at the pace they were going. Who knows what more they have to do to finish what ever they're trying to build."

"If they're dismantling a ship with a rune structure and hoping to re-use those bits in something else they will be there for days," Anjali pointed out. "It's



not a simple task to take something like that apart without damaging things. And putting it back together so it works is even more time consuming. Especially if they're putting it together in a different shape."

"Doing something like that they must have many wizards working on it?" Torim asked. The prospect of facing a small army of wizards was not appealing, but it also bolstered the notion that the Towers might be involved somehow. They were always willing to put their noses in the business of other wizards, especially if many gathered in one place.

"They'd certainly need more than a handful," Anjali replied with a frown. "You don't need a wizard to pry the planks off. You need one to tell which one to pull out and where to put it. Other than that the work could be done by anyone. There's also bound to be some damage so you'd need a wizard to fix that."

"That's something we'll need to account for," Ranaly mused. "The mercenaries are great at bashing skulls, but dealing with wizards is going to be tough for them. We'll need some defences."

"We can probably handle it," Anjali said and gave Anika a look. "Though having an extra wizard or two would be good. If the other wizards gang up on us we'd be pretty easily overwhelmed."

"I'm sure Yondal has some wizards he works with," Anika said and gave their host a questioning look. "His line of work has to cross paths with all sorts of people."

"I'm sure he has, but wizards are expensive," Ranaly said with no small amount of frustration. "He's going to fleece me for hiring a couple of them."

"Probably not that much compared to the amount of men you're hiring," Torim said and leaned back in his chair. The front two feet came off the floor and forced him to rock back and forth right on the edge of falling backward.

The look Ranaly gave him was ice cold. "My finances aren't infinite. The only reason we're even talking about going after the group is because I'm hiring extra hands. I don't see *you* doing much to make things easier for us."

Torim leaned forward so his chair rested on all four feet again. He gave the arrogant noble a murdering look. "No one asked you to get involved. You did it all on your own."

“Then maybe I’ll just deal with this on my own,” Ranaly replied and took a defiant gulp of his wine.

“Enough you two!” The force in Anjali’s voice was enough to shut both men up. “We’re in this together. Ranaly, we do appreciate all that you are doing. Without you we probably wouldn’t be able to do anything about the situation. Torim, I understand this is personal to you. That doesn’t mean you can’t accept help in dealing with it. Be glad you have friends by your side.” As she talked to each man she gave them looks filled with warmth and compassion.

All in all Torim gave her full points for the effort. He saw the truth in her words. Without Ranaly and his resources the whole affair would have been over by now. Either with all three of them dead or with Douggy getting away and whatever plan he had being fulfilled.

“So everything will be ready tomorrow?” he finally asked, hoping to move the conversation on.

“Should be,” Ranaly confirmed. He seemed as eager to move on as Torim did.

“Well, I’ll be back then,” Torim said and stood up.

“In the morning or when are we moving out?” Anjali asked.

Torim stopped. The exact schedule had not been talked about. He gave Ranaly a questioning look.

“In the morning,” the man said. “First light. We need to get moving early. Going to take a while to get to our destination even with the transport I’ve arranged.”

“See you then,” Torim said and gave Anika and Anjali a nod before walking out the room. He couldn’t help but feel relieved as soon as the room was behind him. Ranaly just didn’t sit right with him. Despite what Anjali said about him he couldn’t shake the first impression of him. Maybe it had been a front, but he had been very convincing with it. To be that convincing there had to be some grain of truth in there. That was what his mind was screaming at him every time he laid eyes on the man.

Not wanting to be any closer to him than necessary he made his way out of the mansion and into the garden. They had all agreed to sleep there for safety and Torim wasn’t going to go back on that. If anything happened he wanted to be

there to keep Anjali and Anika safe. Ranaly could burn in a fire for all he cared.

Though thinking about it, as he walked on the gravel path, past some bushes and towards a big tree that served as the centre of the garden, the two women were perfectly capable of keeping each other safe. Possibly more so than he was. Still, it never hurt to have an extra caster on your side.

He stopped under the tree and looked up at its branches. They spread out so far out that the base of the tree was well sheltered from rain. Even with the downpour that had happened earlier, the ground by the trunk of the tree was dry. With no rain coming down at that moment there were still drops of water coming down at the edge of the tree. It seemed like the leaves shifted the water to the edge of the tree. Whether that was natural or some clever work from the gardener was a question Torim pondered for a moment before walking over to the tree trunk and putting a hand on it.

The scent in the air brought back memories. His first find with Douggy had been under a tree not that dissimilar from the one in front of him. It had not been a big treasure, just a chest with some gold coins and an old piece of parchment that had held value to certain individuals. They had paid a decent price for the effort the pair had put into finding it.

It had not been a hard gig, but it had been the first time he'd worked with Douggy. Remembering it made him smile. It was a good memory. They'd gotten along well, had laughs and bonded over various things. It had been the beginning of a friendship.

The smile on his lips died.

Now that friendship was dead.

His hand formed a fist and he hit the tree with it. Not hard, but with enough force that he felt it. Swallowing hard, Torim parted with the tree and continued walking around the garden. He hoped it would calm him down. The sky was still dark grey, promising more rain, but for now it was calm. Puddles of water had formed on the gravel path. Torim did his best to avoid them. It was refreshing to focus on something that wasn't a direct worry to him.

The simple sight of water drops falling off flower petals had him mesmerized. It wasn't the sort of thing he'd expected to enjoy, but it was oddly soothing. He

could feel the anger sink below the surface. It was still there and he knew it would boil to the top without much agitation.

He enjoyed the moment of peace as he walked the garden.

## Chapter 15

Youndal wasn't what Anjali had expected. The sides of his head were shaven clean. A streak of hair ran down the centre and ended in a long ponytail. His chin was covered in a beard that was braided in two long strands decorated with colourful beads made of wood. A couple of the decoration were silver. He looked void of emotion until he started talking. Then his face came alive. More so than others.

"Bitch of a job you've hired me for," he said with his melodic voice.

Anjali would have bet good money he could make men tear up if he started to sing around a camp fire. Not a bad quality for a mercenary troop leader.

"Yet you took the money," Ranaly pointed out.

"Ain't no bitch money can't make appealing," Youndal replied with a grin. It wasn't a pleasant grin and reminded well of who the man was. He had seen and done things that would land people in front of the executioner in a just world.

Looking around the deck of the ship, Anjali saw many men who would have faced the same fate. Around fifty mercenaries stood around their leader, listening on what the plan would be. In addition to them there were two wizards standing a bit further off, looking like they would rather be anywhere else.

It was a ragtag bunch, but judging by the varied equipment, everyone was prepared for what was coming. Along with swords and axes, there were a surprising amount of casters on display, though Anjali suspected there were not many shells to go to them. If you weren't a wizard they were expensive to acquire and usually mercenaries and the like who had them reserved them as a last resort.

Her hand moved to the pouch on her belt. It was filled with shells of all sorts. She decided it was best not to advertise its contents too much. While she trusted the mercenaries to do their job, stealing likely wasn't beyond many of them.

Still, she was impressed with what Ranaly had scrounged up together. The ship was big enough for the crew as well as all the mercenaries. All in all there was close to a hundred people on the thing, soaring through the sky to face off an

enemy they knew little of. Anika was leaning against the railing next to her, looking down at the ground below them and the farmlands passing by. Torim was next to her, leaning his back against the railing, looking up at the masts where a couple of sailors were adjusting the sails.

“I hope the plan isn’t to fly in on this thing,” Torim muttered. Ranaly and Youndal had been talking about the details for a bit now and they hadn’t gotten to actually talking about how they would make their attack.

“That would be stupid,” Anjali agreed. They knew there were wizards with the enemy. A ship in the sky would be an easy target. While it would be possible to defend against such attacks it would make landing a dangerous manoeuvre. One that would cause injuries and death regardless of the defences. You could block balls of fire, but dampening the actual impact that would rock the ship was next to impossible.

When in the sky the last thing you wanted was the ship being rocked in such a way.

“We’ll land a bit off and hide behind the hills,” Anika said without looking at the pair. “That’s the only way we’re going to succeed. We can approach without being seen and surprise them.” The wind was fluttering her hair. Unlike the day before the sky was clear. There would be no rain that day, though for their approach a wall of water from the sky might have offered an advantage.

“Sounds like what they’re telling the men,” Anjali agreed as she listened to Ranaly and Yondal. They had finally gotten to the meat of the plan. It was as Anika had suggested. They would land the ship a fair way away from their destination and continue on foot. The plan was to surround the valley the enemy was hiding in and then attack. The two wizards were tasked with counter magic while Anika and Anjali would primarily focus on supporting the attack with offensive spells. If need be they would also support the defence.

“Wonder what I’m supposed to do,” Torim muttered as he heard the plan unfold. There was no mention of him.

“Go with the front line mercs,” Anika suggested. “They’ll be the first ones in the base. Best chance you’ll have of catching Doughty.”

“Best chance to get killed as well,” Torim said with a sigh. “Sometimes I wish

I knew magic so I could stay back.”

“It’s not all it’s cracked up to be,” Anjali said with a brief smile. “Some of the spells can be horrifying not only on those feeling the brunt of them, but also the caster.”

“I’d say it’s worse for those on the receiving end far more often,” Torim replied. He’d had plenty of spells cast against him. None had been that pleasant. Most would have killed him had they landed as intended.

“Fair point,” Anika said in support of him.

Anjali sighed. “Why does it always boil down to this argument when wizards and non-wizards are going to a fight? It’s why I wanted to get away from stuff like this. We’re all risking our lives in this.”

The two looked at her in silence. She stared back at them, not wanting to budge from her outburst. The prejudices she’d witnessed in the matter were not something she was willing to forget or put aside.

Ranaly and Youndal finished their briefing. The mercenaries dispersed around the ship, forming small groups that chatted and laughed like it was just another day. It most likely was that for many of them. They were used to going into fights and coming back alive. They had no reason to think today would be any different. Seeing that confidence gave Anjali both worry as well as reassurance.

“How long until we’re there?” Torim asked to break the silence. He watched Ranaly walk up to the helm to talk with the captain of the ship. The noble was wearing an outfit fit for battle. On top of a finely made chain mail he had some padded clothing. Enough to protect him from conventional weapons fairly well while allowing for good movement. No doubt he had some enchanted items on him that offered protections against magic.

Anika looked down at the ground and around them to get an idea of where they were. Looking ahead she could see the first signs of the rolling hill amongst which their enemy was hiding. “An hour. Maybe two. Depends how close the captain feels comfortable taking us.”

Anjali walked over to the railing and took a look around. “We shouldn’t fly in this high. Too easy to spot us.” She worried they would be flying into a trap or at

the very least a camp fully expecting them after getting early warning. If that turned out to be true the fight would be that much more difficult if not outright impossible.

“A ship over here isn’t completely out of the question,” Anika reminded her. “Some routes go through this area. So if we notice we’ve been spotted we can always fake being a merchant vessel on a regular route.”

“If we notice we’ve been spotted,” Torim said. “Unlikely to happen, that.”

“Well, true. In any case I’m sure Ranaly and the captain are aware of this,” Anika replied, sounding defensive. “They wouldn’t just fly us in this high.”

Just as she said that the ship started to descent ever so slowly. The three watched over the railing as the ground came closer and closer. They started to worry they’d crash just as the descent came to a halt and the ship continued at a height that would have had them crashing into tree tops had there been any around.

The hills quickly grew taller and the ship started navigating through the small valleys they formed. The mast was still likely visible from the hill tops, but most of the ship was hidden behind the ground. It was a twisty ride and the ship tilted in the more tight turns. Everyone onboard had to hold on tight to not fall.

At the railing the ship came so close to the ground a few times that Anjali thought she could have reached out and her finger tips would have brushed the tips of the tall grass.

The twisty ride went on for a good while before they arrived at a larger flat area where the ship came to a halt and settled down. The crew were quick to drop ropes, scale down and tie the ship down. Rope ladders were tossed over the railing on both sides and the mercenaries started to get off with their equipment.

The trio watched it all unfold in silence. The tension in the air was obvious.

“Ready to go?” Ranaly asked as he joined the along with Youndal.

“As ready as we’ll ever be,” Anjali replied and did a final check that she had everything with her. She grabbed her little backpack from the deck where it had been tied down. There were some extra clothes in there along with a few items she had thought might come in handy.

“Lets’ get going,” Ranaly said and climbed over the railing. He seemed to be



good at climbing down the rope ladder. It wasn't long before he was on the ground.

Anika had more trouble with it and it took her quite a while to be on the ground. Anjali had to slow down because of her. Her calves and hands were crying out in protest at having to do so much work all of the sudden. Ranaly and Youndal were the last ones off the ship.

"How far away are we?" Anjali asked as the pair set their feet on the ground.

"Should be an hour or so," Ranaly replied with a nod from Youndal. The mercenary leader did not seem like he wanted to talk to anyone but the man paying them.

"We should get going then," Anjali said and followed the two. Torim and Anika were not far behind as they started making their way towards the enemy.

Much of their way was walking along the narrow valleys formed by the hills. A few scouts went near the hill tops and peeked around to ensure they wouldn't be spotted. The longer the walk went on the more nervous the atmosphere got. Everyone knew they were headed towards a fight. They knew some would not be coming back alive.

Anjali wiped some sweat off her forehead and looked up at the sky. The clear sky let the sun warm with its full force. Between the hills there was no wind to cool them. Every time they entered a shadow she felt a bit of relief. The tall grass gave off a scent that would have been comforting were it not for their destination.

The column kept a good pace. The terrain wasn't that difficult. The grassy hills didn't have many rocks around them nor was there any thick undergrowth to slow them down.

"We're getting close now," Anika said as she hurried up next to Anjali. She pointed towards a tall hill top in the distance. "Pretty sure the valley is behind that one."

Looking into the distance Anjali nodded. There were still three smaller hills between them and the tall one. A good ten minutes of walking. Looking up the hill sides she could see the scouts had gotten more careful with their movements. In the distance she could see the forward scout climb up the last hill before their target. "It looks steeper than I thought."

Anika squinted as she looked at the hill. "It had a fairly gentle slope into the valley. Shouldn't be too hard to run down it."

"Let's hope so. Wouldn't want to break a leg doing it," Torim muttered from next to her. He had rushed up to catch up to the pair.

Ranaly and Youndal were almost at the front of the column. They looked to be talking and there was a lot of pointing going on.

"Wonder what they're talking about," Anjali said and nodded towards the pair when Anika and Torim gave her a questioning look.

"Probably the best way to approach," Torim said. "You can plan all you want based on maps and descriptions, but when you're actually on the ground, that's when you make the final adjustments."

"Makes sense," Anjali agreed. They kept walking. As they did, small squads started to form from the mercenaries. They took different paths in order to surround the valley. Now that they were on scene it was obvious it wouldn't be a very tight surround. Far too few men for that and far too much area to over.

"Going to be hard to stop people from running away," Torim noted as it became obvious there would be huge gaps in their surround.

"Don't we want people to run away?" Anjali asked. "Less people to put up a fight."

"Certain people running away wouldn't be desirable," Torim replied with a grim voice. Looking at him it was obvious to her that Duggy slipping from his grasp again would send him over the edge. There was little she could do about that and she could understand the frustration he felt. Having him slip away like that just a few days ago must have been frustrating him to no end.

"We'll make sure he doesn't get away," Anjali assured the man. Their group had formed and was heading up the hillside now. There were the three of them along with Ranaly and a couple of mercenaries. Youndal had gone off with a group that headed for the opposite side of the hill. It made sense to have someone who could give commands on either side.

As the top of the hill got closer the group slowed down and crouched to keep themselves out of sight. By the end they were crawling on the ground.

"No guards anywhere," Anika noted from next to Anjali.

“They must be confident they’re hidden away,” she replied, almost whispering without even realizing it. They got to the hill top. Anjali crawled up high enough that she could get a view of the valley below.

The camp was abuzz. Workers were moving. What looked to be the remains of a ship were not far from a covered up work area. All that was there were a few support beams from the hull. That they had managed to tear the ship down so quickly worried her. She hoped they had not been as quick to put together whatever they were working on under the covered area.

“They’ve worked quick,” Anika whispered next to her. “When Ranaly and I were here they had only started to tear down the ship. Now there’s nothing left but a few planks.”

“They still seem busy working on it,” Anjali noted. She could see people going into the sheltered area with all sorts of items. Some were carrying long planks, others heavy looking pieces of iron, others sacks filled with who knew what. If she strained her hearing she could hear banging, as if something was being hammered, along with shouts and other noises of people working.

