

The Pale Rose

by Mikko Tirkkonen

<http://www.lilwolf.biz/>

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Part One

Losses

Chapter 1

3073 C.D.

Eleria: 8 years old.

“**W**hat is that?” asked the little girl and pointed out the carriage window. The bumps in the road made it sway a bit. The woman sitting opposite to her looked out the window just in time to see the farmer pass by with his poorly made straw hat and dirt covered clothes. It was a dry summer day so the dust kicked up by the horses quickly swallowed the man.

“That's a farmer, your highness,” replied the woman and moved a strand of brown hair that had fallen in front of her eyes. She had been dealing with similar questions for a while now. To some the girl already knew the answer but asked anyway. To some the answer was a new one and resulted in even more questions.

“Why was he so dirty, Tabitha?” the blonde haired little girl asked. She swung her tiny feet back and forth over the edge of the cushioned seat. The tips of her shoes barely reached the floor.

“That's what farmers do, Eleria,” replied the older woman, knowing that when the little girl called her by her first name it was safe to get less formal with her. The only other person inside the carriage was the old midwife, sitting next to the little girl, fast asleep. “They work the field to grow crops and that gets them dirty.”

“They should try to bathe more often,” said Eleria with a small frown.

“I'm sure they clean themselves after their work is done,” replied Tabitha. She was accustomed to answering the little girls questions. She was at that age where everything she saw caused a flood of questions that made sense or – sometimes – no sense. On a longer trip the questions were how she entertained herself.

“Or they could find something to do that doesn't get them so dirty,” said Eleria after considering things for a moment.

“Oh, they couldn't do that, Eleria,” replied Tabitha. “Who would then grow

the crops that made the bread you ate this morning or fed the cow from which the meat came from?”

“I didn't consider that,” conceded Eleria after a moment of thought.

A silence fell in the carriage as it rolled along the road. Tabitha returned to her knitting, though she glanced at the princess from time to time with concern. It was pure luck the little girl was there, alive and well. It was the same luck that had ensured she did not know what had happened to make his father send her away from the palace.

Tabitha knew it all.

It had been mere two nights ago that she had been sleeping in the outer chamber as she always did in case the princess had a need for her during the night. There was a door leading to the princesses bedroom and another leading to the day room.

The day room was where the princess spent most of her time. It was where her teachers came to educate her and where the women of the court gathered around her to fill her in with the latest gossips. It was surprising how much the little girl paid attention to such words or at least pretended to. Often she'd complain about the ladies of the court after they had gone.

Beyond the day room was the hallway where the guards assigned to the princess patrolled to keep any unwanted visitors away. That night they had failed in their task.

An assassin had somehow made his way to the day room without being noticed by anyone. Considering the security around the entire imperial palace of Ramyn, it was no small feat, though history had several examples of similar occurrences. Somehow the assassins managed to find new ways in through the weak spots in the guard rounds or the structures.

The only thing that had saved the princesses life that night had been the fact that her pet cat had been sleeping in the day room instead of in bed with her. The poor creature had sought comfort under one of the couches and its tail had stuck out. In the darkness the assassin had not seen it and had stepped on it. The ruckus the cat made had alerted the guards and they had rushed in immediately, forcing the assassin to fend for his life.

The noises of the fighting had been enough to wake up Tabitha, but the thick stone walls and wood doors kept it from reaching the little princess. She slept through the whole thing and by morning the only thing telling of what had happened during the night were a few out of place items in the day room that the soldiers had failed to clean up properly.

The emperor had ordered that no one speak of the event to his daughter. He did not want to upset the little girl or cause undue fear. He had stern words with everyone who dealt with her and so the princess went on with her life unaware of the blade that had come so close to cutting her young life short.

Shortly after that it had been publicly announced that the princess would be going on a visit to the coastal cities. It was not that unusual an announcement for she toured the cities often during summer.

What was unusual was that in private she was told she would be going to visit the Strihin family instead. She often visited there due to the fact the family was her assigned protector. They also had a son in the family, close to her age, and the two were close friends. Whenever she visited the two would spend a lot of time together and he'd drag her along to do things that would never have been allowed within the palace.

A carriage had departed from the palace before them, with a larger guard and every sign that the princess was in that one. Shortly afterwards they had slipped from the palace with a modest guard and a carriage that could have belonged to any noble born going back to visit their home.

They hoped the decoy would ensure the safety of the princess.

"How much longer until we arrive?" demanded the little girl, pulling Tabitha from her thoughts.

"Not much longer," she assured the princess. It was their second day on the road. The city of Ramyn laid on an island in the middle of a river and the Strihin estate was located down stream from there, on the southern shore. A day and a half on carriage was about the usual time it took to reach it.

As Tabitha glanced outside she could start seeing familiar land marks by the road. The lone tree at a crossroad that had an iron cage hanging from one of the branches. She noted that the skeleton had been cleaned up from the cage since

the last time they had gone by the place. A figure moved inside it.

“Why is that man in the cage?” asked Eleria as she stuck her head out the open window in an effort to keep the iron structure in her sights for as long as possible.

“Because he has done something bad,” replied Tabitha.

“What sort of bad?”

“Most likely he robbed people. People travelling on the emperors roads. That is the most common sort to end in a cage like that.”

In the city such men would have been sentenced to the arena to be eaten by animals or cut up by gladiators, but on the countryside locking them in a cage without food or water was a widely used practice. It served as a warning to others who would consider a similar career in crime.

To Tabitha it simply seemed barbaric.

“Why would someone do that?” asked Eleria and slumped back in her seat.

“Only the gods know,” replied Tabitha as she looked at the tree disappearing into the distance.

She took her eyes off the sight and returned to her knitting.



The Strihin estate was more a fortress than a mansion. The sturdy stone buildings formed a huge square and the only way inside was a metal supported wooden gate that took eight men to open and close. All the windows opened up to the spacious inner yard that could have easily held hundreds of people within it, leaving the outside with nothing but stone to face any threats. There was even a stone tower that rose high above the red brick roofs of the smaller buildings. A lookout was always stationed there to warn of any approaching threat.

There was a well in the centre of the inner yard. There were a couple of trees there as well, but mostly it was beaten dirt. It was surrounded by buildings ranging from barracks to stables and barns. During the day the animals would be moved outside to the flat, grass covered pastures that surrounded the compound. Only the chickens were left to roam free around the yard.

You'd have thought it a normal farm with the noises from the smiths hammer and anvil echoing through the yard and the chickens plucking around. Maids and servants went around tending to their duties.

It was an unusual place for a noble family to call home.

"Careful now," said Tabitha as she helped the old midwife out of the carriage. Eleria already stood outside on the yard and watched the old woman hobble down with an impatient expression on her.

"You fuss too much, Tabitha," croaked the old hag as she finally got both her feet on the ground. The yard was abuzz as the escorts dismounted and sought water and food for their horses.

Why the midwife had bothered to come along was beyond Eleria. For most of her life the woman had been following her around, but rarely did she come to the Strihin family estate. She complained about her old bones and the stress of travel and usually stayed behind in the palace.

She had complained loudly at having had to sleep in a tent the previous night. Eleria found it a comfortable enough place, but the old midwife seemed dissatisfied no matter what efforts were made to ensure her comfort. Even in the tent she had had a sizeable bed with a comfortable mattress, but according to her it had been as hard as sleeping on the ground and the pillows had been too soft and the sounds of birds singing had kept her awake long into the night.

How a woman of such a meagre background had become so pampered spoke volumes of the luxury life in the palace offered even to the servants.

"Eleria!"

The familiar voice of the young boy made her forget all about the midwife's odd behaviour. The coach rolled away as she turned around to greet her friend. He was one of the few she let get away with not addressing her as princess or your highness.

"Cheid," she greeted the boy and inspected him from head to toe. His jaw was as well shaped as ever and made him look older than he really was. Pieces of hay dotted his otherwise good quality and fine clothes as well as his short cut brown hair. A tell tale sign that he had been up at the barn, playing in the hay. He had dragged the princess along a couple of times and it had always resulted in

a scolding from his parents and even Eleria had had to endure lectures from Tabitha on how a princess should behave.

Playing in the hay was not what had gotten her to go with it, but rather the company of the boy. She'd have been perfectly happy knitting if Cheid had been there to talk with. He had much more interesting stories to tell than the women of the court.

"I heard you were coming, your highness," the boy said and gave a bow that was more joking than serious.

"No doubt by eavesdropping on your uncle," said Eleria. It was one of the boys favourite pass times. His uncle was an important man and the things that were discussed in his study and the information that passed through it would have been enough to peak any young boys interest – much less a grown man's.

Cheid looked guilty as charged.

"Come, my lady. We should get settled in. You two will have plenty of time to talk," said Tabitha. She put emphasis on the word talk in the hopes it would discourage the two from getting into trouble.

The servants had already carried most of the princesses belongings inside her usual quarters. Tabitha noted that there were a lot more armed men walking around than usual. She saw several traversing even the rooftops with bows flung over their shoulders.

The threat on their guests life was taken seriously, it seemed.

The old midwife had hobbled onto a bench under one of the trees and looked content to sit there and enjoy the sounds of the farm.

"Fine," Eleria conceded with less enthusiasm than a rock. Though she had to agree that getting out of the dress she wore and into something more comfortable and practical did not sound like such a bad idea.

"I'll see you later then, your highness," said Cheid and bowed again as the little girl started to walk away.

Eleria glanced back and smiled at him, before disappearing inside the stone building. A wooden staircase led to her rooms on the second floor. There was a walk around balcony that had a wooden roof over it, allowing servants and others to get around without getting wet on a rainy day. The quarters she had were not

that dissimilar from what she had in the palace. Smaller to be certain, but she had her own bedroom, as did Tabitha, and there was a day room as well. It was all ordered and built to be a smaller version of what she was used to. Even the tapestries on the walls were similar.

The servants bowed to her as she entered the day room and scurried off as soon as they had accomplished their tasks.

“Tabitha, I want to change into something more comfortable.” She was already busy throwing off the shoes that gripped her feet a little too tight around the toes and had the first strings undone from her dress.

“Of course, your highness,” replied the older woman and started to help her take off the clothes. Soon the little girl was left with nothing but a plain looking undergarment and by that time they had made it into her bedroom and closed the door so that no servant would disturb them.