“Let’s hope we catch them by surprise,” Torim muttered from her other side. His gaze was focused on the hill tops surrounding the valley. She followed his gaze and saw the first sign go up that another group was in position. It wasn’t long before the signs had come in from all the groups.

Looking past Torim she saw Ranaly converse with the mercenaries with them, before standing up and waving a small flag. It was a bright orange in colour and would stand out from a distance. Looking at the hill tops around her she could see people appearing and heading down the sloping hillside, right towards the camp below. She stood up and grabbed her caster. Next to her, Torim and Anika did the same.

“Be careful,” she said to both of them.

“You too,” Torim said before taking the lead. Anjali followed, doing her best to keep up with the man. She could understand why he was moving quickly. Every second was a second closer to them being spotted. The closer they got before that the better their chances of success. She was glad the hillside was covered in grass instead of being made up of loose pebbles like some other they’d

hills she had seen.

The group made it half way down before the camp noticed the approaching groups. Shouts could be heard and Anjali could see people running around. Some were obviously grabbing weapons and heading out to meet the approaching threat. Others hurried with their equipment carrying. It looked like they had no intention of stopping the work being done.

The first wizard made his attack. A ball of fire launched from the camp. It wasn't aimed at Anjali or her group, but to the opposite side of the valley. It exploded mid air. It seemed the wizards hired by Ranaly knew what they were doing. The flames couldn't even reach the grass and start a fire to cut off the approaching group. The defensive spell had accounted for even that.

"They're good," Anjali said.

"Smart to protect the grass as well," Anika agreed from next to her. Glancing at her, she was holding on to her caster with white knuckles. With her other hand she was drawing runes in the air. Basic defensive stuff that would serve well in any situation.

Not wanting to be caught unprepared, Anjali started drawing runes as well, though she went a slightly different route than Anika. She chose more specialized defences against attacks she thought might happen. Wizards tended to be prisoners of habits. Part of it was because they all received training at the Towers. Certain spells were favoured over others and only a truly battle hardened wizard would have broken out of those habits and chosen his own ways of attack.

She hoped there weren't that kind of wizards in the camp. Dealing even with just graduated ones from the Towers would be tough.

The group got to the outskirts of the camp. A few more spells had been cast from the camp against the other groups. They were met by a line of men in workers clothes. They had axes, swords and spears in hand, ready to fight. Torim and the mercenaries ran at them and soon there was an all out fight going on. Anjali stayed behind with Anika and the pair looked for opportunities to help, but with the men tangled in close combat there wasn't much they could do.

She saw Ranaly raise his blade and cut into the shoulder of one enemy. The man dropped his axe and let out a chilling cry of pain. Ranaly was quick to slice

his throat to silence him. He moved on to the next enemy.

Torim was doing quick work of anyone getting close to him. He used a sword along with his caster. A swing of his sword and a man would fall to the ground, missing a limb or holding a gaping wound, his caster shooting a deadly bolt of flames or water at another man running at him. With a quick motion he'd spin around, parry an attack with his blade then duck away and quickly put in another shell in his caster.

"This way," Anika said and grabbed her by the arm.

Anjali was surprised, but followed her. She had found a way past the fight and towards the covered work area. Even now, on the ground, there was canvas running down from its top to cover the sides. They couldn't see what was going on inside. More men emerged from under the cover.

"Look out," Anjali said as she pulled Anika behind her and braced. She activated some of the runes she had been constructing. Her focus was on one of the men who had appeared. From the distance it was hard to tell what sort of runes he was making, but the movements of his hands gave her enough of a hint.

The ground before her shot up just in time to block the green liquid spurting towards them. They could hear the hiss as it hit the wall of dirt. Whisks of smoke rose up. Some of the liquid spilled past the sides of the wall. She had not had time to make it that wide. She quickly looked to the sides to see if anyone had been hit by the acid. She was relieved to see that was not the case.

Anika climbed up the dirt mound in front of them and fired off her caster at the wizard. The jet of flame was right on the edge of its effective range, but at least it would give the man something to think about. She ducked back behind cover as soon as the round had been fired off.

Knowing what was likely to come next, Anjali put up a shield above them. Only a few second later a bright flash nearly blinded her. A lightning from the clear sky was not something natural, but a standard attack on someone who had put up a wall like hers. Even with the shield the hairs on her arms stood up and she could feel small sparks in her hair. Looking at Anika there were plenty of loose hairs on her head that were puffing out and standing up.

"What now?" Anika asked as she ran a hand through her hair in an attempt

to calm it down. Anjali could hear the small crackles as electricity found ways to discharge.

Glancing back, Anjali could see the attacks had not affected the group fighting there. Both Torim and Ranaly looked to be doing fine. The defenders were dwindling and pulling back slowly. "We push on," she replied in a determined tone and a grim expression. "Handle the defences for a bit. I'm going to need a moment for this on."

Anika nodded.

The rest of what happened around her from that point on was a blur to Anjali. She focused on her runes. A loud bang wasn't enough to disrupt her focus. She barely registered the bright flashes and the wave of heat that washed over her. It was something a wizards had to learn to do. Shut out everything around them so the focus could be solely on the spell she was constructing.

One distraction could have the spell fizzle out or, even worse, completely backfire on the caster.

She worked quick and got the runes done.

"Out of the way!" She gave the order with a commanding voice. She didn't wait to see if Anjali did as told. She could only trust the young woman had her senses about her. She let loose the spell.

It was a spell she had rarely used and for good reason.

Thin strands of different colours burst out of thin air in front of her. They shot out forward, towards the enemy, at a speed that made them hard if not impossible to dodge. They wormed above the wall of earth and found their way to the enemy. Anjali caught a glimpse of their terrified surprise. It was quickly covered up by the strings wrapping around them. The multicoloured wrapping might have been a beautiful sight had she not known what came next.

The muffled screams from the men caught in the wraps told the story. The strands squeezed and squeezed. Even from a distance the sound of bones snapping and joints popping was sickening to hear. Even more disturbing was watching the human shaped wrappings collapse into themselves and the blood spill out from what ever small cracks there were. The red liquid sprayed everywhere in the air in a fine mist.

“That’s one nasty spell,” Anika said. She looked a bit pale.

“I don’t like using it,” Anjali admitted and assessed the damage she had done. The wizard that had been attacking them was one of those caught in the spell. She counted a half dozen others that had been taken down. It left them a clear path to the covered work area. Glancing back she could see Torim and Ranaly were headed their way while the mercenaries were taking care of what remained of the group that had blocked their path.

“You all right?” Anika asked just as the two men joined them. They gave her a worried look.

“I’m fine,” Anjali said and wiped some sweat off her forehead. “You know how it is. Use a big spell and it drains you. Regardless, we need to hurry and get to that covered area. We have to stop what ever they’re doing there. They’ve defended it hard enough to give away that it’s important to them.”

“Not going to argue against that,” Torim said, gripped his sword a bit tighter and rushed on. Ranaly followed him after giving Anjali one last worried look. Keeping the rear, the two women followed them.

They made it to the covered work area without any further resistance.

The moment they set foot in it a blast of air threw them all to the ground.

Anjali hit the back of her head hard enough that for a moment all she could see was flashing lights, but she didn’t need to see. She could hear well enough. She could feel it. The sheer amount of magic that had just been activated.

All she wanted to do was crawl away from it.

It made her wish she’d never see what it was.

## Chapter 16

The blast of air knocked the wind out of him. Torim gasped for air as he laid on his back on the ground. He tried to keep his wits about him and see what was going on around him. What cover there had been over the work area had been blasted away by the same force that had knocked him to the ground. He could hear a distinct hum.

Looking around him he could see Anika next to him. To the right was Ranaly gasping for air much as he was. Looking up he could see the bottoms of Anjali's feet.

At least the group had survived, he thought to himself as his lungs struggled to pull in air.

There was dust floating everywhere. Best he could make out were dark shapes if they were more than a few feet away. His lungs took in a reluctant breath of air. Torim managed to sit up and take a good look around. The dust in the air started to settle. A blue glow in front of him drew his attention. He squinted to try and comprehend what he was seeing. It looked like a big wooden box, but as his gaze went up he quickly realized it was much more than that. It continued on to what looked like an leg, then a torso and then what looked to be an arm of some sort and finally a head. How tall the thing was was hard to tell from his vantage point, but he wagered it was taller than the hills around them.

"Shit," Torim muttered, baffled by the sight in front of him. It was a giant of a machine. Covered in glowing runes. "This isn't good."

"What the hell is that?" It was Ranaly, on his hands and knees next to him.

"What ever they were working on," Torim replied and tried to keep his panic bottled up. Now that he'd had a few more moment to take in the sight it was obvious it was a weapon. Its right arm looked to be a giant caster. If its destructive power scaled up with size then the thing could single handedly level a city with one or two shots. Even more concerning, while there was wood visible, there was also plenty of metal to re-enforce the thing and protect what looked to be vital spots. At least the amount of metal seemed to point to that.



“That’s amazing.”

Torim turned to give Anika a surprised and concerned look. Calling a death machine amazing was worrying even from her. Looking back at the machine it was obvious more than a single ship had been used to construct it. With the dust settling more and more details came to view. It was boxy, but clearly human shaped with arms and legs, a torso and a head that looked like the helmet of a knight. Just the head was the size of a three story house. Sunlight made the windows on it glare. Along with that it became more and more apparent there were more weapons on it than just the huge caster. Gun barrels were poking out every which way from its torso. Looking up at them it became obvious some were being angled down towards the ground.

“We should get moving,” Torim said with some urgency in his voice.

“Back to the ship?” Anjali asked. She was holding the back of her head and wincing every now and then. She glared up at the giant construct and spat on the ground. There was some blood in the spit. “No way we’re fighting that. That huge caster. All it has to do is fire that and we’re all dead.”

“It won’t shoot it at its own feet,” Torim countered. “Best we rush right next to it.”

“He has a point,” Ranaly agreed and looked around. Torim did the same. It looked like the enemies had been taken by surprise just as much as the attackers. Some looked pleased as they cheered. No doubt happy that they got to see their hard work come to fruition. Others were simply stunned by what had happened.

The mercenaries seemed to be taking it the best. Most had given the giant thing one look, shrugged and then continued killing what they could. The defenders were quickly snapping out of their moment of elation and returning to the fight. It looked like they didn’t have much time to make a decision on what to do.

“That’s not our only worry,” Anjali said. “That thing isn’t going to just stand there. It’s going to move.”

“That thing? Are you crazy? It’ll crumble under its own weight.” Ranaly seemed convinced that what they were facing was just a fancy statue. Torim had

thought the same for a brief moment, but with all the runes covering the thing, who knew what it could do? Ships flying in the skies was equally ridiculous yet it happened every day.

“She’s right,” Anika chimed in just as Anjali looked ready to give more information. “Runes can accomplish a lot. The wood on that thing is probably tougher than the highest quality steel. As long as it has enough magic I have little doubt it can..”

Her sentence was interrupted by a loud creak. Everyone turned towards the noise. They watched in horror as the left foot of the construct lifted off the ground. It was like a giant had ripped up a barn and was using it as a shoe. It wasn’t a quick movement, but the sheer size of it made the situation dangerous. The huge shadow passed over the group. The group strained their necks as they watched the huge foot glide over them and start to come down at the base of the hill. Each one of them braced for when it hit the ground. The tremor it sent all around shook them to the very core.

Its other foot started to move to complete the giant step the thing was taking. For its size it moved frighteningly quick.

“It doesn’t care about us it seems,” Torim noted and looked at the tall back of it. The second foot came down, shaking the ground. There weren’t many features on the back of it, but even there it was obvious some smaller casters were around to offer a way to fight even at the rear of it. Anyone attacking the thing would have a hard time doing so without losses.

It started to climb up the hill. The steps were shorter and more wobbly, but it obviously was capable of making it all the way to the top.

“We have to go after it,” Anjali said and fired off a quick caster round towards a group of enemies that looked to be coming their way. A group of mercenaries was quickly on them after the fire died down.

“We don’t even know what that thing is for,” Ranaly pointed out. “Obviously it’s not something we can take out.”

“We have to,” Anjali countered. “That thing can’t be let loose on the world.”

“The world is better equipped to handle it than we are,” Ranaly countered. His head was turning every which way to keep an eye on their surroundings.

Their argument was interrupted by the construct reaching the top of the hill. It stopped. They could hear the clanks and noises coming from it. The arm with the huge caster started to move. It was obviously being aimed. The movements were so small and precise it could have easily been mistaken for a living being.

“Isn’t that the direction where our ship was parked?” Anika asked with worry in her voice.

“It is,” Ranaly said just as the construct fired. A ball of fire larger than what any of them had seen before launched into the distance. Even from where they were they could feel the momentary heat before it sped away. The huge shell ejected from the caster came tumbling down through the air. The thud it let out when hitting the ground was a testament to just how big and heavy it was. It could have easily crushed a house.

A few moment later they felt the vibrations in the ground. Above the hill they could see the red glow of flames climb higher and higher until they could see the flames themselves expanding in a ball so large it was hard to comprehend. For a moment it looked like there was nothing stopping the flames from reaching the valley. Every one of them could feel the panic start to grow inside them.

Then the flames died down. They could all feel the air rushing from behind them towards the explosion. The rushing air made for a stark contrast to the ominous silence that ruled the valley.

Looking around Anjali could tell the sight they had just witnessed had shocked everyone. Ranaly had his mouth open, giving him a mixed look of surprise and horror. Torim looked ready to run and she couldn’t blame him for that. She could feel the urge to do that as well, but she knew they couldn’t let that thing get near any inhabited city. It would be death and destruction on a scale the world had not seen.

Yet she couldn’t come up with a way to take the construct down.

“I guess there goes our ship,” Anika managed to say. She let out a nervous laugh. Looking at her Anjali could see the stress she was under. She looked ready to break.

“We don’t know that,” Anjali said, hoping to inject some positivity to the situation. “They might have gotten away from it.” Still, she was having a hard

time believing it herself.

“We need to get the fuck out of here,” Torim said and looked around for a path out of the valley. As he said that the construct started to turn around on top of the hill. Creaks and clang told of parts moving. The huge feet made small steps to turn the thing around. The huge caster started to lower towards the valley.

“Ain’t no running from that,” Ranaly said, sounding defeated. “Even if we rush that thing now we won’t make it in time. We can’t run away.”

There was no denying that fact. If the thing shot another huge fireball into the valley they would all be burned to death. There wasn’t time to run up the hills. Trying to protect against a spell of that magnitude was beyond what a single person could do. Even if the mercenary wizards joined with her and Anika, Anjali doubted it would be enough. The fire would burn all the air around them making it impossible to breathe.

There was only one way she could think of that would give them even a slight chance of surviving. That plan hinged on the ground below their feet being stable enough to handle the impact of the fireball.

“We’re going underground!” She shouted out her plan. “Get everyone together.”

“Underground?” Anika asked.

She nodded. “Help me with the spells. If we get far enough down that should protect us from a fireball. Or anything else they might shoot into the valley.”

No one questioned her plan. When it came to spells she was likely the one with the most knowledge and experience. So they went to work. Anjali quickly drew runes and soon a tunnel opened on the ground, sloping down at a shallow enough angle that they could walk down the slope. She pushed the tunnel further down and started walking into it. Following her was the rest of the group along with what mercenaries had made it to them. She was happy to note that one of the mercenary wizards was there. Somehow Youndal had made it there as well.

Anika held up the rear and closed up the tunnel behind them. It was hard work to do it without having it all collapse on them. The spell just compacted the earth around them, creating the path they were taking. She was uncompacting it all behind her. Doing it the wrong way and it would all come crumbling down on

them. At the same time she couldn't be too conservative or there wouldn't be enough ground to fully close the path. At the same time she wanted it to be stronger at certain points to help carry the weight.

The one mercenary wizard that had made it with them was lighting their path.

To her disappointment, much of the ground they went through was just dirt. She worried it would not be strong enough to withstand what ever the giant caster was about to fire at them. She told the mercenary wizard to be ready to cast a protective spell over the group, just in case. It wouldn't stop a full on collapse, but it would offer some protection once they stopped.

To her relief they reached some more solid rock. It became slower to dig a tunnel through it, but even a few feet of it would greatly improve their chances of surviving. She stopped when she felt the ground shake.

"Now!" she ordered the mercenary wizard. She stopped digging and joined in casting what ever protections she could. She re-enforced the ceiling above them and hoped it wouldn't come crumbling down on them. The ground continued to shake. Small stones fell on the group. Even through all the dirt and stone above they could feel the heat radiating from above.

"It's not going to reach us, is it?" Ranaly asked as the shaking continued.

"Let's hope not," Anjali said quickly as she tried to keep her focus on maintaining the spells. A quick glance told her Anika was doing the same. To the credit of the mercenary wizard, his lights were still giving them enough to see everyone in their small hole.

The air in the hole quickly grew oppressive. There was nowhere for the heat from above to go nor from their bodies. With each breath the air grew more stuffy. The combination had them all sweating and feeling like a headache was coming on.

The shaking finally stopped. The only sound was the breathing of everyone in the hole. Then there was a thud. It was obviously in the distance. The next one was further away.

"It's walking away," Torim said, voicing what most were already thinking.

"Can we start digging up? We can't stay here for much longer," Anika said.

“We’re running out of air.”

“Wait a bit more,” Anjali said. “We don’t want to come up with that thing still close by.”

No one objected so they waited. When they could barely feel or hear the thuds of the things walking, Anjali started digging back up. It was a much shorter way than before. The fire had melted and compacted the ground above them. The first ray of sunlight that came down when they broke ground made everyone feel better. The fresh air that rushed in filled their lungs, easing the feeling of uneasy they had all gotten.

Torim was the third one out of the hole. The air around him felt hot. He could feel the heat radiating from the ground around him. There was a scent of burned grass and ground that assaulted his nose. He coughed and looked around him.

Dark smoke rose from patches of ground. The valley base had been relatively flat before, but now had a distinct slump to it. The sheer force of the ball of fire had either compressed it, burned or melted it enough to create what looked to be a crater as wide as the valley itself. The hills surrounding it were nothing but charred ground. Gone were the green grasses and anything else that might have lived there. The buildings that had made up the camp were nowhere to be seen. Not even a piece of wood on fire remained. It had all been wiped away.

“Shit. A miracle we survived that,” Torim said. It was hard to wrap your head around just how destructive the attack had been. His gaze went to the hills surrounding the area. How much wider would the area of destruction been had they not been there? Enough to wipe out the entire central island of Ramyn? At the very least a significant portion of it would have been destroyed or damaged.

The amount of lives lost would have been horrific.

“What the hell have you gotten yourself involved with, Douggy?”

“Some bad shit,” Anjali replied from next to him. She wiped some dirt and sweat off her forehead. Her clothes were dirty and covered in dust from the tunnel.

“We can’t stop that thing,” Torim told her. He could see the expression on her, the way she had her body posed. She wanted to go after that thing. She

wanted to destroy it. Looking around, there was no sign of the construct, but the hills made for an effective visual barrier. No doubt it was walking towards whatever was its intended target.

“What the fuck was that?”

Both turned their attention to the voice. Youndal didn't not seem pleased with the turn of event. It was easy to see why. Only ten of his mercenaries remained alive. The rest had been wiped out by the ball of fire. It wasn't the sort of loss he had been expecting.

“I don't know,” Ranaly said. “I told we didn't know what was waiting for us. That's a risk you accepted. How the hell would anyone know something like that excised?”

Youndal looked like he wanted to argue against it, but decided not to. Possibly he weighed the future business someone like Ranaly would bring his way against the lost men. It was a risk men like him took every time they accepted a job. Instead he gave his employer a silent stare that conveyed his anger all too well.

“Arguing won't bring back the dead,” Torim said loud enough for both the men to hear. The mercenaries scattered around them nodded grimly. “Everyone who came here knew it could end up with them dead. None of us wanted that, of course, but it's where we're at now.”

“The important question is do we let that thing go on and kill more people.” Anika threw herself into the conversation. Torim gave her a look of warning, but she ignored it. “They're obviously going to use it for something sinister. No matter how you look at the situation, something like that doesn't belong in the hands of anybody. That's far too much power.”

“What do you suggest we do?” Ranaly asked and spread his arms. He looked around. “It did all this with just one shot. What the hell can we do against that? We don't even have our ship to catch up to it. I doubt we can do it on foot.”

It was a valid concern, Torim admitted. While its steps had not been that quick, each one covered such a distance that it could move with surprising speed. Catching up to it would require horses at the very least. A normal walking speed would have the thing outpacing you with a comfortable margin.

“They probably think we’re all dead so we have that going for us,” Anika interjected into the conversation. She was similarly covered in dirt and dust as everyone else. She even had a clump of dirt stuck in her hair to the right side of her head. Why she hadn’t shaken it off yet was odd.

“Great. I say we use that and go somewhere where they won’t be coming,” Ranaly said.

“Where’s your fighting spirit?” Anjali asked. “Just before you were boasting how no one is going to get away with damaging your mansion.”

“That was before I found out they have a fucking doomsday weapon,” Ranaly replied with no small amount of tension in his voice.

“I doubt their ambitions are contained to a small area with that thing,” Anjali pointed out. “Probably nowhere to run from them. At least not in this kingdom.”

“I have properties further south,” Ranaly countered,

“The rest of us don’t,” Anika pointed out. “If that thing is headed for Ramyn and it successfully takes over the kingdom, I seriously doubt they’re going to stop there. People like that never do. They always want more.”

Ranaly started to reply, but a shadow creeping up on all of them silenced him.

Torim felt the momentary feeling of fear wash over him. He quickly looked up, half expecting to see the giant construct looming over all of them, ready to fire off another apocalyptic round of destruction. To his relief, and to the relief of everyone else, all they saw was the bottom of a ship. It took them a moment to realize it was the ship they had flow in on. The relief that came with that realization was obvious to see on everyone’s faces.

Ranaly and Youndal waved up to the crew for them to land. The ship made a couple of circles above the valley before starting its descent. Its keel touched the scorched earth a few moment later. Everyone was too excited to continue debating what to do. The knowledge that they now had a means to leave with ease was enough to stifle all such talk.

The rope ladders were thrown down the side of the ship and the group was quick to climb on-board. Torim was in the middle of the group to get up on deck. Half way up he started to realize just how hot his feet were. His boots had



relatively thick bottoms, but the ground had still heated them up to a point where now that they were cooling, he wondered how he had not noticed it earlier.

Looking around it was obvious the ship had not escaped unscathed from the attack. There was a set of burned down sails strewn on the deck. The replacement sails weren't enough to fully populate the masts, but offered enough for the ship to move. Walking around and looking down the sides, Torim could see parts of the hull that were scorched. The flames had come in contact with it, that much was obvious, but somehow it had managed to run away from them.

Some of the crew were on deck with bandages wrapped on their arms. The vessel itself had not been the only one to take damage, it looked like. No doubt some were just burns from bringing down the burning sails and fighting other fires that had started onboard. Had the actual fireball touched them they'd have been burned to a crisp.

Torim knew ships like it could handle more stuff than those without runes, but it was still impressive that it had survived with so little damage. Curious, he wandered over to the captain.

"How the hell did you manage to escape?" he asked of the man.

The captain gave him a look. "We were ready to go so when we saw that infernal construct pop its head up we were already putting up the sails. Bastard still caught us pretty bad. Sails went up in flames. Some other stuff caught fire. Crew got hurt putting it all out so we didn't go up in flames. Probably a good thing the sails went. Forced us to go down low. Probably hid us behind a hill so the thing thought we were down and out."

Had one of those rounds not been fired at him, Torim might not have been able to appreciate what the ships and its crew had gone through, but he knew full well what it felt like to face one of those coming towards you. "You escaped in the air, we escaped underground."

"Ain't many places to escape that thing," the captain said and gave him a look that conveyed his crushed spirit.

Torim watched Anjali walk towards them. He didn't have much doubt about what she was going to talk to the captain about. He suspected it would not go down well. At the very least it would be an amusing show.

“We need to go after that thing,” Anjali said as soon as she got close enough. Torim had trouble hiding his smile.

The look the captain gave her was filled with disbelief. “Go after it? Are you mad, woman?”

“We have to stop it before it does any more damage,” Anjali said, not phased one bit by the response she got to her initial response. Torim followed the two argue about it for a moment before moving on. It was unlikely the captain would relent, but Anjali could be persuasive. Given that Ranaly and Youndal were headed for the pair it looked like the debate would take some time.

Part of him wanted to stay and give opinions on the matter, but even after the initial objections he’d had over chasing the thing he found himself not really caring one way or the other. It was likely Douggy was on the thing, but it was unlikely they’d be able to do much against it. So chasing after it seemed pointless and a good way to get killed.

On the other hand not doing anything seemed like a good way to get killed as well. The organization that had built up the thing was certain to have plans for it. Given that it seemed to be headed for Ramyn it would likely cause quite a bit of damage. Of course, there would be forces opposing it, from the royal guard to the wizards in the Towers.

He was certain the people behind it all had taken that into consideration. They likely had plans to counter everything he’d just thought of. More than likely they had allies in various places. Possibly some mercenaries to keep the guard busy.

Go after it or not it seemed to him that outcome would end up being the same. It wouldn’t be something they’d be able to ignore. Not least of which because the organization behind it all seemed to already want them all dead. Given that the only real escape was likely to be flying off to some other continent or world.

He leaned against the railing and looked down at the scorched ground. The ship was still tied down and wasn’t going anywhere just yet.

“They reached a decision yet?”

Torim turned to regard Anika as she leaned against the railing next to him.

She looked like she could use some rest. No doubt most on the ship had a similar look to them. “Probably going to be a while,” he replied.

“We’re going after that thing, aren’t we?” Anika asked. She didn’t sound frightened. There was a resignation in her voice. It looked like she had come to the same conclusion as he had.

“Probably,” Torim admitted. “You know how it is when Anjali decides something.”

“I do,” Anika admitted with a sigh. “Just not sure I agree with her on this one. Not any more.”

“If you think about it, that thing can easily take on armies with its weapons,” Torim said more to himself than the woman next to him. He was still trying to talk himself into accepting what he knew would be the outcome. “A small group like us might have a better chance of doing something about it.”

“Maybe,” Anika said with hesitation in her voice.

“With this ship we can catch up to it,” Torim continued. “Fly in right above it and rope down onto it. We’ll find some way inside. Then its just a matter of taking out the people controlling the thing.”

“You’re starting to sound more like a soldier than a treasure hunter,” Anika noted.

Torim chuckled. “Maybe, but I’m just thinking out loud here. Soldiers aren’t the only ones who can think strategy.”

“Still. It’s dangerous.” Anika gave him a look filled with both worry and fear. He couldn’t blame her. Those emotions were welling inside him as well.

“Everything has been dangerous since Douggy fired his caster at me,” he finally said, accepting it as the fact that it was. “And I don’t think things will become less dangerous until that thing is taken down along with the people who built it.”

“Tall order for a small group like us,” Anika said, not looking convinced it was the right path to take, but at the same time unable to disregard it as avoidable.

“The way I see it, we either do it and die or we do nothing a die anyway.” Torim shrugged as he said the words. Glancing back at the ship captain he could

tell Anjali had worn him down along with Ranaly and the mercenary captain. They all had those looks.

They didn't like it, they didn't agree with it, but they couldn't deny it was the only path they had to take. They'd argue against it for a moment more, but they had given up without even fully realizing it. Anjali on the other hand looked like she had more energy than when she started. It was like she was siphoning it off of the men she was arguing with.

He watched the group in silence with Anika next to him. It wasn't long before the group broke off and Anjali headed for the pair. She looked pleased with herself.

"We're going after it?" Torim asked before she could open her mouth when she got close.

Anjali nodded. "Took some convincing, but we're going to take that thing down."

Torim sighed. Hearing it made it more real. "Let's hope we don't all die, then."

## Chapter 17

The doubts were hard at work. Anjali had to constantly remind herself that they were doing the right thing. The mercenaries were on board, Ranaly supported it, even Torim had not voiced any more objections. The captain of the ship still seemed reluctant, but he was giving the crew the orders and had even talked them into accepting the plan. They were chasing the construct against unfavourable winds so progress was slow, but their target wasn't that fast nor was it easy to hide from view. They'd see it long before being in range of doing anything.

Still the problem remained. What was the plan to take the construct down?

That was what she was still trying to figure out. As was everyone else onboard. She was confident, along with the captain, that the ship would be fast and nimble enough to dodge the huge caster on it. It wasn't meant to fight moving things and took time to aim. It was meant against big armies and fortifications.

The problem was there were smaller casters on it as well. Those would pose a threat, but at least they were something they could defend against if dodging was impossible. Getting close would be challenging, but not impossible. What to do from there was the question.

Anjali gave the rope in her hands a look and as strong a tug as she could muster. It would hold, but using to go down onto the construct would be near suicide. Even if the ship wasn't dodging it would be easy to lose your grip and fall to your death. There were harnesses the sailors used during storms to keep safe, but they were designed to keep you anchored to one point. Not to move with you when going down a rope.

At the moment it still looked like the only option that had a chance of working.

Not that they knew landing on the construct would get them anywhere. Presumably there was a way to enter it, but given how laden with runes the thing was those points likely had all sorts of protections on them to prevent just what

they were planning. Though given the fact the group had forced them to rush there may have been places where everything wasn't complete. It could move, but maybe some protections had not been finished.

It was a foolish thing to put your hopes in.

A shout from above drew her out of her thoughts. She missed the words the first time, but a second time made it clear enough.

"There it is!"

The young man high in the nest was pointing off to the left side, forward of the ship. The hill still covered the view for those on the deck, but it wasn't long before they could see the head of the construct rise above them. The deck came to life with crew rushing to ensure things were tied down for the heavy manoeuvres that were likely to soon shake the ship.

Anjali gave the head in the distance one last look before heading towards the helm. The captain was there along with Ranaly, Torim and the mercenary leader. She walked past Anika who was resting against the railing, looking at the construct in the distance. She gave her a look that begged for some reassurance, but she had none to offer the young woman. If anything, she needed the same thing as she did.

"It'll be all right," she managed to say as she passed by. The words sounded hollow even to herself, but Anika seemed to gain some confidence out of them. She reached the helm just as the men seemed to end a heated discussion.

"What were you arguing about?" Anjali asked as the men gave her uneasy looks.

"What we should do now," Ranaly replied. He'd managed to clean himself up a bit, but there was still dust on his clothes.

"Well, that thing is definitely headed for Ramyn," Youndal said. "Still a way to go to get out of these hills, but I think that's our best chance of getting close to it. Drop down and use the hills as cover."

"We can't dodge well like that," the ship captain said. "It catches us between two hills and there's nowhere to go but up and that ain't always going to be the direction we want to dodge."

"And what do we do when we get close to it," Ranaly added to the chorus of

questioning voices. “Using ropes to lower ourselves onto it isn’t going to be pretty.”

Anjali sighed. They had all been wrestling with the same problem she had and hadn’t come up with anything better. “Almost makes me wish we had your little flying boards with us.” She gave Ranaly an amused look.

The man looked anything but amused. “We do have them. They’re down in the cargo hold.”

For a moment Anjali couldn’t quite believe it. “Why would you bring them along?”

Ranaly shrugged. “Never know what you might need. They don’t take up much space.”

“Why didn’t you tell that we had them?” Anjali asked, now accepting that they were indeed onboard, but angry that the noble had not bothered to mention it to anyone.

“Just didn’t think about it,” Ranaly admitted. “I mean, they can only transport one person and once you’re off it there’s no way to get it back for others to use. Sending just two people against that thing would be foolish.”

“But we can use one to pull a rope from the ship to that thing,” Anjali said trying her best to keep her voice from showing the frustration she was feeling at the nobles inability to share information. “Once the rope is secured on the other end going down it will be much easier.”

“Also means we can’t dodge anything shot at us,” the ships captain noted. “The ropes we have aren’t that long. Not much in the way of moving space once tied down.”

“It wouldn’t be for long,” Anjali assured the man even though she had no idea how long it would take. Someone sliding down a rope like that could either be quick or it could take a long time. “Once those who go are on the thing the ropes can be loosened and you can steer the ship to a safe distance.”

“That would leave those on the construct no way to escape,” Torim pointed out. Given the looks Anjali saw from everyone, no one liked that idea all that much.

“It’s the best we have,” she said and gave all the men as grave a look as she

could muster. “Not everyone is going to live, but a few us dying is a whole lot better than that thing firing one of those infernos at the city. Now, let’s stop arguing and start doing, shall we?”

The men exchanged looks. Doubts were on display, but so was determination. They were committed to doing what she’d laid out.

“I’ll go get the boards,” Ranaly said. “I’ll grab Anika to help. She knows how to handle them.”

“I’ll choose a few volunteers,” Youndal said and started towards his men who had huddled up near the main mast. They all looked nervous. They knew what the ship was headed towards and what it meant for them.

“So who are the unlucky bastards that’ll have to do the flying?” Torim asked.

“Probably me and Anika,” Anjali said, not really liking the idea, but given the situation it seemed like the best bet. “Going to need someone who can use some defensive spell to do the flying. The ship can be protected by its wizard and the mercenaries that are still left.”