“There will be a banquet tonight, my lady,” reminded Tabitha.

“Oh? What for?”

“To celebrate your arrival, of course.”

The little girl frowned. “Why do they have to make such a big deal about it?”

“You are the imperial princess,” Tabitha reminded her. “Any noble family would feel honoured to have you visit them.”

“But this is like a second home to me.” Rarely a year went by without Eleria visiting the place. Often times she spent months at a time there and especially during the summer she often made several week long visits.

“Would you not find a banquet appropriate if your father went away for several months and then returned?” asked Tabitha as she dug through the trunk the servants had lugged in. Finding the right outfit for her amongst all of it was proving to be a challenge. “And you know the Strihin. They take any occasion they can to throw a banquet.”

“I suppose so,” Eleria admitted and played around with a strand of her hair.

“Ah, here we are,” said Tabitha as she pulled out a simple looking dress that had a hem that would keep out of your way and a white shirt to go with it. While it was practical clothing, the quality of the cloth or the sowing could not be denied.

It was only a few moments later that the two emerged from the bedroom and into the day room. There were several windows there that gave a view of the yard as well as a door that led to the walk-around balcony. Eleria stepped through the door and observed the yard below.

It was getting late in the afternoon so the animals were slowly being brought back inside for safety. Servants were carrying out tables and forming the banquet area. Her nose caught the scent of freshly baked bread and searing meat coming from the kitchen nearby. Barrels were being carried out from the cellar and decorations were being strung between the few trees on the yard. It looked like they had decided to put in extra effort with the banquet this time around.

She spotted Cheid walking across the yard and waved at him. The boy waved back and started to head towards her.

“Don't you go playing around with him now, your highness,” said Tabitha in a stern voice. While she was a servant the empress had given her some freedoms with regards to her daughter and there were limits she was free to set on her. “The celebrations will start soon and we'll have to get changed. And you have to watch out for the sun.” The pale skin of the princess was something of a curse for her. She couldn't spend much time in the sun without getting painful burns.

“But we just changed,” complained Eleria. “Can't I just wear this dress?”

Tabitha eyed the young girl and then glanced at the people working on setting everything up. They were busy carrying out chairs now. She knew full well that the Strihin family was not big on fancy dressing. They were a military oriented clan and preferred practicality over fine looks. In that sense the princesses' dress fit in perfectly and it wouldn't be the first time she wore something similar to it during a celebration.

“Very well. You can wear that dress,” Tabitha gave in. “But don't go anywhere that will make you dirty!” she added in a stern voice as Cheid got close enough to hear. The boy had taken the nearby stairs that allowed people to go up or down without having to go inside the building.

“Don't worry, Tabitha, I'll keep her out of trouble,” the boy assured with a wide smile. He had managed to remove the pieces of hay from his hair and clothes and now looked a lot cleaner.

“Who is it that usually ends up in trouble here?” demanded Eleria in a feisty voice. She did not appreciate being portrayed the misbehaving one when it was always Cheid that found himself being yelled at and in trouble. One time he had nearly set the smiths shop on fire because he had played a prank on the poor man and sprinkled some oil on his anvil. When the red hot iron had touched it the flames had shot up immediately, burning off a large portion of the hairs on the smiths arms.

It had been no small amount of yelling and discipline that he had received for that.

Cheid had the good sense to look ashamed. “My apologies, your highness. The sun must have confused my thoughts and the wrong words came out of my mouth.”

“You don't need the sun for that,” muttered Eleria.

Tabitha smiled at the two poking fun at each other. It was something that happened only when those two were together. Other times both of them were surrounded by people who could not act that way towards them and that forced both of them to put on a more mature front than either truly wanted. Them both being about the same age and from relatively close social class allowed them to act like children should when they were together.

“No going outside the estate,” reminded Tabitha as the two started to walk away excitedly. Apparently Cheid had something he wanted to show her.

“We won't,” promised both of them and then rushed down the stairs and across the yard, dodging the servants who were still busy arranging the tables and chairs for the banquet.



“Here's to the princess and her well being!” Cheid's uncle raised a cup and the people sitting around the tables cheered and raised their own cups. It had started to grow dark and there were lanterns strewn all around to give light as well as a large bonfire to give warmth against the chill that was slowly creeping in.

Eleria gave everyone a benevolent smile from her seat and sipped some of

the watered down wine from her cup. Tabitha was sitting next to her and Cheid was there right beside the older woman. The old midwife sat after him.

To her other side sat Cheid's uncle, a grey haired man with a sturdy build and a blue shirt that could have easily been worn by someone in the emperors personal guard. The only extravagant thing about him was the gold medallion around his neck, depicting the family crest of the Strihin.

From there the feast began. Food was carried to the tables. Entire roasted pigs, boiled potatoes and gravy, pies of various sorts and barrels full of wine and mead. There was even a minstrel playing and singing tales of heroic deeds from the past.

The atmosphere was nothing short of merry and Eleria quickly found herself smiling despite the reluctance she had shown earlier towards the event. It made her feel like she had come home. Back in the palace she'd have received no special welcome, apart from all the ladies of the court swarming around her, doting and blabbering about things she cared very little for.

She much preferred the heart warming welcome she was getting now.

As the celebrations continued and the wine and mead flowed everyone's attention was drawn to the entertainment and the songs the minstrel sang. Many times the crowd joined in as he played something that allowed for the audiences participation.

No one paid attention to anything else but what was going on on the yard. No one noticed the guards on the roofs slumping down silently. There was no one to raise the alarm. There was no warning for the people on the yard.

The wooden gates that should have withstood the battering rams of a well equipped army flew off their hinges and into the yard in a thunderous boom. The heavy doors hit the outer edge of the gathered people, crushing bones and filling the air with screams of pain, while splinters found their way all across the yard.

Tabitha immediately wrapped her arms around Eleria and sheltered her with her own body in case more stuff came flying their way. There was shouting all around as the gathered crowd tried to understand what was going on. Some of the men who had their wits around them went for their weapons, quickly realizing it was an attack.

As the dust settled they could see to the gate once more. A man stood there, dressed in a black robe. Around him swarmed men with swords in hand.

“Find the princess! Kill her! Kill them all!” The clearly heard order from the robed figure set loose the bloodthirsty men around him.

“Take her to safety!” shouted Cheid's uncle and gave Tabitha a stern look as he pulled the sword that had been fastened to his side.

She nodded and grabbed the princess who was trembling and looking at her with wild eyes. “Don't worry. Everything will be fine,” she assured the little girl and wrapped her arms around her. She glanced around for Cheid, but the boy was nowhere to be seen. The old midwife had keeled over. A large splinter of wood protruded from her chest.

Chaos had descended onto the yard with men shouting, women screaming and the sound of steel hitting steel as the few men who had weapons met the attackers. There were screams of pain and curses floating in the air.

Tabitha could feel the little girl tremble as she made her way towards the nearest building. It turned out to be the kitchen. The warm air hit her with a strong gust when she opened the door and closed it off. There was no bolt to lock the door so she grabbed some heavy looking sacks of flour and dragged them against it. They wouldn't keep anyone away for long, but at least it would buy some time.

Outside the screams and sounds of fighting continued.

The kitchen was dimly lit with most of the light coming from the ovens that still had a fire going. There were sprigs of dried herbs hanging from the ceiling that filled the air with a mouth watering smell.

Desperately, she tried to find some escape route. There were no stairs leading upstairs nor were there any windows that would have let them escape to anywhere but back into the worst part of the fighting.

Eleria clung to her as she rummaged through the space. Past all the tables, ovens, pots and pans was a door that led to a storage room.

“Come on,” said Tabitha and guided the little girl to the door. Behind it they found shelves covered walls filled with all sorts of jars. All the way to the back she could see a hatch that led down below. Looking around she could not see any

other place for them to hide. She grabbed the iron ring and pulled open the hatch. A ladder led down into the darkness.

“Eleria, I need you to go down there,” said Tabitha and placed her hands on the little girls shoulders. She looked back at her with moist eyes that were filled with fear. “Find a hiding place and don't come out until I come for you. Do you understand?”

“I don't want you to leave me,” Eleria sobbed.

Tabitha gave her a quick hug. “And I don't want to leave you, but we don't have a choice. Be a brave girl and do as I say.”

Eleria gave her a weak nod and started down the stairs, into the darkness below. Tabitha wished she had a torch to give her or some other source of light, but the light would have shone through the cracks in the floor and given her away.

“Are you down safely?” she asked.

“Yes,” came the weak voice of the girl.

“Go hide. I'm going to close the hatch now.”

The sound of the hatch closing was one of the worst sounds Tabitha had ever heard and she had to swallow hard not to cry. She spent a moment dragging some barrels and heavy sacks over the hatch so as to hide it. She doubled her efforts when she heard the door to the kitchen being broken down. Satisfied that her efforts had hidden the hatch well enough, she turned to face what was to come.



The darkness surrounding her was not complete. There was some light from the kitchen that trickled down from between the floor boards. She could hear Tabitha moving stuff over the hatch.

Hide.

That was the single thought that dominated her mind. The attack and what was going on in the yard was tucked away in a corner of her mind, out of the way for now. She felt her way around to the nearest wall, but stopped as she heard noises coming from above.

“Well, what have we here?” a harsh male voice asked.

“What do you want?” she recognized Tabitha's voice.

“Where's the princess?” another male voice asked.

“I don't know. I'm just a kitchen hand,” replied Tabitha.

“Oh? That is a shame,” said the first voice. There was a scuffle and a muffled scream. Eleria moved slightly to see what was going on. Straight above her, through a crack in the floor, she could see Tabitha laying on a barrel on her stomach. She saw vague glimpses of the man behind her, ripping away her skirt and undoing his pants.

“Shut up,” the man grunted and slapped Tabitha. She stopped her pleas and sobbed silently as the man got to work and had his way with her. She nearly rolled off the barrel head first because of the force he used. When he was finally done the other man took his place. After a brief moment the man let out a grunt and started pulling his pants up.

Eleria nearly gasped as the first man lifted his sword and drove the blade straight through Tabitha's back.

“Damn it Berdle, why did you have to go and do that?” demanded the man who had just finished defiling her.