“I’m not liking that idea too much,” Torim said and glanced to where Anika had been resting against the railing. Ranaly had already recruited her and the pair was headed down below deck to get the boards.

“Neither am I, but the situation is what it is,” Anjali said. The pair went silent and waited. The ship changed its course slightly to get down low and head more towards the moving construct. Seeing the hills come closer and closer was both reassuring as well as frightening.

Frightening because they would restrict the ships movements somewhat. Reassuring because it would make it harder for anyone on the construct to see them.

“Damn head wind,” the captain cursed next to them. “If it was coming from behind us we’d be much faster.”

“Can’t change the weather,” Anjali commented. The silence fell over them again after that only to be broken by the captain shouting a few orders here and there. The sailors seemed efficient and used to performing their duties as ordered. If they had doubts they were not shown when orders were given.

Ranaly and Anika soon appeared from under the deck, dragging with them



the two boards. They soon had the masts on them and the small sails unfurled. The mercenaries had nothing better to do than to look on at the odd contraptions. They, along with pretty much everyone else on the ship, had never seen something like them before. Youndal seemed particularly interested as he talked with the two. He seemed to have a lot of questions. His expression made it obvious he was already thinking of uses for them. No doubt a mercenary could find such crafts useful for all sorts of things, from combat to simple message delivery.

Anjali walked over to them. "I swore I would never get on one of these again, but it seems I'll have to break that oath."

Anika and Ranaly both gave her a surprised look.

"Are you sure?" Ranaly asked.

With a nod, Anjali grabbed one of the boards by the slender handhold that was on the sail. "You need people who can protect themselves with some magic. That means me and Anika will have to make the initial landing. That leaves two wizards to tend to this ship and the ship wizard to keep the essentials running smoothly. That should be enough to give all of us the best chance of success."

"It's going to be dangerous," Ranaly reminded her as if that fact had whisked past her.

"I know, but there isn't a safe place in this plan," Anjali countered as she moved the sail a bit to get used to how it handled. She had to admit it was much better than the early version of it that she had previously tried. The sail had barely moved in that one. You had needed a lot of arm strength to handle it. This one seemed like even a kid could handle it.

"We're getting close!" the ship's captain shouted out. Looking towards the front of the ship they could all see the construct starting to tower over them. There were still several hills between the ship and it, offering cover, but that distance was quickly shrinking. It wouldn't be long before they'd have to pull up to circle the thing.

"We should get off the ship before we get too close so you can get used to controlling the board," Anika said. "We'll stick close by with the ropes."

Anjali nodded. "Good idea. I need some time with this thing."

With no one objecting, the two women got on their boards and activated the runes. Both of them took a heavy and long loop of rope with them, slipping the loop over their head and over one shoulder. It made moving harder, but both were still able to control their boards without trouble. With the runes activated they took to the sky.

The lift from deck was more stable than Anjali had expected. Still, she could feel her palms sweating. She stuck close to the deck for a while as she got comfortable with how small adjustments to the sail let her change direction. Anika had no such need to be careful and she was flying around the ship like only someone who was confident in their abilities could.

Having gained some confidence in both her abilities as well as the board, Anjali took to the sky as well. She guided the board up and away from the ship. Leaving the bubble of calm created by the larger ship, the wind struck and caught her by surprise. For a moment she was struggling to both hold on as well as to regain control of the small board. The hills got frighteningly close before she regained full control and flew straight again.

It brought back memories to her first flight on the earlier version. Ranaly had been confident it would work and, at the time, she had not had a reason not to trust the man. So she had gotten on the thing and went to the sky. The first few feet off the ground had gone well, but then she realized it was nearly impossible to control the thing. The way it reacted to controls was unpredictable. One moment it would be sluggish to react the other it would jump at the slightest movement. The runes on it had not been finely tuned, but rather sloppily put together and that was the result of it.

She was pleased to notice the board gave her fine control over its movement. It acted predictably and the runes on it actually cushioned movements that would have been too hard and put her in danger of being thrown off.

It was impressive and made her want to talk to who ever had made the runes on it. It was a masterful piece of work.

Anika flew her board right next to hers. "We're close enough, don't you think?" She had to shout so she her voice carried over.

Looking ahead Anjali could see the giant construct loom over them. If they

got any closer between the hills the danger that they wouldn't be able to have enough room to move would become far too real.

"Let's go," she replied to Anika. With those words both of them started climbing up. Glancing back she could see the ship following them, albeit with some distance between them. The boards rose much faster and it wasn't long before they were at shoulder height with the construct. They hadn't had time to discuss a more detailed plan of approach, but it seemed they both had the same idea after exchanging a few hand motions.

Anika veered off to the right with her board. Anjali went left. There was no sense putting them both in the same direction. Once she had reached the side of the construct she started approaching it. She had kept a comfortable distance for now and kept a close eye on it. There wasn't any indication she had been spotted. None the less she had some defences up and ready to protect her from incoming caster rounds.

She tried to make out any sort of access hatches on the construct, but given how haphazardly it was put together it was hard. There were mismatches of planks and bits of metal. The transitions were quick so it was entirely possible that she was just skipping over a part that was a hatch because it looked like anything else on the thing. There were no visible handles to open up anything.

Movement caught her eye.

One of the casters sticking out of the things side was moving. It was obviously shifting to aim at her. Anjali gripped her sail more tightly and started to weave from side to side as well as up and down, making herself as hard a target as possible. The first shot came at her just as she had expected.

"Always fire," she muttered to herself as she guided the board safely away from the jet of flames. She only felt a brief wave of hot air brush past her. Not that there were that many useful, common caster cartridges to use when in the sky. The ones she feared the most were any air based ones. Some of those were pretty much invisible to the naked eye when there was no dirt or other debris on the ground to disturb. It would make dodging them quite hard.

She kept a close eye on the casters pointing towards her as she weaved closer to the construct. She could see a burst of flames come from the other side.

A quick glance told her Anika had avoided it just as easily as she had. More worryingly, one of the big casters on the back of the thing seemed to be moving as well. It was obviously looking to fire at the ship trailing it.

Her momentarily lapse in concentration almost became deadly when a torrential gust of wind hit her. Anjali strained to keep a hold on the sail as the board tumbled backwards and down towards the ground. Her protections had lessened the blow just enough that she could hang on and regain control. She swooped up back towards the sky just before the ground. From her point of view it looked like just a few feet and she'd have crashed, but no doubt the situation had made it look worse than it had been.

No sooner than she had gotten her board under control did she have to dodge yet another attack, this time a series of sharp shards of ice coming at her like a cloud of angry bees. One of the casters on the constructs legs had gotten her while she had focused on recovery. It was by pure instinct that she pushed the board to its limit so it whisked her away, down behind a hilltop. Most of the ice hit that, but some made it to her before that. Her protections took care of them in bright blue flashes. Still, she got showered with fine ice, almost like snow. It stung where it hit skin and forced her to close her eyes until the hill afforded its protection to her.

"Fuck this is harder than I thought," Anjali muttered to herself as she collected herself in the shelter of the hill. The construct was well protected, she had to concede that. She could see the on going battle from her position fairly well. The ship was still circling around, but keeping its distance. It was too far away for the casters on the construct to hit it with anything that could do damage.

Anika was still on the opposite side, trying to get close, but the casters were not letting her close in. With each giant step the construct took it got closer to making it out of the hilly area. With each step the cover that had saved her was getting closer to vanishing.

Focusing on the construct Anjali tried to find some weak spot she could exploit. Both sides had casters on them so approaching from there was difficult as her attempts had showed. The same was true for the front and back. She

considered coming in at a slight angle from the front or back, but quickly dismissed that idea since it would put her in the firing zone of casters on both sides. Finally she spotted something that might work. On the insides of the constructs legs there weren't any casters that she could see. With the legs moving it was risky, but it looked like her best bet of getting close.

With a tight grip on the sail, she made the board move again. She stuck close to the ground and approached the construct straight from its rear. She passed over huge footprints left behind by the passing hulk. Someone coming upon them later on would be wondering what could have made such large prints. Even for a giant they were far too big.

She pushed the board to the maximum speed it could reach as she raced close to the ground to catch up to the thing. Keeping an eye on the casters she could see them trying to aim down at her. She hoped to make it to the dead spot before they could fire. She slipped in between the legs just as a shot was fired. The flames burned the ground behind her. She could feel the heat wash across her neck and back.

She slowed the board down to keep pace with the construct. Looking at the legs on either side of her she could see there were no casters there to target her. Maybe it was an oversight in design or they just hadn't had the time to finish the defences there. She could see why it would be a lower priority than everything else. As she looked around she could see a few obvious spots where there was a place reserved for casters. There just weren't any.

She let out a relieved sigh and started rising up with the board. She'd need to get to the shoulders of the thing to tie down the rope and let the ship come closer. With that thought in mind she edged closer to the back of the thing and looked up.

With being so close to the body the casters that were trained outwards were unable to target her. She considered her options for a moment. She knew she had to take out as many of those weapons as she could on the way up. Otherwise the ship would have a tough time getting close. She considered pulling out her own caster and taking shots with it, but she didn't feel comfortable with using just one hand to control the board. The other option was to use her own magic. There

were a few spells she could prepare in the safety she had now and to release them as she passed by the caster.

She chose the latter option and started drawing some runes so she could have the spells handy. It took a lot of effort to keep the board under control while doing so. It made for slow progress, but she soon had what she wanted ready. So she headed up the construct.

The ascent was slow as she tried to stick to as close to the body of the thing as she could. So it was quite a few minutes before she reached the first caster barrels sticking out. There was sturdy looking leather covering the opening. Covered in runes it probably was strong enough to keep out arrows and many forms of magic. Still, there was a hole in it for the shooter to peer through as well as a wide slit for the barrel of the caster. It was those weak points Anjali targeted with her magic.

Thin strands of flames shot out from her fingers when she activated her runes. They slithered in through the small openings in the leather, pulsing, as if pumping more and more flames inside as the spell was active. She could hear the shouting coming from inside the construct. A brief smile crept to her lips when she made a fist out of her hand and severed the strands of flames from her own hand. She quickly rose up higher.

A moment later there was an explosion inside the construct. Flames shot out from the openings in the leather before the entire thing blew out with flames racing out. It wasn't enough to stop the huge thing from continuing to walk on, but at least one caster was out of the way. Looking up she could see several more on her way, including a bigger one that was still being aimed at the ship tailing them.

Confident she now had a working offence, Anjali headed up. She blew up two more casters on her way before reaching the bigger one. Each explosion was preceded by screaming and shouts as those inside tried to contain the situation the best they could. She could hear heavy thuds of doors closing and being screwed shut. It gave her some idea of the design of the thing. Like ships there were compartments in it. She made note of that because it would make fighting inside it that much more difficult.

The ship was still trailing them when she got to the big caster. Anika was still distracting the side. She was taking shots and generally keeping those inside busy on her side. She could have easily followed Anjali on her way, but keeping the people inside busy was no doubt the better choice.

Anjali was ripped back to reality when she got close to the big caster. The slits in the leather for it were far bigger and she could see men peering down at her. Then she saw the barrels of hand held casters peeking out. They were aiming at her. It looked like the easy ride was over. She hoped sticking as close to the construct as possible would limit what could be launched her way. She suspected the people inside didn't want to hit their own ride. With her eyes on the casters she continued onward.

It seemed like her plan was working. The casters inside couldn't target her with her so close to the body. She could even hear frustrated shouting when she got closer. The caster barrels disappeared from the slits. It looked like they were putting something in front of the opening to prevent her from striking at them. That being the case she hastened her ascend and as soon as she got close enough she let loose the spell.

The strands of flamed poked and prodded to find a way in. The slit had been closed off in a hurry, but it looked like it would be good enough. There was one weakness to it though. It wasn't covered in runes. The piece of wood was just normal wood so Anjali changed her tactic and focused the strands of flames to one spot and started to burn the wood. Soon there was a hole through which the flames could slither in through. The shouts from inside were enough to tell her she had been successful. It wasn't long before she could sever the strand of flames and fly off, out of the way of the explosion.

She continued going up. It had been the last caster before the shoulder of the construct. It didn't take her long to reach in and land her board down onto the wooden surface. The shoulder was wide and flat enough that you could have put two wagons side by side and still had plenty of room for people to walk around them. The ride was smoother than she had expected. One big step was barely felt at the top and the construct remained as stable as any walking thing could.

Looking around she could see a doorway in the neck of the thing. She could only hope no one would be barging out of it any time soon. Not wanting to waste time she hoisted the heavy stack of rope off her and looked for a place to fasten it. She found a crack through which she could guide the rope through and tie a knot. It anchored the rope solidly enough to a piece of wood that was nailed down pretty well.

Having done that she assessed the situation. The ship was still trailing them, but had now gotten closer since it looked like all the casters at the back of the construct had gone silent. Anjali waved her hands, hoping to signal them that the way was clear. She got no signal back.

Looking to the side she worried. The casters there weren't firing any more and she couldn't see Anika flying around anywhere. Had she been hit or had she simply pulled back or changed strategy? She got her answer when the younger woman suddenly shot up with her board, using the same path Anjali had cleared.

"You sure cleared the way," the young woman shouted to her with a big grin.

"Wasn't easy," Anjali shouted back at her. "You grab the rope and head back to the ship?"

Anika nodded and brought her board closer. She tossed her rope to Anjali who tied it down as well before tossing the end of her own rope back to her. Anjali watched her start to fly towards the ship. The lines were fairly long, but they weren't going to let the ship be that far off from the moving construct. Maybe a hundred feet or so. It forced Anika to stop mid air to wait for the ship to come closer.

All the while Anjali kept her eye on the door and had her defences ready. She had pulled out her caster and loaded a cartridge in it. If anyone came out to fight her, they would be met with a fiery hell the moment they opened the door.

She hoped it wouldn't take too long for the ship to come so more people could come on board.



## Chapter 18

Torim watched the pair from a distance as they tried to get close to the hulking construct. He wasn't the only one. Everyone had their eyes on the spectacle. Jets of flames shot out here and there and the two small dots that were Anjali and Anika dodged them.

"Wish we could go closer," Ranaly said from next to him.

"We tried that. Didn't work too well," Torim reminded him. The casters on the back of the thing had shot at them the moment they'd gotten in range. With how slow the ship was to turn and dodge it was better to steer clear. The ship wizard along with the mercenary wizard had already said they wouldn't be able to protect them from a direct hit from the big caster. There would be damage and injuries. Possibly deaths, though they did assure a single hit wouldn't be enough to completely cripple or destroy the ship.

Ranaly grunted. "Doesn't look like they're having much success."

"Give them time," Ranaly replied. He had no doubt one of the two women would succeed. They were persistent and had the needed skills. Just as he thought that his heart sank when he saw Anjali fall behind a hill. For a time that felt like an eternity he lived in the fear that his friend had crashed and burned. When she finally emerged from behind the hill he couldn't help but let out a sigh of relief.

"She seems to have a plan," Ranaly said. He wasn't able to hide the relief in his voice. Glancing at him, Torim could see the wrinkles of worry ease off his face. Going back to the struggle taking place in the distance he had to agree.

Anjali had a plan.

Her approach seemed to work. When she slipped between the constructs Torim couldn't help but smile with a wide grin. "She did it!"

"It's not over yet," Ranaly said. "She still needs to make it up to the shoulder."

"But no caster is going to be able to hit here where she is now," Torim reminded him. The pair watched her remain in place for a while before continuing

her ascend. Torim was right that no caster was shooting at her. They were both surprised when she stopped near the first one and shortly after rose up quickly. The explosion that shot out from where the caster had been made them both grin.

“She’s causing some havoc,” Torim said, his voice giddy at the thought of the people inside the construct running around trying to put out the flames. He hoped a few had died. They’d done enough miserable things to the world to warrant that wish in his mind.

“It’ll be easier to get closer if she manages to take out the big one,” Ranaly said as they watched her explode another small one.

“She’ll do it,” Torim said with confidence. They fell silent and watched her progress. They both cheered when she managed to explode the big caster. Then they cheered again as she made it to the shoulder of the construct.

“Time for us to go in,” Torim said.

“Agreed,” Ranaly said with a grim tone. Both men headed for the ship captain. He was behind the helm, looking worried as he eyed the construct before the ship.

“Time to go in,” Ranaly said as soon as they got close enough.

“Not yet,” the captain replied.

“What do you mean?” Torim demanded. “She took out the casters on the back. She’s out there waiting for us to come in.”

“It’s not safe,” the captain replied. It was obvious from his expression he was worried for the safety of the ship as well as his own life. He had agreed to the plan, but it seemed Anjali being away had given him the courage to push back on the plan.

“It’s as safe as it’s going to get,” Ranaly said. “Now, I’m paying you for this so you’d better do what I tell you. Get this ship to the construct so we can board the damn thing and destroy it from the inside.”

The captain gave both men a grim glance. “I am the captain of this ship. It does what I tell it to do.”

Torim grunted, pulled out his caster and pointed it straight at the captain’s face. “Now, you have two choices here. Either you do what your employer is telling you to do or I blow your face off. Which is it going to be?”

The captain stared down the barrel of the caster. He licked his lips. He quickly glanced around to see if any of his crew was in a position to help, but it looked like they were content to watch from the sidelines.

“No sane person is going to be coming between a man and a caster pointed at him,” Ranaly said, his voice as pleasant as it would have been at a dinner table discussion. “I suggest you do as the man asks.”

The captain grunted, but issued the order to the crew. The ship turned and headed straight for the construct. The mercenaries gathered at the centre of the ship where they would be the safest if something happened. They had the main mast to hold on to in case of sudden movements and the sides of the ship would protect them from the worst of any attack. The crew was going about their duties as usual.

Satisfied that things were on the right track once more, Torim holstered his caster. He squinted as he looked over the ship and towards their target. He spotted the small figure on a board headed their way.

“Is that Anjali?” he asked.

“It’s Anika,” Ranaly replied. “She’s pulling the rope. We should hurry. No telling how long Anjali has on that thing before people come for her.”

“We’d better get on that thing then,” Torim said and turned to the captain. “And you’d better stick to the plan now.”

“We’ll leave one of the mercenaries to make sure he does,” Ranaly said. It was obvious he had lost trust in the captain’s word. The look the man was giving him made it all the more obvious. He was dismayed at both having to carry out the plan as well as having lost what was one of the most important things to a ship captain – the trust of his client.

The two left the captain at the helm and headed towards the bow, where Anika was making her landing. Two of the crew were there to greet her and grab the rope. They quickly tied it down and kept it taut so as to offer the people sliding on it the best possible chance of making it.

Ranaly stopped to give Youndal the order to leave one man behind to ensure the captain didn’t do anything deviating from the plan. Torim continued on to exchange a few words with Anika. He couldn’t help but smile when he saw the

young woman standing on the deck, her hands still firmly on the sail of the board.

“I’m glad you made it out alive,” he said.

Anika grinned. “It was touch and go. They sure did put up a fight to keep us away. Good thing Anjali found the route she did. We probably wouldn’t have made it otherwise.”

“And we’ve still got to fight everyone inside,” Torim said and gave the construct ahead of them a glance. It was still walking along as if nothing had happened. It almost seemed like those inside either didn’t care about the damage already done or they were trying to keep the thing going as long as possible in the hopes that they’d reach what ever their ultimate destination was before being taken down.

“Not looking forward to that,” Anika said and sighed. “That shoulder was already wide. Its torso and legs are two or three times wider. There’s so much space inside it. Who knows how many enemies there will be.”

“Its’ going to be a fight,” Torim agreed.

The mercenaries were gathering around the bow. Harnesses were being handed out by the crew. They helped people get into them and gave quick lessons on how to use them. The leather straps went over the shoulders, around the waist and around the thighs, giving plenty of support. A metal ring on the waist was where the rope was attached or what ever you wanted to. Since they were going down a rope they’d be using another metal clip that would go around the rope and attach to the harness. That way people could just slide on with the clip and not worry about holding on to the rope.

“It will be,” Anika agreed and took a swig of water from a container one of the mercenaries offered her. She gave the man a smile as she handed the container back to him. “But we’d better get to it. I don’t like Anjali being on that thing all alone.”

“Neither do I,” Torim agreed.

“I’d better fly right back to her,” Anika said and got back on her board. Torim gave her a wave as she rose in the air and started towards the construct.

Walking to the railing he saw the rope dangle mid air. The breeze of air hit

him and made him all the more aware of the huge drop anyone falling off would be subjected to. Death would be certain from such a height. His hands started to sweat as he watched the first mercenary take to the rope. He dangled mid air with seemingly nothing holding him from falling to his death. The metal ring tethering him to the rope was not sliding on the rope that well so he had to use his hands to pull himself onward.

It looked like hard work.

The man was half way on the rope when another one started the journey. Torim had to agree that two was likely the most the rope could handle safely. Even with two it was starting to swing around and make moving harder. With that going on, Torim decided it was best to stop watching and get ready.

He grabbed a harness being offered to him by one of the ships crew. The straps around his thighs were fastened tight to the point that tensing his muscles was almost painful. He thought about loosening them, but the thought that his legs might slip out was enough to make him bare the discomfort.

One of the ships crew made a final check on his harness and adjusted a few buckles here and there to make it more comfortable. Two more mercenaries had gotten on the rope by the time Torim made it there. He clipped his metal ring to the rope and hoisted himself on top of the railing.

He made the mistake of looking down.

A hard swallow and his head shot back up. He decided it was best to focus on the rope or the construct ahead.

“You can do this. Just don’t look down,” he muttered to himself. A moment of brief hesitation preceded his slide off the railing. For a moment it felt like he’d fall, but then the rope caught him. The metal ring slid on the rope for a bit before coming to a halt. With a grunt, Torim reached up to the rope and started pulling himself along it. He quickly wished he’d worn gloves. The rough rope wasn’t gentle with his hands and he could feel each pull getting more and more painful.

He kept his eyes on the shoulder of the construct. The first three mercenaries were there already as was Anika with her board. He could see her talking with Anjali. The three mercenaries had taken position by the door, ready to jump on anyone coming out of it. The fourth mercenary was still on the rope

though he wasn't that far off from the goal.

Something passed through his field of vision almost too quickly for him to tell what it was. He knew the sound it had made. An arrow. He looked over to the constructs other shoulder. A group of men was there. One was reloading his crossbow. Two others had casters in hand.

"Shit." Torim hastened his way along the rope. He pulled himself along as quick as he could. Quick glances at the men let him see the first round fired from a caster. He thanked all the gods it was aimed at the ship. A simple fireball. The ship could take it. He let out a small scream when the rope gave way and he started sliding back towards the ship. He tried to frantically catch the rope that had slipped from his hands. He managed to grab hold and still himself. He feared his heart was about to explode. There was a tightness to his chest while his heart pounded away at an alarming beat.

Looking back he could see the ship had lurched downward. The fireball had hit it. A section of the hull was scorched and had spots of flames on it. A portion of the front sail was burning. The crew were doing their best to limit the damage.

There was nothing he could do about the ship so he turned towards the construct once more and started pulling himself towards it. The drop had set him back a good bit and now he had to pull himself on a slight upward angle. Letting go of the rope was not an option or he'd slide back. Sweat ran down his forehead. The muscles in his arms were burning from the strain. He glanced up at the other shoulder once more.

He saw the one man aiming at him with a caster.

"Fuuuuck." Torim hastened his movements. He kept his eyes on the goal and tried to push away everything else from his mind. There was nothing he could do about the outside stuff. All he could do was pull himself to safety.

He felt the heat on his back. It hit like a wave and went away just as quickly. He tightened his grip on the rope just as it loosened. He swung onward with it. He tried to wrap his legs around it as well for maximum grip. He knew he'd need it. The construct came closer and closer. Torim didn't even realize he was screaming until his body slammed against the hard wood and metal of the constructs arm.

Almost all the air was knocked out of his lungs.

He gasped for air while clinging to the rope with the strength only the proximity of death could give. As he was trying to recover the rope started to get pulled upward. Having gained enough of his senses to realize it, he looked up and saw Anjali looking down from the shoulder. She was shouting something, but he couldn't make out what it was. It was like someone had put wax in his ears. The only thing he could hear was the beat of his own heart and the thuds when the construct took another step.

He did manage to start to aid in getting himself up. As the rope was being pulled he started climbing upwards so the people pulling the rope wouldn't have to do it for as long. Now that the worst of the shock had subsided he worried his grip would fail before reaching the shoulder. Not long after realizing that he had to stop and wrap his legs around the rope to stay still. Letting go with one hand he could rest the other. Looking at the free hand he could see the skin was torn and there were bleeding wounds. Now that he was seeing the damage the pain started to come through as well.

"Fuck," Torim grimaced and took a deep breath in the hopes the increasing pain wouldn't get too bad. He glanced back to see where the ship was. He couldn't see it anywhere. He worried it might have suffered more damage than what he'd seen. Maybe it had crashed or the people on the other shoulder had shot enough caster rounds at it to force a retreat.

"You all right down there?"

The shout from Anjali finally carried to his ears. Torim looked up and saw her worried expression.

"I've been better," he shouted back at her. "My hands are fucked. I don't think I can pull myself up any more."

"We'll pull you up," Anjali assured him and disappeared from view. The rope started to move up a bit faster. There wasn't that long a way to go so Torim decided it best to just hold on and let the others pull him up. Soon he was up to the shoulders ledge and got pulled onto it by Anjali and Anika. Having something solid under his feet felt reassuring despite knowing the situation wasn't that much better. He was still on the construct with apparently no way off it besides storming in and killing everyone running it.

“Let me see your hands,” Anjali said as she grabbed one hand and started to wrap cloth around it. It stung, but covering up the small cuts and torn skin would no doubt help.

“How’s the ship?” Torim asked as he looked around the shoulder. Now that he was up, two mercenaries had gotten to guarding the doorway once more while the rest were catching their breath from the effort of pulling him up. He gave them appreciative nods as their gazes met.

“Forced away,” Anjali replied. “They took some heavy fire from the other shoulder. They didn’t really have a choice.”

“Well, let’s hope they come pick us up once we’re done,” Torim said and grimaced. His body was starting to realize all the bumps and bruises he’d gotten. Slamming against the construct had been painful, but only now were the consequences of it starting to be truly felt. Lifting his shirt up a bit he could see the dark bruises starting to form.

“You all right?” Anjali asked. She was looking worried when she caught a glimpse of the bruises forming.

“Hurts, but I’ll live,” Torim replied and managed a quick smile. “We should rush in before things start hurting too bad.” With those words he grabbed his caster and thanked all the gods for it not falling. The fact he had his cartridges as well made him add another round of thanks.

Anjali simply nodded and they both headed for the doorway with casters in hand. To their surprise the door was pulled open before they got to it. Two men rushed out, one pointing a caster at the pair in front of them, the other holding a sword.

They didn’t make it far before the two mercenaries on either side of the door pounced on them. The one wielding the caster got hit on the head with a mace that had spikes on one side of the heavy metal orb at the tip of it and a smooth surface on the other. It was the spiked side that sunk into the man’s skull.

The sword wielding man had a blade stuck through his side after two steps and before anyone realized it the mercenary had grabbed him by the shoulder and tossed him off the construct. The scream from the falling man was short but all the more memorable.



It was Anika that ensured no one else would be rushing out the door by unleashing a caster round in through the doorway. A gush of water that blocked the way entirely and no doubt knocked down and washed away anyone close by. With the distraction done the two mercenaries rushed in, followed closely by their comrades as well as Torim and the two women.

The inside was much more spacious than the outside gave away. What they entered was essentially a room with a ladder leading up and down. A door opposite led to the other shoulder. It was obvious the water had rushed straight through the room. Torim hoped it had washed off the people on the opposite shoulder. Four more men were strewn around the room in various stages of trying to get on their feet.

The mercenaries were quick and merciless in disposing of them. They never got a chance to put up more than a panicked defence. With them cut down they had the room to themselves. Besides the now dead men there wasn't much else in the room. A couple of small openings that could be used to peer outside.

The most interesting thing in the room were the runes. Anjali and Anika were busy looking through them, trying to figure out what they did and what could be learned from them about the construct and how it operated. The mercenaries and Torim kept a close eye on the two openings, one in the ceiling and the other in the floor, to ensure no one would be coming up or down the ladders.

The relative calm of the situation bothered Torim.

He couldn't shake the feeling something would soon go wrong.

His gut feeling wasn't wrong.

## Chapter 19

The runes were fascinating. There were combinations and constructs she had never seen before. Had the situation been any different Anjali would have been excited over them. Now, she mainly felt frustrated that the pattern was hard to discern because there was so much new in the runes.

“Fascinating,” Anika breathed out next to her.

“It is,” Anjali agreed. “Shame we don’t have time to appreciate it more. It really is amazing work. We need to hurry and find some clue as to where the power source is and where the control is. Given what I’m seeing I doubt they’re in the same place.”

“Agreed. This would seem to indicate the commands come from above,” Anika said and pointed towards a grouping of runes. Given the directionality of them and what led to the grouping her assessment seemed likely to be correct.

“Which is which?” Anjali mused.

“Does it matter? We’ll need to hit both about the same time,” Anika said.

“True,” Anjali agreed. Just as she turned to tell Torim and the mercenaries about it she saw flames shoot up from the ladder hole in the floor. She barely had time to release her protective spell and contain the flames that burst into the room.

She wasn’t quick enough to save everyone.

Torim fell back and crashed on the floor. He avoided the worst of the flames thanks to it, though the tip of his left shoe caught fire. One of the mercenaries was far more unlucky. The flames engulfed him fully, blinding him. He screamed and stumbled onward. He disappeared down the hole in the floor. His screams ended in a thud.

“Fuuuck,” Torim quickly pushed himself backwards, away from the danger. He stamped his foot with his hands to put out the small flames.

Anjali didn’t have time to focus on anything but containing the flames. Keeping a wall of air against the flames was a delicate operation. The heat from the flames affected the air and wanted to push it out so she had to constantly

adjust the barrier while still trying to ensure she wasn't using all the air in the room. She was also trying to funnel as much of the flames up to the upper level as she could. Not that she thought it would do much damage up there, but even a small annoyance would suffice. She expected the flames to die down, but instead they only grew more intense.

It wasn't a caster round.

"I need your help, Anika," Anjali shouted. The roaring flames weren't that loud, but still she felt the need to shout to underline the urgency.

"What do you need?" Anika was right next to her.

"That's no caster round. There's a wizard down there. I can keep the flames in check, but I need you to make some sort of attack to break that spell."

Anika gave the flames a look. The heat from them was making her sweat even though the air barrier dampened away the most of it. "I'll see what I can do."

Anjali nodded and trusted her apprentice. What ever she came up with would be free to pass through the wall of air. It was, after all, pushing the air into the flames. It wasn't a solid field that would stop something from passing through. She hoped the attack would come quickly. Keeping the wall up was putting a real strain on her.

She was glad when she saw a mist form and start to get sucked in by the wall of air. She did her best to aid it and create a corridor through which it could slither down to the lower level. It was a slow process and aiding it put more strain on her. She had to wipe some sweat off her forehead so it wouldn't get in her eyes.

The flames disappeared a few minutes after the mist had made its way down. She let the barrier go down immediately. She found herself short of breath. Gasping for air, her heart pounding, she could barely hear what Anika was saying next to her. It was like she was under water.

Two of the mercenaries were quick to go down the ladder. It looked like they had no fear the way they slid down the ladder. Her hearing got better and she could hear the sounds of fighting from down below. It didn't last long and a silence grew.

"All good?" Torim yelled down. The remaining mercenary and him were ready

to go down as well. Anika was keeping an eye on the opening above them, her caster trained up, ready to unleash death on anyone looking to cause problems.

“All clear here,” came a reply from below. Anjali recognized it as the voice of one of the mercenaries.

“We should split up,” she said. “It’s likely the controls are up while the power source is down. We’ll need to take out both to ensure this thing never moves again.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Torim agreed.

“You go down with those two while we head up with him?” Anika suggested.

“Fine with me,” Torim replied and without saying more went down the ladder. He had his caster out.

For a brief moment Anjali worried how they would handle another wizard, but with a caster and two mercenaries they should somehow be able to handle it. At the same time she worried whether one mercenary would be enough to keep her and Anika safe. She reminded herself that they didn’t really need looking after. The two of them had enough magic to protect themselves and with both of them having caster they were perfectly capable of taking care of any threat.

Having caught her breath Anjali grabbed her caster and loaded it with a short range water cartridge. She gave the mercenary a nod and turned to Anika.

“I’ll go first. With my protections in place I should be able to handle any spell coming my way. You keep him and yourself safe and follow as quick as you can.”

Anika nodded and loaded her caster. The mercenary also nodded while holding his mace. It was a perfect weapon for the close quarters they were in. Not as long as a sword so there was still room to swing it effectively. If a door or something else needed smashing it would work for that as well.

A deep breath and Anjali started up the ladder. Caster in one hand she worried what would be waiting for her at the top, but she kept going and made certain her magical protections were in place and working. She didn’t want to be turned into ash by a surprise attack.