“What?” asked the first one.

“She was pretty. We could have had some more fun with her.”

“She's still warm. If you're quick you can have your fun,” replied Berdle.

Eleria stifled a sob. Something warm dripped on her face and she quickly wiped it away. Had there been light she would have seen her sleeve stained red. She pressed herself against the nearby wall again, not wanting to see any more of what was going on.

There was a moment of silence and some footsteps. “Nah. I bet we can still find a live one if we hurry,” said the other man.

“Shouldn't we search this place,” asked Berdle.

“Why bother? We'll torch it all anyway,” replied his companion and both men laughed. The footsteps went away. A moment later there was the sound of a piece of wood slamming the floor and a brief moment later the sound of flames as they started to eat up the easily burning fabric of the sacks in the room above.

Eleria knew she was in danger. If the flames didn't get her, the floor collapsing would. She couldn't get up again because Tabitha had blocked the hatch. She felt around in the dark in a panic, but only found barrels and shelves.

The only blessing from the fire were the slivers of light it cast down and allowed her to see better every moment the flames above grew.

"Please, please, please, let me get out of her. Please, please.." Eleria repeated the words in her mind and sought some measure of strength from them. She went all around the room until she stumbled upon a hole in the wall. It was covered with canvas and had she been looking at it in the light instead of feeling it with her hands she would have dismissed it as a part of the dirt wall.

She pulled aside the canvas and crawled into the tunnel that widened after the opening into barely high enough to allow her to stand without crouching down. The smooth floor that had been in the room behind her turned into a rough one that gave her trouble maintaining her balance.

It felt like hours to her as she slowly made her way through the tunnel. How long it went on was impossible for her to tell. All she had on her mind was her mantra of pleases and the notion that she might yet escape with her life.

Finally she arrived at the end of the tunnel. A wooden ladder had been propped up against the wall and she did not hesitate to start climbing it. Up above she could see a sliver of light coming through a crack in what she could only assume to be a wooden hatch. She hoped it would not be too heavy for her to lift, though at least she was now safe from the fire. To her relief the hatch and the bushes covering it were not heavy and even she could easily lift it up.

The evening sky was a welcome sight to her, though she did not pay much attention to it. Of more concern to her was where she was. Looking around she could see the burning estate well into the distance. The faint screams carried over to her with the wind as well as the smell of burning wood – and worse things.

The flames revealed small figures passing by it. There was laughter as well as cheers.

For a moment Eleria stood there and watched the fire cast its orange light to the surroundings. She knew she had to get away and that there would be no one left at the estate who could help her. How long the attackers would stay there was

a mystery so waiting for them to just leave did not seem like a good idea, especially since her hiding place amounted to nothing more than a few scant bushes and young trees.

She decided getting away was the only thing she could do. She turned her back to the fire that was consuming what she had long considered her second home, and wandered off towards the nearest copse she knew of.

There she'd have places to hide in.

Chapter 2

Cheid: 8 years old

Cheid jumped from his seat the moment the gate exploded into the yard and spewed splinters amongst those celebrating. Before even realizing it he was already running towards the smiths workshop and the cache of weapons that was stored there. His aunt called after him, but the pleas to come back fell on deaf ears.

The young boy was not the only one who had the same thought, but he was the first one to reach it. He ripped open the door and inspected the racks upon racks of weapons. His original thought had been to grab a sword and return to protect Eleria, but as the older men swarmed around him he found himself handing out blades to them instead. He had no idea of the declaration the robed man had made, but he could hear the sounds of fighting outside and the grim expression on the men that came to collect weapons was enough to tell him the situation was serious. There was fear in eyes he had never expected to see it in.

Finally, no more men came to him. He grabbed a short sword that was light enough for him to swing comfortably and headed out. As soon as he stepped out from the smiths workshop he froze. The sight in front of him would have been enough to give even the most battle hardened soldier a pause, but for an eight year old kid it was enough to crush any resolve he had of helping.

Bodies were strewn all across the area where only a moment ago the men and women had been raising their cups to cheer. Tables were over turned, food trampled by the boots of men fighting for their lives. Blood mixed in with the wine and mead that had been spilt on the ground. Screams of pain and pleas of mercy filled the air only to be drowned out by the continuous sound of metal meeting metal.

Numbly, Cheid watched as a man dragged a woman out of the building only a few feet away from him. Her clothes were torn and her bare breasts slipped into view almost teasingly as she stumbled after the man pulling her.

Cheid knew her. She was a maid to her aunt. She had always treated Cheid

well and he could remember more than one occasion when she had slipped some sweets to him after he had done something bad. Her smile had always been warm. Now, tears streaked her face and the terror in her eyes touched deep in the young boy.

A silent rage filled him and he started towards the pair with steady steps. He did not scream nor did he run. He moved on as silently as he could. The man did not pay attention to his surrounding as he was busy dealing with his prey. The first warning he got was Cheid's blade sinking deep into his side.

Cheid nearly trembled as the man turned to look down at him with a surprised expression on him. He stared straight into his eyes and watched as the life escaped. The man tried to speak, but all that came out of his mouth was a splatter of blood. His hands tried to raise his sword, but the strength had already escaped them. He slid off from Cheid's blade and slumped to the ground.

The boy took in deep breaths and stared at the body at his feet. The first man he had ever killed.

"Cheid! What are you doing?" the maid demanded as she crawled over to him. The man's sudden stop had sent her falling to the ground. "You need to hide!"

"But.."

"Hide!" the maid shouted at him and pushed him away. She looked beyond him with wide eyes. The boy turned and saw three men heading their way. He took the ready stance that had been taught to him during the few sword fighting lessons he had gotten.

"I'm going to protect you," he said to the maid and positioned himself between her and the men coming towards them.

The maid grabbed his hands and ripped the sword away. "Run you foolish boy!" She pushed him back, towards the building behind them and the stairway leading up. Cheid tried to move forward again to protect her, but it was too late. The men had reached her.

She tried to hit the first one with the sword. Even Cheid saw it was a lousy hit and the man blocked it with contempt and hit her with his gauntlet covered hand. The woman slumped down to the ground. Her nose looked broken and

blood flowed freely from it.

Cheid scampered backwards and up the stairs. As he glanced back he could see one of the men was coming after him. The other two remained with the fallen woman, one ripping away her remaining clothes, the other removing his trousers. The fighting in the yard seemed to have died down enough that the attackers didn't find the defenders much of a threat any more and could focus on having their fun with who ever was still alive.

He ran up the stairs best he could. All he could think of was hiding from the man coming after him. He could hear the heavy footsteps as the man climbed the stairs.

"Come on, boy. Don't make this hard on yourself," the man called after him.

His voice was enough to send chills down Cheid's spine. He ran down the walkway and chose a door at random. He slammed it shut behind him and leaned against it, catching his breath and taking a moment to see where he had landed.

To his disappointment it was just a bedroom for several servants. There were six beds, three on each side of the room, as well as trunks at the bed ends for the servants personal belongings. A small table was directly opposite to the door Cheid had entered from.

He could hear a door being slammed open on the outside. The man following him was only a few doors away. He heard the sound of furniture being turned and pots being broken as he looked for him in the other rooms.

Cheid pushed himself from the door and tried to open the trunks. There had to be something in them he could use to defend himself. A knife, something. He'd have settled even for a dull spoon, but all the trunks were locked so there was nothing for him to find. He looked around, hoping to find something, but all that was out in the open were a few pieces of clothing laid out on the beds and wooden plates on the table.

Hiding under a bed did not look like a workable solution given how the man was tossing the room next door. He'd find him in such an obvious hiding place.

In the end the decision was made for him as the door slammed open and the man entered. He immediately saw Cheid standing there, in front of the table. He grinned.

“There you are, boy. You really should have listened to me. Now this is going to be unpleasant for you.” The man drew his sword and began to advance towards Cheid. “I was thinking of just running you through with this here blade, but you made me look for you. I'm going to have to play with you a bit for that.”

Cheid stared at the blade coming closer to him. Frozen, he watched it raise and come down. The flat of it hit him on the side of the head and sent him sprawling to the floor. He felt a trickle of blood start to run down the side of his head. He tried to crawl away to the nearest corner, but another hit landed across his back. The man still did not use the sharp edge of his blade, but the sharp edge still tore clothes and pricked skin.

Cheid cried out in pain as yet another hit landed on him. He could feel something swelling inside himself. It was like pressure was building up and pressing on every inch of his skin from the inside. His fingers tingled and the hair on the back of his neck stood up.

“Where are you going?” demanded the man and landed another hit on the boy's back. Blood was starting to stain his shirt. The screams of pain were mixed in with sobs. “You think this hurts? Wait until I really start with you.”

Cheid's hands touched the wall. There was no more room to escape. He flipped on to his back and faced the man. He stared at him with as cold eyes as a boy his age could muster. The pressure inside had stopped growing. Now it was moving, down from his legs, up to his chest, and down his right arm. Almost on its own, Cheid raised the hand.

“What are you going to do? Point me to death?” mocked the man and raised his blade once more.

Cheid had no clue what was going on or what he was doing, but somehow he willed the pressure in his hand to release. A jet of flames shot out and engulfed the man in front of him. The flames were hotter than those he had felt in the smiths forge.

It was the man's turn to scream in pain as the flames melted his armour and burned his flesh. Like a living torch he ran out the door, leaving behind a trail of flaming footsteps on the wooden floor. With his last strength Cheid crawled forward enough to see the man go over the railing and fall down to the yard. He

saw the flames from the footsteps grow larger, but he had no strength left.

Darkness overtook his vision.

When Cheid finally came to, he found himself amidst burned rubble. The beams holding the roof up had collapsed and with them the floor had given in. He'd crashed down into the storage room below, but somehow there was a circle of calm around the spot where he had landed. No flames or debris had touched him.

Stumped, the boy looked around. The sky above was starting to turn with the rising sun. He could not hear any sounds from the outside. The fight must have been over. With a wince he pulled himself up and sought support from the nearby wall. It felt hot against his touch and after a moment he had to lift his hand so as not to burn it. For the stones to heat that much, the fire must have been infernal.

In his mind he thanked the gods for saving him from it.

The abuse the man had given him reminded of itself with sore spots on his back and a headache that made his teeth throb. Clearing all the debris to get to the doorway took him a while. Some of the stone walls above had crumbled down, forcing him to look for a detour to get to where he wanted.

When he finally made it to the door he stopped to take in the sight.

If the room behind him had been a mess of broken and charred beams and piles of rocks, the yard was far worse. It was a slathering of broken bodies on top of one another.

Cheid swallowed hard and ventured onward.

He saw the body of a young girl. The only reason he recognized her was her clothes. The daughter of one of the maids, two years younger than him. Half her head was crushed as if caught between the steady beat of a smith's hammer and anvil.

From there on he had to force himself to look instead of closing his eyes and blindly making his way through the yard. He needed to find if anyone was still alive. If there were no other survivors then it was his duty to take it all in and tell the world.

It was unlikely anyone would stumble onto the estate for days. The smoke

would not have been visible to the main road nor to the river up north. Everyone who lived close by laid dead in the yard and would not be alerting anyone to the events.

He went to where he had been seated along with the princess and what family happened to be at the estate. He expected bodies and braced himself for it, but it still made him sob when he found his uncle. The old man had always seemed like nothing would break him and that he'd stand firm against anything thrown at him. Now, nailed to the trunk of a tree, his stomach cut open, he looked as broken as the fine piece of porcelain Cheid had dropped from the second floor when he had been five.

Below, at his feet, was the naked body of his wife. The sharp point of a wooden pole emerged from her mouth after having made its way through her entire body. Like a pig ready to be roasted.

The expression that was frozen on his uncles face was enough to tell even a boy as young as Cheid that he had had to witness everything they had done to her before being allowed the relief of death.

Cheid wiped the tears from his eyes and continued his search, all the while making promises of revenge in his mind. His father would raze down the empire to find the culprits, of that he was certain, and the young boy intended to be right there by his side.

The princess.

That was who he needed to find. It was a sense of duty that had been drilled into his mind ever since words became something he could understand. Protect the princess. Though after spending as much time with her as he had it was the simple bond of friendship that drove him more than anything. But search as he did, he did not find her. She might have been buried under the rubble of collapsed sections of the buildings or the attackers might have taken her with them, but at least she was not among the dead that could be recognized. There were some charred remains inside the buildings, but even Cheid could tell they were adults and not those of a little girls.

Exhausted, Cheid stumbled out of the ruins he had been inspecting and made his way to a bench that had somehow remained upright. A tipped over table

had spilled its offerings onto the ground. Some of it had been trampled over during the fighting – if you could call it that – but Cheid managed to find a piece of bread and some meat that didn't have too much dirt on it. He was too hungry to notice the small amount of sand that made it in his mouth.

It felt strange sitting there amongst all the dead, eating as if nothing had happened. He thought he should have felt something, but there was nothing inside him but a cold numbness. The tears that had rolled down his cheeks earlier had stopped. Maybe the horrors he had witnessed had broken him?

It was the sounds of the crows that finally pulled him out of that daze. He glared at them as they flocked onto the ruin tops and some of the bravest landed on the yard and started pecking away at the dead.

Cheid felt like he should have done something to drive them away.

He thought about burying everyone, but the amount of effort that would take was beyond his capabilities. On top of that, there was no guarantee that the attackers would not return or send a small patrol back to see if they had missed something.

He took another bite from the bread and slowly chewed it. He remembered then what had happened with the man that had chased after him. What had that been? How had the flames shot out from his hand? He tried to remember the feeling and replicate it, but nothing happened. Had it been the gods? Did they have some plan for him? Had it been magic?

Cheid shook his head and almost laughed at that. As far as he knew no one in his family had ever shown any signs of having aptitude for magic. He tried to remember what his teachers had said about magic, but there was not much there. They had mostly focused on history and the art of war. Magic had only been mentioned in passing and even then the tone had been less than flattering.

The boy leaned back and looked up at the sky. A few crows circled above. The sun had climbed higher and now bathed everything in its warming light. He made the decision.

He had to get to Ramyn and tell his father what had happened. For that he needed supplies, but he was certain he'd find everything he needed.

He stood up and started to prepare for the long walk.



The night had been the most uncomfortable Eleria had ever experienced. She'd walked as far as she had had strength for and ended up in a small copse of trees. She'd ran into a thorny bush and it had ripped her dress to a point where it looked like something the poorest of the poor would have put on their daughters. Her hair was full of twigs and knots after rummaging through the undergrowth and sleeping on the ground for a few hours.

The spot she had found under a tree had been relatively comfortable and sheltered. It was pure luck that she found a small spring and could quell her thirst there. There was no food to be found so she went on with her stomach grumbling. She didn't notice it though. She barely noticed her surrounding enough to dodge rocks or trees that ended up in her way. It was like her mind had relinquished control and the memories in her muscles carried her onwards.

How long she wandered before stumbling on the road, she couldn't say. How long she walked along the road without knowing which direction was the right one, she did not know, not even years after. The only thing she could remember was the wagon.

It rolled up behind her without her noticing. The driver had to call out to her multiple times before she stopped and acknowledged its presence. The back of it was covered in canvas and you couldn't see what it was carrying because of the flaps that sealed the back.

“What are you doing wandering around here all alone, little girl?” the driver asked. What she later remembered about the man was his crooked nose and the black beard that looked like it had never been washed or combed let alone trimmed.

She stared at him with unseeing eyes.

“You're a mess. Did something happen? Were you attacked?” the man asked as she inspected her more thoroughly. The torn clothes and the dried blood on her sleeve were enough to tell she was not on a leisurely stroll. “Where are your parents?”

There was no reply. The little girl just stood there.

The man lifted his straw hat and scratched his head. He looked around, as if trying to find some place where the girl might have come from. He spat on the ground. "Do you need a ride, little girl? I can take you to the next village."

Eleria nodded. What made her react to the question and not the others would remain a mystery.

"Well, hop on board then," said the man and patted the seat next to him.

Eleria stood there, looking at him.

"Come on, there's nothing to be afraid." The man did his best to sound friendly.

Hesitantly, she climbed aboard the wagon and took a seat next to the man. As soon as she did, strong hands grabbed her from within the canvas covered back and pulled her in. Before she could even scream the locks on her iron shackles clicked shut and she found herself sitting on the hard wooden floor, chained to the side of the wagon. In the dim light she could see other children in a similar situation and the large man that had dragged her in.

He could hear the driver chuckle at the front as he whipped the horses on the move once more. "What do you think, Ben?"

The large man eyed her. "She's a nice one, Gip. Blonde hair. They'll pay a nice price for her in Sidan."

Gip laughed. "Them dark skins sure love the white ones."

Had Eleria been in her right mind she'd have been screaming and struggling to get free, but as it stood, she just sat there, looking forward without seeing anything.

The wagon rolled on down the road.



Cheid had a much easier time with his first night on the road. He still had a working mind and supplies after all. He'd found a blanket that had only been cinched in one corner and he had flint and stone to start a fire. He had food and mead with him. He had tried to get water from the well in the yard, but when the bucket came up with what looked like intestines hanging from it he decided the water might not be as tasty as it used to be. The barrel of mead had been the only drinkable thing he had found so he'd taken a full flask of it with him.

His torn shirt had been replaced with one that had a single hole in its side and not much blood staining it. He'd done his best to cover the small wounds on his back and clean them.

It wasn't his first time camping out and even though he had never done it all alone, he had seen all the preparations done plenty of times to get most of the things done.

He had headed north from the estate to catch the river. His hope was that he'd be able to flag down a ship going to Ramyn. That would cut down the travel time significantly, but even if he couldn't do that, the river would be an infallible guide to the city and his path was less likely to cross with bandits or other nasty people.

He figured it would take maybe a week to walk. His step was not that long and an entire day of walking was beyond his strength, which added to the time. If he got a ship then it would be only a day or two, depending how far along he had gotten. He had tried to find a horse, but they had all scattered away or the attackers had taken them with them as loot.

The small twigs did not make much of a fire, but it was enough to keep the worst of the darkness away as he ate his last meal for the day and drank some mead. It made his head hurt, but at the same time it spread a pleasant warmth through his body and made him feel even more sleepy. The hard ground did not feel as uncomfortable after a few swigs and the haze kept away the worst of his nightmares. More than once he woke up during the night, but he always fell back to sleep quickly.

He woke up with a headache and a dry mouth. The mead did not taste that appealing, but he forced himself to drink some while nibbling on a piece of bread. He then packed his belongings into the bag he'd found and started to walk again. Around noon he arrived at the river.

The brown water did not look appealing at all, but he gave it a taste anyway. He decided the mead was the better option. Looking up and down the stream he did not see any ships or boats making their way. He knew the river to be heavily trafficked so there was a good chance he'd see something during the day so he started to walk upstream.

The river ran through the entire Ramyn empire. It was wide and deep enough for sea going vessels to sail all the way to the city of Ramyn. After that it narrowed and became shallower, making it so the largest vessels could go no further.

Cheid thanked the gods for the good weather. The sky barely had a cloud in it and a gentle breeze kept the worst of the heat away. Had it been raining the trip might have stalled before even starting.

The river banks were low and in many places the tall grass reached all the way to the edge of the water. In the distance, far from the river, he could occasionally see smoke rising from farm houses. Visiting them did not seem like a good idea to him. A small boy with such a tattered appearance would find no end to their concerns and they would demand he stay with them instead of going on alone. Maybe they'd listen to him and offer a ride, but that did not seem very likely.

He had much time to think as he put one foot in front of the other. He returned to the fire that had erupted from his hand. After considering how it all had happened he had to admit magic was the only viable explanation. How or why remained a mystery, but there was no denying what had happened. He tried to trace back that feeling he had had then and managed to get a little tingling going through his feet, though that might have just been because of the walking.

No flames were forth coming from his hands this time.

He stopped for a quick rest in the early afternoon before continuing on. Late afternoon he spotted a fire by the shore. The tall mast of a ship was further away from the shore. The boy hastened his steps, hoping the chance for a ride had come across.

He emerged from amongst the tall grass into a sandy bend in the river. What he found there were four men around a fire and a rowing boat pulled ashore.

"It done yet?" asked one of the men. "The captain told us to be quick."