She peeked up to the room above as soon as she could. The fire that had been shot at them had reached there as well. The floor was scorched and she could still feel the heat in the room. There were a couple of chairs strewn around

and it looked like who ever had been there had gone away in a hurry. She pulled herself up into the room to give the two below her the opportunity to climb up. A few hatches along the walls gave people in the room a way to look outside and even fire their casters. Other than that there wasn't much of anything else of note in there. Looking up she could see a hatch blocking their way further up. It made her think there was something important there.

Listening closely, she could hear footsteps above her. There were obviously people up there. A thud of the construct taking another step drowned it all out for a brief moment, but she could swear she heard some shouting. Giving the hatch some more attention it was obvious that going through it would be hard. It was made of metal and was, no doubt, thick and well secured in place.

"A hatch?" Anika asked as she climbed into the room. She looked around with the sort of carefulness that the situation demanded.

"Seems so," Anjali replied as the mercenary climbed in and surveyed the room. "Will be tough to get through it."

"Go through the hatch?" the mercenary asked. His voice had a rasp to it that made you think someone had tried to crush his throat at some point and done some real damage.

"It is the way up," Anjali replied.

"Why not go through the ceiling?" the mercenary asked. "It's wood. Much easier."

Giving the wooden ceiling above her a look, Anjali had to admit it wasn't a bad idea. Even if it was just wood, getting through it wouldn't be that easy, especially if there were runes on the floor above, but it would still be easier than the metal hatch.

"What do we use to cut it?" Anika asked. "We cant' just burn it."

"I have a suitable caster cartridge for that," Anjali said and swapped out the one currently in her caster.

"How do we get up then?" Anika asked before she could start cutting the ceiling.

"Right. No ladder to climb," Anjali said realizing the problem that posed. The ceiling wasn't that high above them. If she got on her toes she could even reach

up to brush it with her fingertips. They wouldn't need much of a boost to hoist themselves up through the hole.

"Those chairs might be enough," the mercenary said and grabbed a couple of them. He put one standing up and climbed on it. It put him high enough that he needed to tilt his head downward in order to not hit it in the ceiling. "If that's not enough I can give you a boost up."

Anjali nodded. "Sounds reasonable. I'll cut a hole by the wall so we can get support from that and we know we won't be surrounded when we poke our heads up."

She took aim at the ceiling and pulled the trigger on her caster. A thin but very powerful stream of water shot out. It cut into the wood like it was nothing. She knew the cartridge had a limited duration so she worked as quick as she could. It wasn't long before there was a square cut into the ceiling. The loose piece of floor came crashing down with a loud thud.

Anika had her caster ready and aimed at the hole.

Anjali quickly reloaded hers and the mercenary put a chair under the hole. Not wanting to waste time she climbed onto the chair and jumped. It was surprising how high she could get. It was a simple matter of pushing herself up once her hands got a good hold on the floor. She tried to look around the room and catch everything that was going on in it.

She immediately noticed the two men in the room. She knew one of them already.

Pok.

He was standing next to what could only be the control for the construct. There were levers as well as a large table that Anjali figured would be full of control runes.

The other man was not far from the treacherous wizard. His eyes were firmly locked to where Anjali was. His caster was pointed straight at her. She knew there was only one way forward. She couldn't drop back into the room. So she strained her muscles to pull herself up as quickly as she could. She heard the distinct sound of a rune getting stamped onto a cartridge. She bolstered her defences the best she could.

The attack she expected never came. Instead she heard cursing. She had herself up on the floor and rolling away from the hole to give room for the two below to get up. Looking up at the man with the caster she could tell something had gone wrong with the cartridge. It had not been activated.

With a slight grin she aimed her own caster at the man and pulled the trigger. Another jet of water shot out and cut into the man. She made a downward motion with the gun, cutting the man from the left shoulder, across the chest, down to his hip. He was dead before his corpse hit the floor. Blood gushed everywhere. The water didn't cut him in half cleanly. She could see his spine still intact along with some of his ribs, but that didn't make the stream any less deadly.

Pok didn't seem to pay any attention to what was happening in the room. He had his eyes closed while his hands were on the table in front of him. Now that she was on the side she could see some of the markings on it. She also saw the crown that was slightly recessed into it. She didn't need any special spells to tell that was where most of the magic was gathering.

Glancing at the hole, she saw Anika climbing up.

There was no other danger in the room as far as she could tell. They were at the very top of the construct, up in its head. There were two holes that served as windows to the outside. What she saw outside of them was concerning. The first sign of the city of Ramyn coming to view in the horizon. It wouldn't be long before the construct would be in range to unleash death upon the unsuspecting population.

Not wanting to waste time Anjali rushed toward Pok and the table. She felt it on her skin. The tingling sensation. It was too late to stop. It hit her hard enough to knock her back through the air. She crashed against the wall. The air was driven out of her lungs. Even with her protections she hit the back of her head hard enough to see stars. She was certain she could feel blood pour down her neck. Her limbs twitched and she couldn't control them all that well. Gasping for air she did her best to get control of her body.

In her mind she cursed her carelessness.

Given how calm Pok had been she should have known there were

protections around him and the controls. Likely very strong ones given how much magic there was. At least she'd managed to keep her own defences up. She thanked the training from the Towers for that. They really drilled it into you. In a fight all sorts of things could happen so being able to maintain your defences even through pain was important to staying alive.

She was vaguely aware that Anika was kneeling next to her. She couldn't make out what she was saying. A few more gasps for breath and the rushing of blood in her ears died down.

"Are you all right?" Anika asked. The worry in her voice was apparent. She had her hand to the back of her head, trying to stem the flow of blood.

"Hurts like hell," Anjali managed to breathe out. Her head was starting to really hurt now. The room felt like it was spinning. She looked up and focused on Pok. The young wizard was still standing there, his eyes closed, hands on the control table. He was obviously deep into the spell and likely had no idea what was going on outside of it. The one man in the room had been there to keep anyone from interfering. The lack of security wasn't that hard to understand. They had not expected anyone to make it inside.

The mercenary had his mace out and he was poking around the young wizard with it. There were sparks of lightning every time he hit the barrier around the man. It was enough force to send his arm backwards and almost force the mace out of his hand.

The construct took another step.

"We're not getting to him," Anjali managed to mutter out.

"I'm more worried about you right now. The back of your head is bleeding pretty bad," Anika said. "I need to use a healing spell on you."

"Do it then," Anjali snapped out. The pain was wearing her nerves thin. It didn't take long for the relief from the spell to kick in. The pain slowly went away, the throbbing in the back of her head died down and she could tell the flow of blood was stemmed. It was like a warm blanket had been used to wipe away all of it.

When Anika was done there was still some pain left, but at least she could function again.



"I'm not very good at healing," Anika admitted as she stopped.

"You did enough," Anjali replied and stood up. She half expected to falter and have to seek support from the wall behind her, but it didn't happen. There was still a portion of her body that thought the back of her head was split open and pouring out blood. It would take a few minutes for the natural reactions of the body to subside.

"No way to get to him," the mercenary said and gave the two women a look. "This isn't something I can deal with."

Anjali nodded. "Not sure it's something we can deal with either. That protective barrier has so much magic to feed off of that it would be like fighting against a flood with a bucket."

Now that she had taken care of her mentor, Anika turned her focus on the barrier keeping them away from the man controlling it all. She walked right up to it and examined what she could see. She took note of the control table Pok was hovering his hands over. She noted the crown embedded in the middle of it.

Anjali tried to shake off the grogginess that the hit had blanketed her with. "Back to basics. Examine the runes." Anika gave her a nod and the two got to work.

It was difficult work. The arrangement of runes was not anything like they had seen before. There were even some runes they had never seen before. It wasn't something Pok could have created on his own. It was the sort of work even a master of the Towers would have had to spend years on. It gave Anjali a bad feeling. It meant there was someone very powerful behind it all.

Still, even without fully understanding what they were looking at, there were bits that were familiar and gave them clues. Most important of them being that the rune pattern had two parts to it. Two end points. The magic flowed from one to the other.

"It's like we thought. There's a power source and a control. This is the control," Anjali said as she crouched on the floor and looked up at Anika.

The younger woman nodded. "What do we do now?"

Anjali groaned and sat down on the floor. She took in a deep breath. "We wait and hope Torim gets the power source."

“Nothing else we can do?” the mercenary asked. The look of frustration on him was shared by everyone in the room. Save for Pok.

“As far as I can tell, no, nothing else. No sense in us starting to make our way down. Torim will handle it. I’m sure of that.” while she said the words, Anjali found herself surprisingly convinced the man would take care of it.

She hoped she was right.

## Chapter 20

“Fucking wizards.” The mercenary spat at the dead corpse at his feet. Half its head was gone from being smashed by a mace.

Torim found himself agreeing with the mercenary. Wizards were nice when they were on your side. When they were hurling spells at you they began to seem a lot less nice. Thankfully the confined spaces had made it easier to deal with them. They couldn't use their more powerful spells for fear of damaging the construct so anything they threw at the trio could often be dodged or countered with caster rounds.

“Third one we've killed, isn't it?” asked the second mercenary. He had a sword out and was wiping some blood off the handle. It wasn't just wizards that had stood in their way. There had been plenty of men wielding simple weapons that had tried to stop them. The two mercenaries had been brutally efficient in dealing with them. Thanks to them they'd gone down two more rooms after the first one. Torim figured they were getting close to where the feet started. The room below them was likely the last one before the legs.

So far there had been no sign of Douggy or anyone else who might have had some leadership level knowledge of things. Either way, Torim knew they had to push downward. He just hoped Douggy would be there. He peeked down the ladder leading to the room below. The glow of runes was unmistakable. Something more was going on there.

“Ready to go down?” Torim asked the two mercenaries. There was nothing particularly interesting in the room they were in now. It looked like a place the people running the construct would use to take a break. There were a few tables and several chairs there along with what might have been planned to be a place to cook meals.

The two mercenaries nodded.

Torim ensured he had a shell in his caster and grabbed hold of the ladder. He slid down as quick as he could and turned to face the room he'd arrived in. The first thing he took notice of was the stand in the middle of the room. It had a

severed hand on it. The most attention drawing thing about it was the ring on its finger. His gaze quickly moved from it and he took a step to the left to allow the two mercenaries to come down as well.

“You’re persistent, I’ll give you that.”

The familiar voice made Torim grin. He focused on the man standing behind the hand. “Been a while, Douggy. Really hoped we could catch up.” He noticed the man wasn’t alone in the room. There were four more men. Luckily none of them seemed to have casters nor did any of them seem to be wizards. They did have weapons in hand, knives and maces mostly. It would be a brawl and Torim found himself outnumbered. He felt a lot better when the two mercenaries came down.

It was a stand-off. Three against four.

“You really have no idea what you’ve gotten yourself into,” Douggy said. He looked like he hadn’t slept in days nor eaten. All in all he looked like someone who had been running around, trying to scrounge up what ever he could to make something big happen.

“Why don’t you enlighten me, old buddy?” Torim said. “You planning to blow up the city with this thing?”

Douggy snorted. “I ain’t telling you shit. If you don’t know it there’s no reason for me to tell you.”

“You always were a tight lipped bastard,” Torim said.

“Served you well while we worked together,” Douggy pointed out.

“Not liking it so much now,” Torim countered.

“Come on then. Let’s finish this.” Douggy pulled out a wooden club with metal wrapped around the end of it. There were a few protruding bumps in it that would bruise you even more if you were hit. For a brief moment Torim considered just firing his caster, but given the hand and ring were in between them it didn’t seem like a wise idea. Ranaly would be furious if that thing was destroyed. There wasn’t that much space in the room either so the flame shell he had in would not let them leave unscathed either. So he holstered the caster and drew out his short blade.

Circling around the hand he came face to face with Douggy. The two

mercenaries went the other way around to face off the three other men.

“How much did they pay you to betray me?” Torim asked as he measured up his old partner. He knew he was no slouch when it came to fighting, but he also knew his weaknesses.

“More than you can imagine,” Douggy replied. He seemed to be taking a careful approach to the fight, measuring Torim and keeping a safe distance, as much as the space allowed.

“I can imagine quite a bit,” Torim replied and made a tentative swing with his blade. Douggy scooted back enough to avoid it. He didn’t even need to raise his club.

“Not this,” Douggy replied with a grin. “It’s not just gold. It’s more. It’s something intangible.”

“Well, what ever it is, you’re not going to get to enjoy it. This is where you die,” Torim replied and made an attack. The club met his blade mid-air. His blade made only a small nick in the hard wood. He wouldn’t be chopping it down with a sword. An axe would have made short work of it, but with a sword he had an even fight on his hands.

Douggy grinned. “You can try.” He swung his club, aiming at Torim’s left side. He parried with his sword no problem and quickly turned it into a stab at Douggy. A scoot back and a swing of his club and the blade went wide, giving him an opening to move in close and hit Torim with his fist.

Torim rolled, the fist glancing his shoulder. Had he not moved it would have hit him in the jaw. Now the missed hit left Douggy unbalanced and allowed for a retaliatory strike with a fist. He hit the man on his right cheek. His head snapped to the side and he staggered backward. It wasn’t a solid enough hit to do much, but it left the man shaking his head and grinning. A trickle of blood ran down from his lip.

“You always did hit like a drunken whore,” Douggy said.

“You’d know all about that, wouldn’t you?” Torim countered and made another attack. It was a simple stab his opponent easily parried, but he wasn’t expecting Torim to rush forward and slam into him with his full bodyweight. The two men fell to the ground. Torim let go of his sword and started punching the

man under him with all he got. He wasn't worried about the club. Douggy was in no position to properly swing it. Had it been a sharp blade he might have worried, but the dull wood offered little danger in such close quarters.

Douggy tried to fight back. He punched Torim's sides. He tried to roll him over so he'd be on top. All the while Torim was landing blows to his head. His opponent was bloodied, but still putting up a fight. Douggy seemed to give up on fighting back, instead using one arm to protect his head.

Torim kept punching.

He was almost caught by surprise when Douggy came back with his other hand, swinging a small knife. It managed a small cut on his forearm before he could properly start to fight back. He managed to grab a wrist and keep the blade away from him. Douggy brought in his other hand to try and get free. It soon turned into an arm wrestling contest as both men tried to get the knife to strike the other.

It was Torim that got the upper hand, being on top. He could use his full bodyweight to push down on his former friend. Soon the small blade was closing in on his throat. The older man strained to keep it from coming closer, but it was to no avail. Torim could see it in his eyes. He knew he was losing and going to die.

"So this is how it ends," Douggy managed to mutter as he bit down on his teeth and fought back with the sort of strength only certain death could provide. The body was an incredible thing when it sensed death was close.

A bead of sweat ran down Torim's nose and fell down on Douggy. "Didn't have to be like this."

"Yeah it did," Douggy grunted. "Eventually one of us would have betrayed the other. Always goes that way with us hunters. Eventually something with the right price comes up."

Torim pushed down on the knife with his entire body. It inched down and nicked Douggy right where his chest and throat met. "No god decrees that things must go that way."

Douggy grinned. "It's our nature." He seemed ready to give up. "For what it's worth. I did enjoy most of our time."

The knife went down again, digging into his flesh. Torim almost wanted to stop it, but he knew it was not an option. One of them had to die there and then and he had no reservations about it not being himself. "That won't make me make this quick," Torim muttered as he pushed down with all his might.

The knife sunk into Duggy. His body trembled. He coughed up blood. The knife sunk deeper. His hands didn't have the strength to prevent it any more. Even the small blade was enough to cause deadly damage in the area.

Torim knew it wasn't going to be a pleasant death. The knife had cut his throat. He'd drown in his own blood. As he pulled out the knife, blood poured out. There were bubbles of air as the lungs let out the last bits of air in them. A part of him urged him to let the man out of his suffering, but given what he'd done he let it be. He did his best to ignore the coughs and moist gurgling sounds his old friend was letting out as he stood up and surveyed the room.

One of the men Duggy had been with was on the ground, his skull caved in like a rotten apple. The mercenaries were keeping the other two busy. Torim didn't worry that much about their ability to handle them. While one of them looked to have received a cut on his arm, he was still pressing his opponent hard enough that it didn't look like he needed any help.

His attention was drawn to the hand on the table. He had expected it to be shrivelled up to the point where you'd fear touching it would turn it into dust. Instead it looked like it had been freshly cut off. The skin was pale, but smooth and the muscles were still there, as if time had not touched it at all. The ring on the finger looked like it had just been handed over by the jeweller. It was polished and the ruby in it sparkled even in the dim light of the room.

What concerned Torim were the runes on the table and around the room. Given the light they were emitting it was obvious they were active. He had no idea what they were used for, though he suspected removing the hand from its place would do something. Maybe it would stop the construct or, at the very least, hamper its operations. Given that that seemed very likely, he walked over to the table and reached for the hand.