"You can't hurry medicine, Shet," replied the oldest of the men and sprinkled something in a pot that was hung over the fire.

One of the men snorted. "Your so called medicines work as good as shit, Feld, and you know it."

"I didn't hear you complaining when I cured your shit from running like water," retorted Feld.

"Well, your cure tasted like shit," said the man, clearly lacking any better comeback.

"All right, Feld, Tom, stop it. We've got company," said the remaining man and nodded towards Cheid. "What are you doing here, boy?"

All the men turned to look at the boy. He was very aware of their eyes on him and he noted that each of them had a blade to their waist and their hands at the ready to grab them as quickly as possible.

"I saw your fire and the mast of your ship. I seek passage to Ramyn," said Cheid. He did his best to sound confident.

The men exchanged looks. "That's a long way for a boy your age to take on alone," said the man who had first noticed him.

"Hah! You know you walked all the way from Voldale to Ramyn at his age, Derek," noted Tom.

"Shut it, Tom!" snapped Derek and gave the man a glare that would have made a wolf cover.

"I am on a journey to meet my father," said Cheid. He did not want to reveal the full truth to these men. They'd spill their guts as soon as the ship arrived at the harbour and he did not want the rumours to reach his father before he did. Getting to the palace would be time consuming, after all.

The men still looked suspicious.

"I have gold so I can pay," added Cheid and pulled a pouch from his belt. He opened it and pulled out a few coins. Robbing the dead bodies had not been a high point in his life, but he knew full well that few if any captain would let him on-board for free. There was always a price to pay and he'd figured it would be easier to pay it with gold rather than work. It had been surprising how much the men attacking had missed in their fervour.

He had enough to pay for passage ten times over and still be left with enough to live in Ramyn for a couple of weeks in relative comfort.

The sight of glimmering gold washed away all of the suspicion from the men's faces. "All right, boy. You can come aboard with us, but it's still the captain

that makes the final decision. If he orders it we'll throw you in the river." Derek gave Cheid a stern look with no hint of humour in it. He meant every word he said.

"I understand," said Cheid and put away his coins.

"All right. You ready yet, Feld?"

The old man dipped a wooden spoon in what ever was cooking in the pot and gave it a stir. He let the green liquid drip from the spoon before nodding approvingly. "All done, Derek."

"Good. Let's get back to the ship."

Tom and Shet grabbed the pot and carried it onto the rowing boat while Derek and Feld looked on.

"Get in, boy," ordered Derek and Cheid climbed to the back of the boat. Feld took a seat next to him while Tom and Shet took the middle seat with a row each. Derek pushed the boat into the water before hopping into the front seat.

The ship was a standard three mast used to haul goods up the river and along the coast. Cheid couldn't observe much more of it because he had to turn his head to avoid the foul smell coming from the pot.

"What is it that you were doing on the beach?" asked Cheid from the old man sitting next to him.

"Cooking up some medicine," replied Feld. "One of the boys got himself a real nasty case of bellyrot."

Cheid grew a bit pale at hearing that. He wasn't worried about getting the disease. It didn't get transmitted from human to human, but who ever had the misfortune of getting bit by the insect that carried it usually ended up dead in a way that was horrific to watch. It was like their stomach went through an intense and quick rotting, leaving nothing but skin hanging from ribs to pelvis.

"You think this will cure him?" asked Cheid.

"Either that or it'll kill him quick," replied Feld and chuckled.

Cheid was happy to get on-board the ship even if the crew was dealing with a horrible situation. The captain was eager to let him take the short passage with them after seeing the gold the boy had to offer. A cabin was arranged for him in short order and before he knew it he was laying in a relatively comfortable bunk

with the knowledge that when the sun rose the next day he'd be in Ramyn.

He'd find his father in the imperial palace and tell him everything. He'd know what to do and every wrong would be righted.

Chapter 3

Emperor Raenim Thraomdan glared at the messenger. Anger boiled inside him and his hands were clutched in tight fists. Everyone present could see that he was bulging by the seams to contain himself. Given the news that had been brought, they could not blame him.

“And you are absolutely certain of this?” demanded the emperor.

The messenger nodded. “I wish it were any other way, your highness, but I saw it. The entire estate was burned down. Bodies were everywhere. No one could have survived it given the state the remains were in. It was pure chance that I chose to stop there on my way here. Had I not, who knows how long it would have taken for word to reach you. I nearly rode my horse to death getting here.”

“Summon Cerith Strihin! Right now!” roared Raenim and stood up from his throne. A purple cape rustled around his broad shoulders. The crown he wore was the only thing keeping his brown hair in order and away from his face. Raenim paced in front of the throne, impatiently. His advisers stood silent. Only the echoes of the emperors footsteps broke the silence. Usually the large throne room would have been filled with members of the court, but they had been ordered to clear out. They would hear the sad news soon enough and then there would be no end to their crocodile tears and thinly veiled attempts at compassion in an effort to gain favour.

Sometimes Raenim wondered why he put up with the lot of them.

He stopped to look at one of the many paintings decorating the walls. This one was of his father. He stood atop a battlement with the emperors sword held high, his purple cape fluttering behind him as a mass of soldiers rushed past him at the distant enemy.

He knew the man in the picture would have been able to protect his daughter. Why had he failed?

The assassination attempt had been a shock. Raenim had made the tough decision to entrust her safety fully to the Strihin family. They had already looked after her on several occasions and they had at times looked after the emperor

himself when he had been younger. They knew how to keep people safe. For some reason they had failed.

Failure was not something the emperor looked kindly on.

The heavy doors opening drew him from his thoughts and he turned to look at the man walking down the red carpet. He was dressed in blue and had the air of a warrior about him. His brown hair was cut short and his broad shoulders told of hours spent training his body.

“Cerith,” the emperor greeted the man without formalities. “Have you heard the news?”

The man stopped for a short bow. “News, your highness? What news?” His coarse voice sounded like he had been shouting for hours on straight and broken something in his throat.

“Your estate. It has been sacked. Everyone killed,” replied the emperor. “My daughter! Killed!” His voice rose into a rage filled shout.

The news shocked Cerith into silence. How could that be? Few if anyone knew where the princess had been taken. Sacked? Everyone killed?

Cheid..

“Your majesty, are you certain of this?” he asked. It was clear to everyone present he was having a hard time maintaining control over himself.

“The man next to you has seen it for himself,” the emperor declared. “How could this happen?”

“I..I do not know, your highness,” said Cerith, clearly stumped by the news. His mind was working on a list of people who had been at the estate. He knew his brother had been there with his wife to look after Cheid. He was relieved to find many of the family were in Ramyn and thus safe, but the fate of his own son weighed heavily on him. Still, he had to give priority to the heir to the throne.

“You do not know?” the calmness with which the emperor said it did not bode well.

“Did this man see the body of the princess?” asked Cerith.

The emperor glanced at the messenger.

“As I said, your highness, many of the bodies were burned beyond recognition. Of course, I can not be certain I saw every body. I left in a hurry to

bring the news.”

“Then the princess might yet be alive,” said Cerith. “Your highness, allow me to form a search party. We must make haste if we are to find her. The chance might be small, but we must be certain before we throw it away. She could have escaped.” Inside he held the same hope for his son.

Raenim stopped pacing and considered the proposition. Maybe the man was right, but he and his family had already failed. Could they be trusted? He shook his head. No, the Strihin family had nothing more left for them but punishment.

“You will not be leading any search party, Cerith Strihin,” the emperor stated. “Nor will anyone else in your family. Guards, arrest him!”

“Your highness!” Cerith protested, but the guards followed the orders without question. His sword was quickly taken from his side and strong arms grabbed him from either side while several others had their spears pointed at him.

“The Strihin family has failed in their duties towards the emperor!” Raenim roared. “From this day on they are stripped of all their rights and properties as nobles of the Ramyn Empire. Their names will be wiped from the books and every member of the family is to be arrested on sight. Women, children and men alike. All of them!”

“As you decree, your highness,” came the voice of the court scribe. The grey haired man bowed and left the room to spread the word.

“You can't do this!” shouted Cerith as the guards began to drag him out of the room.

“I can and I have,” replied the emperor before turning his back on the man. Any further shouts he managed to get out fell on deaf ears. The doors slammed shut as the guards dragged him out of the room.

“Your majesty, was that wise? The nobles will not stand for a decision like that.”

Raenim turned towards the familiar voice. The old man had a hunched back and he was leaning heavily on his cane. His grey beard was well trimmed and groomed while his balding hair hung long where it still grew.

“They failed me, Theoden. They failed to protect my daughter so now she is

dead. The nobles will not object," he replied.

The old man nodded. "Perhaps so, your majesty, but Cerith did have a point. There is yet to be a body. There is still hope."

"There is no saving the Strihin family even if she lives," the emperor snapped and threw himself to his throne. "But we must search for her. The ruins must be thoroughly investigated."

"As you say, your majesty." Theoden nodded.

"The question is, who do we entrust with the burden? If I task them with finding my daughter they might never accomplish that task." It was a quest that could be viewed as a punishment as well as an opportunity. You would be forever in disfavour if you did not succeed. If you accomplished the task the reward would be a significant one. It was a double edged sword that few families in favour would welcome at their doorsteps.

"I might have a suitable person in mind, your majesty," said Theoden. The old man had a sly smile about him.

"Well, don't just stand there looking like a cat that has caught a mouse, tell me." There was impatience in Raenims voice.

"You might recall Lord Kalunta passing away a few months ago."

"Oh, yes, old Klanker," said the emperor, using the nickname the man had earned among the court. He remembered well the old fart. The man had liked to spend gold; lavish parties, jewellery, what ever allowed him to show off his wealth.

"It seems a large portion of his wealth was make belief. Loaned gold, your majesty. He left his heirs in considerable debt. The oldest of the sons is barely twenty and doing his best to repair the havoc his father caused, but as talented as he is, I doubt he will succeed. Not without favours."

It was not hard to see where the old advisor was going with it. A family already on the brink of falling would welcome such a task. They'd put all their energy into it to gain favour. If they failed it would not be a huge loss as the family was already falling apart. "Will they be able to do it?" asked Raenim.

"Orend, the eldest of the sons, is one of the finest warriors I have met, but at the same time he has the tongue of a diplomat, your majesty." Theoden shifted

his weight to his other leg. Age was starting to take its toll and a pain was surging up his right leg all the way to his pelvis. “I hear his little brother is quite the hunter and can trace a deer better than the forest rangers. Together they will succeed, your majesty.”

The emperor nodded. He liked what he was hearing. The sort of men he would be happy to grant favour if they succeeded. Not the schemers and plotters that infested the court. “Very well. Summon them. I want to meet them as soon as possible.”

“As you wish, your majesty,” said Theoden and bowed before hobbling out of the hall. The emperor waved others to follow him and was left alone to digest the news that had been told. The old man could hear the sobs right before he closed the door.



“I will have the money for you by the end of the week,” assured Orend and gave the man sitting opposite to him a pleasant smile. In truth he wanted to reach for his sword and skewer the fat bastard dressed in the finest silks. He cursed his father for loaning money to live a lifestyle beyond his means.

“You better, your grace, or I will come claiming land,” said the merchant in the sort of voice only a man who spent most of his days resting on a divan could use. He could be described in one word: flabby. His face was obnoxiously fat, though it fit his large body, and every time the man laughed his nerve racking laugh there were multiple layers of fat below his chin that went into motion.

There was nothing Orend despised more than a man who did nothing but eat and sleep. “Are you threatening a noble of the empire?” he asked in a dangerous voice.

“Goodness no, my lord,” the merchant said quickly. Even if he was collecting a legitimate debt there were still things he could not do or say to a noble. “Merely stating the facts of the agreement your father signed.”

“I've given you my answer. I will see to it that you get your gold.”

“I appreciate your willingness to work with me, lord Kalunta,” said the merchant and stood up. His stubby feet could barely carry him out of the room,

though that was as far as he had to walk. There were servants waiting for him outside who'd help him up to his palanquin.

Orend sighed and stood up. The room was lined by bookshelves. The only places where there weren't book backs were the two windows and the door leading out. It was his fathers study in their city home. He had loved books, though the outside world had seen him as nothing more than a party organizer and a source of entertainment.

He walked to one of the shelves and opened the small chest that was there. There were three pouches there and he tried the weight of each one. There was not much gold in them, not enough to pay the merchant. He put the pouches back in and raked his hands through his thick, black hair. Where would he get the gold the merchant wanted? He had already squeezed all the gold he could from the peasants renting land from the family. Would he finally have to resort to selling property?

Then the cycle would begin. More debtors would come collecting, more property would need to be sold. In the end the result would be the same as not paying the debts.

The door opened and his little brother stepped inside. "How did it go?" the younger man asked and took the same seat the merchant had used.

"About as we expected, Loren." Orend went back to his seat. "He gave us until the end of the week."

Loren had the same sort of black hair as his brother, though he was of slimmer build than he was and a palms width shorter. Though most of that could be put on the account of the four years that separated them in age. "Any idea where we'll get the gold?"

Orend shrugged his shoulders. His green eyes measured his little brother. "All I can think of is selling property."

Loren frowned at hearing the news. He had grown accustomed to his big brother pulling surprise after surprise from somewhere to stem the debtors from staking their claims. He had always found gold to pay the debts owed. Now it looked like he had run out of tricks. "You always said we would not sell any of our properties."

"I wish I could keep to that, but there just isn't anything else left," said Orend and rubbed his nose. A hair from his moustache had gone awry and tickled him.

"So this is the end of the Kalunta family?" asked Loren.

"Do not despair, little brother. We will think of something. We will prevail." Orend tried to sound confident even though inside he was feeling perhaps even more beaten than his brother.

A knock on the door interrupted their conversation. A servant entered. "My lord, a messenger from the emperor has arrived. Your presence is requested at the palace immediately."

"Thank you," said Orend and the servant bowed and backed out of the room. He leaned back in his chair and gave Loren a curious look. "What could the emperor want with me?"

The younger man shrugged his shoulders. "I have no idea, but I do know one thing. You best not keep him waiting."

"You are right," admitted Orend and stood up. It did not take long for him to change into an attire that was fit for seeing the emperor. A blue cape along with a blue silk shirt and trousers of the same colour made him look like a real noble. He quickly made his way through the streets of the nobles layer of Ramyn. Tall walls sectioned off large city manors while in places it was the street facing side of the building that served that purpose. It all depended on the preferences of the owner.

He cursed as he saw the disc at the transport station rise just as he got it into view. It would mean he'd have to wait for it to come down, further delaying his arrival at the palace.

Tall walls surrounded the station and the guards inspected everyone looking to go to the palace. Orend showed his travel pass and was let through the sturdy looking gate without much hassle. Without the pass the guards would have turned him away without questions. You simply did not go to the palace layer of the city without one.

Ramyn was a city of layers. At the top there was the imperial palace. Below the floating mass of land was the layer of the nobles and their city estates. Below

that was the ground level – a central island in the middle of the large Ramyn river – with the harbours on its southern and northern shores. The city expanded further on both shores of the river. At the ground level lived the wealthy merchants and artisans and other common people. On the central island, there were layers below ground level that had the poorest of the poor living in it. The bottom of each layer had an enchantment on it that portrayed the sky in order to make living under a floating mass of land bearable for everyone.

Orend looked up once more and saw the transport disc disappear into a black hole in the otherwise blue sky. It would take a while for it to come back down. It was a slow time of day so there were not that many people waiting with him. A few bureaucrats with their piles of papers and a scribe that was accompanying them, another well dressed noble no doubt on his way to the court.

He gave the noble a nod as acknowledgement and received one in return. Neither saw the need for further exchange of word or gestures. Orend tapped his foot against the ground and looked up impatiently. He saw the disc emerge from the black hole and make its way down.

Moved by elemental spirits and an elementalist controlling them, the disc floated up and down seemingly on its own. Orend gave the young magician controlling it a nod as the disc came to a halt and the passengers got on board. He made his way to the centre of the disc. Some liked to go to the edge and look down for the view, but he found it made his palms sweat and heart throb like it wanted to burst out of his chest. Standing in the centre of the disc made him feel somewhat better.

The disc rose gently from the ground and accelerated towards the black hole in the sky. Orend made certain not to look up either. Despite the fake sky he always felt like he was headed towards solid ground and would be crushed on impact. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. The change in the air told him they had entered the tunnel that went through all the land and finally emerged in a similar transport station as they had parted from.

The only difference was that while the one below had been set up to keep people outside the transport station, this one was set up to keep people inside it.

The wall encircled the yard the disc emerged in and the guards were keeping their eye on it rather than the palace that stretched beyond the walls.

Orend had to show his pass again in order to be allowed on the palace grounds, but as below the guards did not hassle him much after seeing he had the proper credentials.

The gates opened to a large parade ground. On special occasions it would be filled with the imperial legions marching with their flags held high. On either side there were areas reserved for seating that would be erected when needed. There were barracks and the bureaucrats buildings a bit further ahead the field and beyond that started the huge palace complex that took up most of the layer.

“Ah, there you are, lord Orend.”

“Lord Theoden. What brings you out here?” Orend eyed the old man. He sat on a chair that two servants could carry. Were it not for his old age such a thing would have been viewed as boasting within the palace grounds.

“You,” replied the man and instructed his servants to lift up the chair and follow the younger noble.

“Does this have something to do with why I was summoned to see the emperor?” Orend knew the old man to be a close advisor to the emperor. If he had come all the way out to the transport station to meet someone like him then there had to be something very important going on.

“That is part of it,” said the man and looked down on Orend. The servants kept pace right next to him as they crossed the parade grounds. “I would give you advice, if you are willing to accept such from an old man like myself.”

“Do not sell yourself short, lord Theoden. You have the emperors ear and mine are far less worthy of your advice.”

“Do not sell yourself short either, young Kalunta.” Theoden looked at him intently. “I've kept an eye on you. Out of pure curiosity to see how you would handle the mess your father left you in. I have to say you have done well, considering.”

Orend took the compliment with a graceful nod. “Thank you, though I have to admit I find myself against a wall at this time.”

“Ah, yes. The merchant Sicer. He is a soft man, but drives a hard bargain. I

take it today's meeting with him did not go well?"

"You are well informed, my lord," said Orend and did his best to hide his surprise. The fact the old man knew about the meeting told how closely he had been keeping an eye on the situation. "I fear we will have to start selling property to cover what we owe him." Normally he would not have volunteered such information, but given how much Theoden had shown to know, he had little doubt he already knew how deep the family troubles had gotten.

Theoden nodded. "That is why I urge you to openly welcome the emperors task."

"He has a task for me?"

"For your family."

They entered the palace and walked through a maze of corridors to arrive at the door to the throne room. Orend had plenty of time to think about what the emperor might be offering him. Why would he bother with such a low ranked family? One that was in trouble, no less?

Perhaps it was exactly because of those things, which would mean the task being given could well end up ruining any family that had the misfortune of receiving it.

Theoden said he would wait outside for him to return. He indicated there was something more he wanted to talk about, but could only do so after the emperor had given his task.

With a bit of anxiety, Orend stepped into the throne room.

Coming back out the anxiety he had felt coming in seemed like a pleasant feeling. The weight that had been put on his shoulders by the emperor was nothing short of crushing, though he recognized the immense benefit if he managed to bear the load. More than that he felt the responsibility over the young life of the princess.

"I take it you accepted?" asked Theoden. He was right where he had been earlier, sitting in his chair.

Orend simply nodded.

"It is no easy task you have been given, unless it happens that you find the body of the princess in the ruins."

"I pray that she is still alive," replied Orend and started down the corridor. Theoden followed, carried by his servants.

"How will you manage this?" asked the old man with a sly look. "You will have to travel and leave the family matters behind."

Orend had not thought about that. He had already planned taking Loren with him, but that would leave no one to manage things. How would they handle the financial troubles?

"Ah, I see you had not thought about that," continued Theoden after observing the young man for a moment. "I can offer you a solution."

"What sort of a solution, my lord?" Orend was weary. It was seldom that another noble offered another anything without some hidden agenda, something that would further their own position.

"You have to sell some of your property, of that there is no doubt. What I am proposing, is that you sell to me."