His movements were slow and careful. He half expected some form of magic to attack him, but as his finger touched the hand and wrapped around the wrist

that was still attached to it, no attack came. He pulled the hand off its stand without any problems.

As soon as he removed the hand from its place the runes in the room flickered and their glow started to die down. He could tell the entire construct screeched to a halt. He'd grown accustomed to the movements of the thing as it took its giant steps. Them going away was very noticeable.

He also noticed the hand he had just picked up felt warm. Had he not known it had been severed from its owner for centuries he might have expected it to move. He started to feel like it wasn't the sort of thing you should handle for too long. With that in mind he spotted the casing the hand had been in on a side table. He quickly made his way to it and stashed the arm where it belonged. It was a wooden box, finely crafted and shiny from waxing, with a velvety soft inside that hugged the hand. He closed the lid and let out a relieved sigh.

Apart from being a severed hand, there was something subtly unsettling about it.

Snapping out of it, Torim gave the room another look. The mercenaries had finished the fighting without him even noticing it. The two thugs that had fought them were on the ground, one with a severed arm, slowly bleeding to death, the other with what looked like a jaw that had been smashed to bits and he looked to be choking on his own blood from other injuries suffered. A glance at Duggo saw his body motionless. There was no sign of life.

A part of him felt guilt over the outcome. He had been with the man for a decade. The tough spots they had survived together meant something even against his betrayal. His anger had made him blind to that. Now that he was looking at his dead body all the good forced its way to his mind. The guilt of taking his friend's life started to worm its way in as well. He reminded himself of what he had done and tried to keep it at bay, but it lingered.

"Fuck. I'm going to need to empty a barrel of wine after this," Torim said out loud and shook his head.

The two mercenaries silently nodded. They were obviously waiting to be told what to do next. Knowing the way up was clear didn't really leave him much orders to give.



“You two look if you can find anything of interest below here. I’m going back up to see if they need this thing.” He tapped the box that had the hand in it. The two mercenaries disappeared to the level below through a hatch. Torim figured there might have been one room below that then split into the two legs. More than likely there were some people down there, but the two mercenaries should be enough to deal with them.

Climbing up Torim wondered whether Anika and Anjali would find some use for the hand or whether they’d just be happy it had been taken back from the group. It had obviously been powering the entire construct so there was that to celebrate. Stopping the thing in its track likely meant the city was safe from what ever had been planned. At least that was what he hoped. There was no telling what was going on in the upper levels nor what was happening outside.

The best he could hope for was that the construct was the only thing in the groups arsenal.

Going up past all the levels they’d cleared reminded him of the violent path they’d taken down. Bodies were resting where they had fallen. Pools of blood were growing darker as they dried up and seeped into the wooden floor. Seeing the same sort of carnage on his way up past where Anika and Anjali had gone made him worry. At the same time he was relieved to see that the dead people were not his friends nor the mercenary that had gone with them.

Reaching the room where the others had gone through the roof instead of the metal hatch had him worried. Obviously what was above was something important. Important meant there were likely solid defences there. Though given that the trio had made their way there it seemed reasonable to think they would be all right.

Wanting to be careful Torim took his time getting close to the hole in the floor. It was a bit too high for him to peer in through even if he stood on the chair below it. He could hear talking up there. Female voices. He had little doubt they were Anika and Anjali. He put down the box and wiped the sweat off his hands into his shirt. He then jumped and grabbed hold of the edge of the hole. His muscles objected to pulling his entire body up, but with some struggle he managed to get up high enough that his head poked through the hole.

The scene before him felt like it was frozen in time.

Anika was off to the left. Her caster was pointed towards a man. She was just pulling the trigger on it. To the right was the mercenary, his weapon raised, rushing at the man everyone in the room seemed to be attacking. Anjali stood in the middle, her hand out, palm spread as if doing so would be enough to stop what was coming for her. The wall of water pushing out from the man's hand looked to be in direct path to wash her away.

Torim blinked.

The wall of water surged onward. It split apart where Anjali stood and wrapped back around her.

A yelp was the only thing Torim managed before the rushing water brushed him back down the hole.

## Chapter 21

The wait felt longer than it had been. Anjali could feel her frustrations grow the longer she stared at Pok. His expression wasn't smug or anything. With his eyes closed and deeply focused he looked calm, emotionless even, like a poorly sculpted statue of someone. Yet she wanted to punch him in the face so bad she clenched her fists and had to remind herself of the force field protecting the man.

"Did you see that?" Anika asked and pulled her out of her thoughts.

"What?" Anjali asked.

"The runes flickered," Anika said and pointed at the ones coming into the room from all around the construct. Focusing on them, Anjali could see it. A flicker where previously the runes had glowed with a strong and solid light. Another flicker.

"Better get ready," Anjali said. "Looks like Torim and the others have managed to disrupt the power source."

The trio spread out in a half circle around Pok, as much as the force field allowed them to. The mercenary was on the right and Anika to the left. Anjali took the centre.

The runes dimmed.

"They're such long runs with so much magic in them that it's taking a while for it all to be used," Anjali said to calm the others nerves. She could tell the magic in the room was weakening. Looking at Pok, a trio of wrinkles had appeared on his forehead. He knew something was wrong. The magic was getting weaker. Soon he would not be able to keep the forcefield active. It felt like the construct had already ground to a halt. It should have taken its next step already.

Pok opened his eyes.

Anjali grinned at him.

His eyes widened with surprise. His focus was gone. To his credit the recovery was quick. "How did you get in here?" he demanded and quickly surveyed the room, registering the enemies as well as his fallen comrade. The

brief moment of worry on his face quickly passed and was replaced with a cocky grin.

“We flew in,” Anjali replied. “It seems our friends have removed what ever was powering this thing. Now would be a good time to surrender.”

Pok laughed. “Surrender? To you? You’re pebbles standing in the way of a land slide.”

“You’re all alone. Everyone else on this thing is already dead,” Anika said. She managed to sound confident in the claims she was making despite not actually knowing it. Though given that the power source had been disabled there couldn’t have been that much left below them.

The man grinned again, clearly unworried about the situation. “I’m not alone. I never will be again. This family I have become a part of does not end with me nor with all those on this weapon of our righteous fury. More are outside, others are working on their parts of the plan. You will never stop them all. You won’t even stop me.”

Anjali had been bracing for the coming attack the entire time the young man had been talking. She hoped the others had done so as well. The source of over powering magic may have died down, but Pok was still dangerous. That much was obvious. She was surprised the man had chosen a water based attack, but given the situation it made sense. A torrent of water would wash people away from him, giving time to prepare another attack. She was pleased to note Anika had fired her caster, though the flames did little against the wall of water coming for her. The mercenary was out of luck.

The water crashed against her protective barrier. It divided and rushed past her. She could swear she heard a yelp from Torim from somewhere behind her, but she didn’t have time to look behind her. She had to prepare for what to do after the attack passed.

The water pushed everything away from Pok. And it kept coming. Anjali knew the hole in the floor would drain it away, but she started to worry there would be no end to it as the water rose to her chin level. She could feel her protective barrier weakening under the pressure. It wasn’t built to withstand a long, constantly growing pressure. To her relief the flow of water died down and

the water level started to go down. She got eyes on Pok again. She was not amused when he opened up a door in the wall behind him and disappeared. She had expected him to fight after what he said. Still, running away was not something she was against. They'd stopped the construct. Not having to fight the man was a good thing given the situation.

Still, she had to give credit where credit was due. The door had been expertly hidden. There were runes on it that she herself had looked at carefully, but she had not noticed any hinges or crack that would have told there was a door there.

She rushed over to the doorway and poked her head through. The door led outside, to the back of the construct. As she looked down a momentarily spell of vertigo rushed over her. She took a deep breath and steadied herself as she looked around. She saw Pok floating down towards the ground. It was a tricky spell to use. A sudden gust of wind could throw you off balance and send you tumbling to your death. Knowing that, she pulled out her caster and quickly loaded a shell into it. She did her best to aim at the man in the distance and pulled the trigger.

The torrent of wind unleashed from her caster rushed towards the man. When it hit, he looked like he stumbled. He was still only half way down the construct. The scream that made its way up was one of fear. It was obvious Pok was struggling with the wind pushing him. He frantically tried to stabilize his descent, but it was to no avail. He lost his concentration. The relatively slow descent turned into a free fall.

Anjali watched the young man fall. His body hit the grassy ground with a thud she could hear all the way up the construct. For a moment she stared down at the unmoving body, wanting to be certain the fall had ended his life. When there was no movement she let out a relieved sigh and pulled back into the room.

The mercenary was resting against the wall. He'd missed the hole down and the water had just pushed him into the wall. He wasn't coughing up water. He was limp. His chest wasn't rising. With the water pressing against his chest it was entirely possible he had not been able to breathe at all or he'd swallowed too much water and drowned.

Seeing him made her worry about Anika. She had not had any protections

up either. She spotted the younger woman on the other side of the hole in the floor. She was coughing up water and trying to catch her breath. The water was still draining from the room.

“You all right up there?”

“Torim?” Anjali replied to the voice coming from below.

“Yeah. Almost drowned in the fucking water,” Torim replied.

Anjali walked over to the hole and looked down. There was still water in the room below. Up to the knee by the looks of it. It was rapidly draining down the stairway. Torim waded to the hole with a box under his arms. He looked up and smiled. “Almost lost this too. It’s the hand. Thing was powering this whole mess it seems.”

“Good thing you got it. It was keeping a shield around Pok who was operating this thing. We wouldn’t have been able to stop this without the power going out.”

“He dead?” Torim asked.

“Yes,” Anjali replied with confidence.

“Then it’s over?”

“I sure hope it is,” Anjali said. She couldn’t shake the words Pok had spoken. The implication of there being more going on and others willing to cause similar destruction. Realizing she had left Anika to fend for herself she quickly made her way to her and helped her to her feet.

“Thanks,” Anika managed to say between coughs. Most of the water seemed to be out of her lungs. Her clothes were drenched and her hair was glued to her face in a big mess.

Anjali tried to sort the hair out and squeezed some water out of it to make it easier. “It’s over now,” she assured the young woman. “Pok is dead and with him what ever plan they had for this thing.”

Anika took in a deep breath. She glanced over at the unmoving mercenary. “Him?”

Anjali shook his head. “Nothing to be done. He drowned.”

“We should destroy this thing,” Anika said, moving to a different topic quickly to avoid having to think too much about the dead mercenary.

“Why?” Anjali asked as she helped her along towards the hole in the floor. What ever they were going to do, it would be at the lower levels.

“So no one else can use this thing,” Anika said. “It’s too dangerous. I wouldn’t trust the government with it.”

There wasn’t much to disagree with in her statement. Anjali could easily see people in power reviving the thing and using it in a war or something else. With such power it could bring smaller nations to their knees with one shot of its massive caster. It would have also been naive to think simply keeping the hand away from such parties would prevent anyone from starting up the construct.

There were plenty of powerful magical items that could do the same thing.

“She all right?” Torim asked from below as the pair arrived at the hole. He looked concerned.

“Just swallowed some water,” Anika said with a brief smile of reassurance.

“Help her get down,” Anjali said. Anika sat down on the floor and Torim grabbed her legs from below. She slid down and with support from Torim she was safely on the floor in no time.

Anjali went back to the stand Pok had been fiddling with. She grabbed the crown from it and stashed it in a bag on her belt. It strained the bag to its limits, but it fit. She only hoped it wouldn’t get bent out of shape as she moved about. Just like the hand, it wasn’t something to be left behind for others to find. She then made her way to the hole and down. Torim helped her down just as she had done for Anika.

“We can use the ships cannons to blast this thing to pieces,” Anika said as soon as Anjali had gotten her feet on the floor. “Now that there’s no magic in its parts, it’s just made out of wood. Frankly, I’m surprised it hasn’t collapsed under its own weight yet.”

The creak they all heard made them pause and look at each other. The following cracking sound put a fire under their feet.

“Best we talk about that on the outside,” Anjali said.

“Agreed. Nothing more to do here. Let’s leave.” Torim led the way, caster in hand, box under his other arm. They quickly went down the few levels to reach shoulder level on the construct. For a brief moment they considered whether to

continue down to ground level or go on the shoulder and use the boards to go down. Seeing as they were for just one person they didn't have much choice. They continued going down.

The creaks from the construct haunted them all the way to the bottom.

They met up with one of the mercenaries Torim had been with. He was coming back up the left leg. He'd cleared the path and broken a way out. The trio had hoped there would be a door to get out, but that had not been the case. Still, with his axe it had not been that hard to break open a wall now that there was no magic protecting it.

The four of them rushed down and squeezed out of the narrow opening the mercenary had created. Not wanting to stick too close to the creaking structure they jogged a fair way away from it in case there was a collapse.

"Still a sight to see," Torim said as he tried to catch his breath as they stopped. Looking back, the construct remained upright, mid stride with both its feet on the ground.

"It's falling apart," Anjali noted and wiped some sweat off her forehead. There were bits of wood dropping down from its arms. It looked like it would eventually crumble on itself.

"It'd probably fall apart from one shot from the ship," Anika said and peered to the sky. The sun shone into her eyes making it hard to see what was up there.

"Probably shouldn't try to tear it down before everyone is out," Anjali said.

"Isn't this everyone?" Anika asked and gave the small group a look.

"One of the mercenaries is still in there," Torim said. "Went down the other leg."

"He'll make it out," the mercenary said. "He always does."

"If he's still alive," Torim said. "There could have been people down that leg."

"He ain't dead," the mercenary said with such confidence in his voice that no one saw it fit to dispute the claim.

"There's the ship," Anika said excitedly and pointed to the sky, derailing the conversation and giving the mercenary still inside a chance at proving his friends confidence true.

The ship had appeared from behind the construct. It was circling around to



the front of it. The group began waiving their hands in the hopes of attracting the crews attention. They saw the small flags being waved at them from the deck as the ship got closer. The ship started to descend and soon there were ropes being thrown down to them and crew slipping down to anchor down the ship.

“Surprised the captain agreed to do that,” Torim muttered.

“They probably know the construct is dead since it hasn’t moved,” Anjali reminded him.

“Still, he didn’t seem willing to take much risks,” Torim countered.

“Ranaly probably had some say in matter,” Anjali reminded him. The nobleman was still on the ship and no doubt had a heavy say in what course it would take. He had no interest in losing his prized item nor the opportunity to revenge the destruction of his property.

“Fair point,” Torim conceded. “Speak of the devil,” he pointed to the figure coming down one of the ropes. There was no mistaking Ranaly nor the mercenary chief that was following him. It didn’t take long for the pair to meet up with the trio.

“Good to see all of you safe,” Ranaly said as soon as he had had the chance to give all of them a brief once over.

“I’m sorry that the same can’t be said for all of your men,” Anjali said, directing her words to the mercenary captain.

Youndal gave a slight nod in acknowledgement. “It is the business.” He did not seem overly concerned over losing men. It had to hurt him on some level, if only in the sense of business. Finding good new people was always a pain in any business.

“Did you get them all?” Ranaly asked as he looked on at the now silent construct.

“We sure did,” Torim replied and then remembered the box under his arm. “And I believe this belongs to you.” He offered the box to the noble.

Ranaly grabbed the box and gave a quick look inside. He smiled. “Seems to have suffered no damage.”

“It’s creepy as hell,” Torim said. “It’s warm. Like it had just been cut off.” Just the memory of first time touching it sent a shiver down his spine.

“It is unique,” Ranaly admitted.

“We need to destroy that thing,” Anika interjected into the conversation. She pointed towards the construct. “It needs to be burned down or someone else will find another item to power it.”

Ranaly and Youndal exchanged looks. Neither one seemed to keen on the idea.

“Don’t go thinking you two can take control of that thing and use it for what ever you have planned,” Anjali said and pulled out her caster. “I’ll set that thing on fire before you make any move.”

Ranaly raised his hands in an effort to calm her down. “It’s nothing like that. No plan for that monstrosity. I agree with you. We need to tear it down and burn it. And we need to do it before anyone from the city comes investigating.”

“Thing’s too big for me to have any use for it,” Youndal agreed. “Burn it down. I don’t care.”

Anjali felt slightly relieved. She wouldn’t put it past Ranaly to have some plan for it that he’d given up just then. Much less the mercenary captain. If he personally didn’t have a use for it it was certain he knew people who would have paid for it handsomely.

“If everyone is out then we should use the ships cannons to bring it down and then set it on fire,” Ranaly continued the conversation.

All five of them turned to regard the construct. Just in time to see the last mercenary crawl out of the hole they’d cut in the leg. He quickly ran away from the creaking structure.

“Let’s do it then. He’s the last one out,” Anjali said and turned around to give Ranaly an expectant look.