"And why should we do that?" asked Orend. Certainly Theoden would be a better owner than many others, but there was no reason why everything should go to him exclusively. An open bid would net a higher price after all.

"Because if you find the princess alive, I will return everything to you."

Orend raised an eyebrow. "Why would you do that?"

"I want you to succeed in your task. The life of the princess is worth much more than the meagre amounts of gold we are talking about. With peace of mind over your family affairs, you will have much more energy to put towards finding her."

"And if I fail? Or find the princess dead?"

"Then I keep the properties I have bought," replied Theoden without a hint of hesitation.

Orend had to admit the plan was brilliant. For the old man. The chances of finding the princess alive were slim so the likelihood of him getting to keep all that he bought was high. Even if the princess was returned alive and well, he would get to bask in the glory of suggesting the right man for the job. The emperor had not told who had suggested him, but it was not difficult to see who was pulling the strings in this play.

On the other hand, he could not see downside in the deal. The property had to be sold in any case and having even the slim chance of getting it back was more than he'd get from anyone else.

"If we are to agree to this, I expect the entire thing in writing and notarized by the head bureaucrat of Trade," said Orend. He knew the reputation of that man. There was no bribing him and if he said something it was usually the truth. It did not earn him friends, but it did make him the most trustworthy person to oversee any deals made between two parties.

Theoden let out a dry laugh. "You are a careful man, Orend. I was right to take interest in you." He took a deep breath. "Very well. We will do as you ask. I will have the papers done within the hour."

"Thank you."

"Don't thank me yet. You might end up cursing me before long," said Theoden.

Orend smiled. "Perhaps so. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have to go prepare for a search that might take the rest of my life."

Chapter 4

Cheid was disappointed to find that the ship had not arrived in Ramyn as he had expected it to. During the night the crewman with the bellyrot had died and the captain had ordered a day long halt to bury the man as was traditional among sea men. Whether the man had died from the disease or from the medicine he had been fed, Cheid did not know, but he hoped it to be the latter that took his life. He suspected part of the reason for the halt was the captains desire to save a bit of gold by building the raft from scrap wood found along the river bank instead of having to buy it if they went all the way to Ramyn.

At least sending the man off would be easier without all the harbours getting in the way.

He did not have much to do as the ship laid anchored in the middle of the river, other ships passing by in silence. The crew were toasting to their lost comrade, at least those that were not busy preparing the raft that would send their comrade on his final trip down the river and onwards to the sea. He went around and listened in on the conversations and occasionally asked some questions of his own.

He learned of the good wind that had put the ship ahead of its schedule, which was one of the reasons the captain was willing to make the stops he had made. He learned of the cargo – precious items from the south to be sold at the market.

Three meals meant he didn't go hungry and against all odds the food wasn't that bad either. Still, the boy was relieved when night finally started to creep over everything and it was time to sleep. The fact he had been delayed by a day still weighed heavily on him. The news was important and needed to be delivered quickly, but at the same time he knew there was nothing he could do about it. He was still just a boy and on a ship the captains word was final.

As morning came and Cheid made his way up to the deck, he was pleased to see the central island of Ramyn just ahead. It was a sight to behold and it was his

first time seeing it from the point of view of a ship approaching from downstream.

The walls of the ground level layer stood tall atop the high cliffs that made up the tip of the island. Above it floated the two layers of land that held the nobles estates and the imperial palace. It was a wonder that had no rival in the world.

He leaned on a railing and looked on as the ship sailed onward, past the huge chains that had been lowered to allow access to the harbours. He noted the captain was going for the southern port on the central island, which suited him fine. From there it would not be a long way to a transport point to get to the nobles layers.

Cheid went back to his cabin and quickly put together his belongings. In the end the ship had not saved him much time, but at least it got him straight to the central island instead of having to walk through the tunnel that went under the river to connect the island to both sides of the shore.

As he emerged back on deck the ship was already in the process of docking. Lines were thrown to the men at the pier and preparations were being made to unload the cargo. Cheid gave the captain a thank you and walked down the plank that served as a bridge between the ship and the shore.

There were several other ships docked along the same pier and there were people going every which direction along with wagons pulled by horses. Barrels and crates formed piles that made walking seem like you were in a maze. Cheid let out a sigh of relief as he finally made it to the end of the pier and felt the solid ground under his feet. The crowd thinned and he did not have to worry about getting trampled as much.

“Have you heard about the Strihin family?”

The question caught Cheids ear as he was walking by and stopped to listen in.

“No? What has happened?”

“The emperor has ordered all members of the family arrested on sight.”

“What could have caused that? They're a noble family.”

“The rumour is they failed to protect the princess. Rumours say she is dead.”

“Well, that'll get you on the bad side of the emperor.”

“That's not all. Apparently they're going to execute the head of the family today in the central market square.”

Cheid froze in his place at hearing what the two men were talking about. He had expected his father to solve the situation, but it now looked like the last remaining pillar in his life had been smashed to pieces. How could the emperor make such a decision? Who had brought the news of the attack?

He turned to the men. “When is the execution going to take place?”

Both looked down at the boy. The other one grinned. “Looking to see the blood spill, eh boy?”

“When?” demanded Cheid and stared down the grinning man as much as a small boy could.

The man's grin turned into a frown. “If you hurry you might yet make it to see it.”

Cheid didn't bother to thank the man. He sprinted onward towards the central market. He knew the city well enough not to get lost. The route was not difficult as all he had to do was aim for the centre of the island. Still, for someone who did not know the city layout Ramyn was an easy place to get lost in.

The buildings on the ground level were tall and there were ramps leading up to walkways and bridges that hugged the sides of buildings and formed streets of their own. If you looked up you could see people going about their business on the walkways as if they were walking on solid ground. It formed a maze if you ventured out of the main streets and finding your way could become difficult.

The central market was not difficult to find. The street from the southern harbour lead almost straight to it. The biggest obstacles were the people that filled the street from side to side and the wagons that tried to navigate through the sea of people. For a small boy like Cheid the greatest threat was getting shoved down so he had to keep his wits about him and more than once he had to dodge as some adult ran past. A few times he almost got stomped by a horse.

He returned the curses the wagon driver hurled at him.

As he got closer to the market square the amount of people only increased. It was clear something was going on, though the market drew a lot of people even on quiet days. Cheid was too short to see it past all the adults, but as he arrived

at the square the crowd tightened and everyone was facing the tall wooden construct in the centre of it.

The crowd was silent and listening intently to a man reading a proclamation.

“..thus the emperor has decreed that Cerith Strihin be executed for his failure in securing the life of the imperial princess, Eleria Thraomdan. It is further decreed that the Strihin family name be purged from amongst the noble families. Any member of the family is to be arrested on sight. Further executions will follow in the arena as members are captured.”

Cheid pushed on as the crowd cheered. They always cheered when there was more blood to be had and all it would cost them was admittance to the arena. The fact the herald had stopped with the announcement meant the execution was about to take place. With the agility only a boy of his age could hold in a crowd, Cheid pushed onward, under peoples arms, between their legs, through any open space he could find. He finally caught a glimpse of the wooden structure and the figure kneeling down on it.

He knew it to be his father.

“Father!” he shouted and rushed forward. He shouted it again, not caring that the crowd might turn on him upon realizing who he was. Most of the people who he passed paid him no attention, thinking he was just a boy who had gotten separated from his parent, but some gave him a closer look and whispered to those next to them.

Cheid caught another glimpse of the scene unfolding. A man with a mean looking axe had appeared next to his father.

“Father, no! It's not his fault! Don't kill him!” Cheid cried out and continued to push forward in the crowd. He could see the axe raising. Then strong arms grabbed him from behind and a hand went over his mouth, stifling any further cries. He struggled, but there was no give in the hold that had him. Even as he struggled he saw the axe come down and the crowd exploded into cheers.

He knew it was over.

He allowed his captor to carry him away without further struggle.



Orend had departed from Ramyn the very same day the emperor had tasked him with finding the princess. He was completely unaware that the same day his best clue had sailed into port at the very same city. Together with Loren and ten men he trusted with his life, he rode on through the night and arrived at the ruined Strihin estate as the sun began to properly give out its warmth. He thanked the gods for the small favour that it had not rained.

Even after days past, there was still some smoke coming from hot spots underneath the rubble. The outside walls were surprisingly intact, but it was clear the assault had been a devastating one as the roofs had all collapsed.

“Loren, take a few men. See if you can get any trails from the surroundings,” Orend ordered. He had full confidence that if there was anything to be found, even the faintest of tracks, his little brother would find it. He had a knack for it and more than once he had tracked deer and other game on their hunting trips that even the seasoned veterans had had trouble finding.

Dressed in green travel clothes, the younger man gave a silent nod and motioned two men with him and began to circle around the premises. Orend rode on with the remaining eight men and entered the estate through the shattered gate. It was clear there had been something else at work than a siege weapon. Only magic could have thrown the sturdy gate from its hinges and far into the yard where it still laid. A pair of legs stuck out from underneath it, telling of the sudden nature of the event.

A flock of ravens fluttered up into the air. From afar it would have looked like a column of smoke suddenly shooting up and flailing around in different directions before making its way down to the ground again. The birds landed on the high points of the ruins, eyeing the group of men on the yard, hackling them with their caws.

Orend looked up at the bird with a frown before turning his attention back to the ground. The smell of death had the nostrils of his horse flaring and it made him want to dig out a piece of cloth and soak it in something more pleasant smelling. But he endured and jumped down from his horse.

The crows had done their job with the bodies. Empty eye sockets looked up at him and torn flesh gaped open where it might have once been intact. Lumps of

meat were scattered all around as the birds had been scared away from their feast.

He patted the side of his horse as it let out a nervous whine. "All right men. We have a job to do. Inspect every body. Leave a mark on those you've gone through. You know what we're looking for. If you find the princess or any body that might be her, call out to me."

Silently, the men dismounted and went to work. Gruesome as the work was, these were veterans from the borderlands of the north. The Karan Mountain Range belonged to the dwarves and their kingdom, but such a vast area of difficult terrain offered too many places to hide. There were all sorts of evil creatures there that sometimes made their way down to cause problems to the villagers living near the foot of the mountains.

These men had seen it all before and worse.