Since there was nothing more to discuss, Ranaly turned and headed for the ship. It didn’t take long for a cannon to be aimed and the construct. While most ships relied on their wizards and casters to fight, there were times when a big hunk of metal whizzing through the air was what was needed. So many ships still had a cannon or two somewhere.

The crew took their time aiming and preparing for the shot. They didn’t want to miss and it looked like the captain was taking it as an opportunity to get some

practice in for them. A shout of warning rang out when the fuse was lit. Anjali put her hands on her ears to shelter them from the boom of the shot. The black ball of metal shot out with a loud bang and arched towards the construct. It struck the leg facing their way and shredded through it and continued on to hit the other leg as well.

With no magic the wood was no obstacle for the destructive force of a metal ball.

The creaks and cracks that came from the construct were promising. It didn't take long for those warnings to materialize. The right leg was the first to give out. The left one gave out soon after and the massive construct came crumbling down. Dust was kicked up and for a moment the crumbled construct was out of view, but the floating particles quickly settled back down, revealing the heap of wood and metal that the fear inducing monstrosity had been reduced to.

"A wonder it ever stood up," Torim muttered.

"Magic is a powerful tool," Anjali reminded him. She couldn't hide how pleased she was with the outcome.

"Makes sense why they built it laying down on the ground. Thing wouldn't have held up if they'd built it upright," Anika said. "At least not without them building it stronger."

"Good thing for us that they didn't," Anjali said and pulled out her caster. She loaded it up with a fire shell and headed towards the heap of wood and metal. She glanced back and was pleased that no one was following her. She got close enough to the pile of debris and fired off the shot she had loaded. The flames engulfed a portion of the pile and set all the wood alight. The heat was enough to make her back off. It felt like her eyebrows would burst into flames.

"Too bad no one brought sausages," Torim said as she returned to the group. Even at that distance the heat from the fire could be felt.

"Won't the fire spread?" Anika asked.

"It shouldn't be too bad," Anjali replied, ignoring what Torim had said. "The grass is green and moist."

"Worst comes to be, the wizards in the city will douse the area with water," Ranaly said.

They watched the pile of wood burn.

“We should leave. There will be people coming from the city to investigate. We probably don’t want to be here to answer questions.” The point made by Youndal was a good one. The city guard would no doubt be coming to investigate. Not to mention people who thought there might be something valuable to recover. Even just the curious ones would be a problem.

Agreeing that getting out would be a good idea they all boarded the ship and prepared to take off with it.

Anjali rested against the railing, looking at the blazing fire. The flames had engulfed all of the wreckage. Even if someone came along and put it out now there wouldn’t be much left to piece together. Maybe they would get a few planks with runes on them, but certainly not enough to assemble another construct. Given that most people who had worked on it were dead it was unlikely anyone would be recreating the monstrosity any time soon.

“You think this ends it?” Torim asked as he joined her. “Still loose ends. The merchant, the woman who came to talk to me.”

Anjali sighed. The last ropes were let loose from the ground and the crew rushed on board as the ship started to rise up into the sky. “I sure hope we hear from none of them any more. Douggy is dead, right?”

Torim nodded.

“Pok is dead. As far as I’m concerned, all the people that were focusing on us are dead. They shouldn’t have a reason to come after us.”

“Well, apart from us destroying something they probably spent years building,” Torim noted dryly.

“Will they know it was us?” Anika asked as she joined them. “Everyone who saw us is dead.”

“Well, it’s no use fretting about it,” Anjali said. “Either they leave us alone or they don’t. I hope they do because being involved in shit like this isn’t something I’m keen on. We could have easily died today.”

“I hope so too,” Anika said. There was still relief in her voice. Her clothes were still dripping water.

Anjali wrapped an arm around her shoulder. “Come on. Let’s go into one of

the cabins and dry you off. Wouldn't want you getting sick."

With those words the two walked off the open deck as the ship started putting some distance between them and the burning wreckage.

## Chapter 22

Anjali dug the crown out of the pouch. She had forgotten all about it. Now, back in her shop, after she had had a few days to recover, she had finally gotten around to putting away her clothes from that day. She considered what to do with it.

It was worth a lot of money, that much was obvious. While it wasn't laden with precious stones and the weight wasn't what some of the bigger crowns would have, there was still plenty of gold in it as well as some really beautiful smaller jewels. Not to mention the magic that was stored in it.

Giving it to Torim would have been the obvious answer. He was the one who found it, after all, before his partner betrayed him. The thought of doing that made her nervous. Knowing her friend, the crown would be sold and there would be no guarantee it would end up in the hands of someone who wouldn't use it for bad things.

On the other hand, keeping it made her nervous as well. It was valuable. If Torim found she'd kept it, he would be angry. Though so far he had given no indication he missed the crown.

Coming to a decision, she knelt by her safe and opened the magical locks on it. The heavy metal door opened smoothly and silently. She stashed the crown on the top shelf, wrapped in thick cloth that would keep any prying eyes from spotting it immediately. She locked the safe and let out a sigh as she stood up and headed to the front of the store.

"Good morning," Anika said and glanced back at her. She was sitting by the counter with a steaming cup next to her.

"Morning," Anjali said and raised an eyebrow. "A paper? You never buy those."

Anika gave the piece of paper in her hands a look. It was four big pieces folded in two, giving a total of eight pages that were filled with text. "Couldn't help it. So much has happened."

"Anything new?" Anjali asked and joined her by the counter.

“They’re still talking about the construct, wondering what it was and who took it down,” Anika said and took a sip from her cup. “There’s also stories of dead bodies being found.”

“Nothing new about that,” Anjali said.

“They’re not talking about a few,” Anika said. “There’s hundreds. All around the city. They were obviously equipped to fight, but it looks like someone beat them.”

Anjali frowned. “A support plan for the construct?”

“That’s what I thought too. The paper doesn’t seem to know much about it. Everyone is just wondering what it’s all about. The government isn’t replying to questions either. There have been some notable individuals found dead as well. Merchants, some nobles, even a few wizards at the Towers.”

“Who ever cleaned all that up certainly was thorough,” Anjali said. “Hope they’re not coming for us because it seems they’ve taken out all the people that might have had something against us.”

“If they were I think we’d be dead already,” Anika said and turned the page. She took a moment to read the stories on there as she sipped her drink.

The shop door opened. A small bell ringing announced the arrival of a customer.

“Morning.” Torim sauntered over to the counter like he had no worries left.

“You look care free,” Anjali noted and ruffled her hair a bit. What ever had been itching her scalp subdued.

Torim leaned on the counter and smiled. “Why wouldn’t I be. I’m alive. The man who betrayed me is dead. Can’t really think of much to complain about. Even got a new job lined up.”

“Hunting for another treasure?” Anjali asked with a sigh.

“Nothing too valuable this time,” Torim assured her. “Just trying to trace down a family heirloom on a clients request. Shouldn’t be dangerous.”

“You never know what’s dangerous these days,” Anika noted from the side.

“Ah, wouldn’t worry too much. Still, I could use to replenish my caster shell inventory. Got any good ones?” Torim asked.

“Haven’t really had time to make new ones,” Anjali said as she ducked into

the back room to grab the locked box she held the shells in. She took it to the counter and opened it for Torim to see. Usually there would have been dozens of shells there, of all sorts of variety, ready to be used. Now, there were only eight left.

“Not much of a selection,” Torim noted as he examined the shells.

“Well, I’ve done more shooting that building the last few days, as you know,” Anjali replied dryly.

“Right. Sorry.” Torim grabbed a pair of shells. One fire, one earth. “I’ll take these.” He dug some coins from the pouch on his belt and handed them to Anjali.

The door to the store opened and the tiny bell let them know a new customer had entered. Everyone gave the new comer a look.

“You,” Torim said and tensed up.

“Ah, you are all here. Good. Saves me time.” The woman smiled and made her way towards the counter.

“You know her?” Anjali asked.

“She’s the one who delivered the message at the tavern,” Torim replied and kept his eyes on the red haired woman.

Anjali tensed up. She cursed herself for leaving her caster in the back room. She quickly snapped shut the box with the shells. As she took a closer look at the woman it was hard to claim she looked threatening. She had a slender build, green eyes that seemed to smile endlessly and freckles around her nose that made her look younger than she was. Her smile seemed sincere as she made her way to the counter.

“Hello. My name is Jenny. It is so nice to finally meet you all. Torim here wasn’t exactly thrilled the last time we met and I can understand that. Telling you to stay away was probably the wrong approach to take.” Her voice had a smoothness to it that made you want to listen to it more.

“Why are you here?” Torim asked before either of the two women behind the counter could open their mouths. He looked ready to jump Jenny and wrap his hands around her throat.

Jenny smiled at him before turning her attention to Anika and Anjali. “Grumpy, isn’t he?”



“We’ve all had a bad few days,” Anjali replied, unsure what to think of the woman. She didn’t seem like she had any bad intentions. If anything, she seemed to be trying to mend things and be friendly.

“Oh, yes. We all have,” Jenny said and relaxed. She noticed the paper Anika had in her hands. “We have to thank you for taking care of that, well, what ever that giant thing was that you took down. Took us by surprise and we weren’t really ready for it. Took care of all the rest though, just as planned.”

“So you’re the ones who have killed all these people?” Anika asked and pointed to the paper in her hands.

Jenny nodded. “It was quite the plan they had. Seize government buildings, take control of the entire city. If they had that giant thing they might have actually done it despite our plans to stop them.”

“And who exactly are you representing here?” Torim demanded. The impatience in his voice was clear for everyone to hear.

Anjali shared that feeling. The woman was circling around the important point in the conversation. “And why are you here?” she asked.

“Valid questions,” Jenny admitted with a brief smile. She glanced behind her and made certain there was no one else in the small shop. She then turned back to face the trio. “I work for a loose organization of people who have interests in keeping the peace. High ranking wizards at the Towers, officers in the city guard, wealthy merchants, nobles, government officials – people of all sorts of skills and means. We don’t have a name, just a symbol.” She pulled out a pendant from under her shirt and showed it to them. It was a black stone with a golden engraving of three birds on it. Having showed it to all of them she hid it back down her shirt.

“We found about the plan to take control of the city. We investigated. We found you lot and worried what might happen. So I was sent to try and steer you away. In hindsight we are happy you didn’t. Otherwise things might have gone badly for the whole city. For that I was sent here to thank you.”

“Well, that’s awfully kind,” Torim said, his voice thick with sarcasm.

“So you’re not here to kill us?” Anika asked. It was obvious she was trying to be humorous to ease tensions.

Jenny laughed. “No. Of course not. I don’t kill people. There are others for that. I just deliver messages.”

“So what’s your message to us?” Anjali asked. “I doubt you’re here just to thank us. The people you work for don’t seem like they’d tell anyone about them unless..”

“Well, yes. There is more than that to me being here,” Jenny said. She seemed to gain a more official feeling to her. “With the thank you I am here to invite you to join the people I work for. You’ve proven yourselves resourceful and, most of all, capable of staying alive. People like that are hard to find.”

“What’s in it for us?” Torim asked. He was blunt about it, but the same question was floating in Anjali’s mind. Anika was nodding next to her.

“Well, let’s first start off with what you’d have to do,” Jenny started, her voice telling she was aware that what she would say next determined the outcome of the situation. “Occasionally you might be contacted to do something. Usually something matching your skills. So, you, Torim, might be asked to find something while Anjali there could be asked to make an item or fix something.”

“Doesn’t sound too bad,” Anika said.

“It really isn’t,” Jenny agreed. “And for that you get some benefits as well. You will be paid for your time. Quite well, I might add. There will be people to help you if something happens. If you’re injured or there’s damage to your property because of your involvement with the group, they will pay for repair and see to it that you get the best care possible.”

“But there’s no guarantee they won’t send you on a job that gets you killed,” Anjali said, finishing off what should have been the first thing to come out of the woman’s mouth.

“They don’t send you on suicide missions, but some jobs will have an element of danger to them,” Jenny said, not sounding pleased for having been forced to admit that. “If it makes you feel any more confident in joining the group, they have offered to cover any expenses you might have incurred during the incident a few days ago.”

“Does that include my shop repairs?” Anjali asked, now more interested in the offer. The repairs had stretched her finances and even though she didn’t want

to admit it, the business was in trouble because of them.

“Of course,” Jenny said. “No strings attached. They will pay for it.”

They all went silent for a bit. Anjali could see Torim was considering offer. Having lost his partner he likely thought a somewhat reliable source of income would not be that bad. Looking at Anika it was obvious she was going to sign up and she couldn't blame her. As a student at the Towers, any source of extra income would be welcome.

For herself, the offer was good indeed. The only thing she worried about was the fact joining might lead her to more dangerous situations. It was the kind of life she had wanted to distance herself from. Would going back be bad?

“Just out of curiosity, has this offer been made to Ranaly as well?” Torim asked, breaking the silence.

Jenny shook her head. “No. And it won't be. His reputation is, questionable. So much so that people in the group are not comfortable with asking him to join, even though he might be able to offer quite a lot.”

Torim nodded and gave the two women behind the counter a look. After a moment of hesitation Anjali made a slight nod. Anika did the same. Torim nodded as well.

“It would seem we are all willing to join,” Anjali said.

“Magnificent,” Jenny said with a wide smile. Her hand went to a pouch on her belt and she pulled out three of the pendants. “Now, as you are new members, your pendants will only have one bird on them. The more birds, the higher ranking you are. Incidentally, five is the highest rank on offer. Anyway, carry these with you and if the need ever rises, show them to people to verify that you are who you are.”

Anjali grabbed the pendant being offered. She could sense the magic in it. Given how easy the engravings on it would have been to fake it made sense that there was some magic in it to keep anyone from faking it. She hesitated for a moment before pulling the pendant over her head. The chain was a bit long and the pendant landed right between her breasts, making it a bit uncomfortable to wear, but at the very least it was tucked well under her shirt.

The pendant felt heavy against her chest. She could feel a slight tingle where

it rested against her skin, as if there was a trickle of magic flowing from it into her. Looking at the others she saw the same brief hesitation before they put on the pendants.

“There’s magic in these pendants, isn’t there?” Anjali asked. She was certain it wasn’t any kind of harmful magic, but she wanted to know what it was, exactly, and whether Jenny was willing to share that information.

“There is,” Jenny admitted. “Part of it is to keep anyone from forging these pendants. If you bring two of them together and one is fake the birds will glow a shade of red. That is your way of verifying if someone is part of the organization or not.”

“Is that all?” Anika asked. “I’m sensing more in it.”

“There are some minor protections included as well,” Jenny said. “Nothing too big, but maybe enough to save you from a bit of injury by fire, cold or other things.”

“No spying on us then?” Torim asked and gave the pendant a suspicious look.

“Nothing of the sort,” Jenny assured them. She sounded sincere enough. She believed to be telling the truth. It was entirely possible if there was a spying element to the pendant, she was not simply aware of it.

“Then I’m happy,” Torim said and stashed the pendant under his shirt. “Anything else for now?”

Jenny shook her head. “No jobs right now, but I can say that we’re still digging into the group that was responsible for the attempted attack on the city. While we’ve dealt them a severe blow there is evidence that not all of them have been dealt with.”

“Are we still in danger?” Anika asked. “I wouldn’t want my room to suddenly get blown up again.”

“No sign of any threat towards you three,” Jenny said. “If we hear anything indicating there is then we will warn you and help any way we can.” With those words the woman looked like she had said everything she came to say.

“I guess we’ll be waiting to hear from you,” Anjali said. She was feeling good about the deal made. She hoped there would be jobs coming her way that would

pay. It would help immensely with keeping her shop running.

“I believe that’s about it, yes,” Jenny said with a smile. She started to turn around, but gave the trio a final look. “Needless to say. Don’t talk about being a part of this group. It’s not something you speak of in public.”

They all simply nodded at the obvious reminder. Jenny gave them a wave as she walked out the door. A moment of silence passed between the trio.

“That was unexpected,” Anika said, breaking the silence. Still, she sounded pleased with the outcome.

“Sure was,” Torim agreed.

“Let’s hope we made the right choice,” Anjali said. “No way to know what sort of dangers they’ll send our way.”

“If you’re uncomfortable with something I’m sure you can say no,” Anika said.

“It doesn’t sound like we joined some shady organization that will kill you if you refuse something,” Torim said. “Usually the types representing such are not the sort Jenny there would be representing.”

“She did seem trustworthy,” Anjali agreed.

“No use wondering. Time will tell. Right?” Anika asked and gave the two a look that was optimistic.

“We’ll see,” Anjali said.

She had a feeling their lives had been tied to something bigger than them.

It made her both elated as well as anxious.

Mostly anxious.