Orend walked around careful not to step on anyone. More than once he shook his head as the full horror of what had taken place gave a glimpse of itself in the form of slain children and women with their torn clothes and gaping wounds. The true shock was when he found Cheid's uncle and his wife. He had met the man on a few occasions and had been impressed by his knowledge in matters of military.

He sat down at a bench nearby and pondered the situation. The destruction was far worse than he had anticipated. Parts of the buildings had collapsed, making it difficult if not impossible to find every body that there was. He had seen burned bodies sticking out from some of the buildings and that would make it that much harder to determine who they had been. The only consolation he could come up with was that there wouldn't be many children the same age as the princess.

It wasn't his first time seeing dead bodies. He had been to villages the orcs had raided and they hadn't been that dissimilar from what he was seeing now. The only difference was the torn down gate. Orcs did not use magic in such ways and it was unthinkable that a large enough group of them could have travelled so close to the heart of the empire. That begged the question who was behind the attack?

Orend shook his head.

It was no time to be thinking about that. What mattered was finding the princess. He stood up and began helping the men look through the bodies. It was no time to put yourself above such work either. The fate of the entire family rested on accomplishing the task handed down.

They searched for the entire day. The lack of sleep began to take its toll, but Orend insisted on pushing on and as the sun started to lower they had gone through most of the bodies they could get to without having to dig too much rubble. Loren rode in with his two men just as Orend and his men started to wind down and gather the horses.

They were not about to sleep in the middle of the corpses.

“Did you find anything?” asked Orend.

Loren reached down to his saddlebag and produced a piece of cloth. “I found two tracks. One just south of here. An escape tunnel hidden in some bushes. Another went north of here, towards the river.”

Orend took the piece of cloth. It wasn't of high quality, but it did clearly belong to a woman's dress. “Which tracks had this?”

“The southern ones,” replied Loren. “I doubt the northern ones belong to the princess. They're clearly a boys tracks and it looks like he left well after the attack was over. I tracked him all the way back to the gate.”

It would make sense for the princess to have used an escape tunnel. It was where she would have been ferried off the moment the attack happened. But who was the one who survived the full on attack and walked away through the front gate? Had he seen something? Both trails warranted investigation.

“Are the tracks hard to follow?” He knew a few of the men were decent enough trackers. If the trails weren't too obscured they could afford to split up.

“Nothing I or Oughund couldn't follow,” replied the younger brother, referring to one of the men that had been with him. The grey bearded bald man with broad shoulders gave a silent nod in agreement from top of his horse. He was only slightly behind Loren and Orend could clearly see his grey eyes and nose that had been broken multiple times.

The older brother returned the nod. “Then here is what we will do. Loren,

you take four men with you and go after the northern tracks. I'll take Oughund and the rest and follow the southern ones. If you find the survivor, question him and see if he knows anything about what happened to the princess. Then come back and meet with the rest of us. If the trail goes cold, come back to us as well."

Loren nodded. "We'll start first thing in the morning."

Orend wished it were possible to track in the dark, but he had to admit a good night's sleep sounded good too. "Come then. Let's set up camp outside. Sleeping with the dead is in no way tempting."

They set up camp a good way away from the ruined estate. The crows returned to their feast while the men huddled around their camp-fire and wrapped themselves in their bedrolls.



No one paid attention as Cheid was dragged through the crowd and onto a side street. From there he was dragged to a small alley no one would look into for fear of getting the attention of a robber.

"That was foolish of you, boy. Had anyone paid attention you'd have been up there right next to your father," said his captor as he released the hold on him and set him leaning against a wall. The boy quickly slumped down to the ground in a sitting position.

Cheid looked at the old man with blank eyes. He was an unremarkable sight in his grey robe, though he was tall and stood straight for someone of his age. The white hair and beard along with wrinkled skin told of the years that he had seen pass by, though the brown eyes that examined the boy looked as lively as any young man's.

"Then why don't you take me to the authorities?" asked Cheid. "I'm certain you would get a handsome reward for it." The bitterness in his voice could have glued together two rampaging grizzly-bears. The emperor had abandoned his family the moment a mistake had been made, no matter that his family had paid a much higher price for it already.

The old man snorted. "Why would I do that? When you have such an interesting story yet to tell. Would be a shame if your throat was cut before you

told it to someone.”

“Who are you and why do you care what I've seen?” demanded Cheid.

The old man glanced around the alley. There was no one around and the people passing by on the wider street paid no attention to what was going on in the dimly lit alley. “I'm Skander Joligan,” he finally muttered and observed his prisoner closely.

Cheid had heard that name. Few could say they hadn't. The man was the master of one of the Towers of Magic – a place where many would be wizards went to seek their education. The five towers rose from the waters south of the island, one tower for each of the four elements as well as the most recently discovered Free magic. He was a wizard of renowned strength and connections. He was someone who could make things happen if he so chose.

Skander knelt down next to the boy and looked him straight in the eye. “I know you have been through a lot and I can't begin to imagine all the feelings that must be running through you. What happened to your family is a tragedy and I can't say I agree with the emperors decision, but he is the emperor. That being said, I would like to hear what you witnessed at your family estate. There has been no sign of princess Eleria. She might yet be alive or she might be dead, but you are the only witness to the event so anything you can tell might lead to finding her fate. You do want to find her, don't you?”

Cheid had not really considered her fate that much. He had assumed her dead along with the rest. He had to admit the old man had a point. He had come to the city to tell the news to his father, but since he was gone along with everyone else who would listen to him, there was no reason not to tell what he knew to the man. “I'll tell you what I know,” he finally said in a quiet voice.

Skander nodded. A small smile crept on his lips as a growl escaped from Cheid's stomach. “You hungry boy?”

Cheid nodded.

“Come on then. I'll treat you to a meal and you can tell me what you know.” Skander offered his hand to help the boy stand up and Cheid took it. They walked out of the alley looking like any normal pair of grandfather and grandson out on a stroll. The central market area was peppered with taverns so they had

no trouble finding one with a quiet corner where they could talk in private.

They did not have to wait long for the inn keeper to bring a large bowl full of stew, a thick piece of dark bread and some cheese and honey. Cheid had not eaten anything since morning so he dug in with a passion. The food tasting good was only a further benefit.

Skander let the boy eat some before starting to ask questions of what had happened. In between mouthfuls the boy told his story. The food seemed to help him push aside emotions that recalling the events would otherwise have brought up. Even the old wizard found himself a little shocked at the brutality of the attack and the ease with which it had been pulled off. The boy did not seem to know anything about the princess or her fate, but what did catch Skander's attention was the manner with which he had survived the attack.

“How would you describe the feeling of it?” asked Skander and stared at the boy intently.

Cheid chewed down a spoonful of stew before responding. “It was like my entire body tingled. Then it all gathered into one spot and travelled down my arm and then..then it was released.”

“And has this happened to you before?”

Cheid shook his head and took a bite out of the bread slice. “I don't know what it is. I thanked the gods for it, but somehow that did not seem right. Was it magic?” The master of one of the towers was certain to know the answer.

Skander pondered what to do. He had thought of smuggling the boy out of the city and sending him off to safety with someone trustworthy. If the boy knew magic then his talents could not be wasted. He would need to study at the towers not only for his own safety, but that of others. He'd need a cover story, though that would be easy enough to provide. It would not be the first time he brought some farmers boy to the towers to learn magic. The problem would be if someone recognized him, though that seemed like a remote possibility. The young students rarely interacted with anyone from the outside and as he grew up it would be that much more difficult to identify him. Would the boy be able to keep his mouth shut, though?

“What do you plan to do now?” asked Skander, ignoring the question of

magic.

Cheid shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know." He looked defeated. "There's really nothing left for me..anywhere."

"What you described earlier really was magic," said Skander. "It was no act from the gods."

"But..there haven't been any wizards in my family."

"It's not strictly a thing you inherit. To be honest we're not completely certain how one is born with the ability." Skander shook his head. "I could talk for hours about the theories we have on it, but that's not something you'd be interested in right now. Would you like to learn more about magic?"

Cheid looked uncertain.

"I can get you into the towers, provided you pass the initial test," continued Skander. "You'll have a roof over your head, three meals a day, and others your age around you. You'd have to abandon your family name and keep it a secret from everyone, but you'd be free to learn a lot of things."

Cheid had to concede that learning more about the power that had saved his life was not something he could turn down easily. Even if it was only briefly, he had felt the power of it. And he needed power, especially after the emperors declaration. During his meal he had had time to think a bit on the situation and he now saw that there was still something left for him to do.

Revenge.

For that he would need power and possibly friends. After all, there had been many men involved in the attack. Dealing with them all alone would be difficult if not impossible. Skander could be an immense help in that. The magic would without a doubt be worth all the pains learning it would involve.

"I think I'd like that," replied Cheid. "But what is the initial test?"

"Oh, that. Don't worry about it. You won't have to do anything," assured Skander. "The examiners will do it all and I have no doubt you will pass. Provided that you told me the truth of how the events unfolded." The old man stared at him intently.

"I did not lie," assured Cheid.

"Good. Now then, let's talk about your made up past."

The old wizard ordered some more bread for the boy and began to explain his plan.

Chapter 5

The wagon rolled on for what seemed like forever. Eleria and the rest of the prisoners were not allowed outside save for a few breaks so they could relieve themselves. They spent the nights sleeping on the hard wooden floor, chained in their place. The men that had taken them stood guard in turns, making escape impossible even if you could somehow get free. But what could a young girl do against thick metal shackles and chains?

Even a grown man would have been kept in place.

Dry bread and warm water were all they got to eat while their captors feasted on stew, meat and mead on several occasions. The stomachs growling inside the wagon did little to hamper their appetite.

Eleria couldn't keep track of the days that went by. She couldn't bring herself to care. The other girls in the wagon seemed to be in a similar situation. None of them dared to talk to each other and everyone spent most of their time staring at the wooden floor. At times someone would sob, but Gip would quickly take note of it and put a stop to it with his cane.

All they could hear were the sounds outside to give some idea where they were going. For the longest time there were only the sounds of nature, but one day the sounds changed. The hooves of the horses hit cobblestone and the wagon started to rumble as it passed over the stones. There were voices and footsteps as people went about their daily chores. They had arrived at a city.

Finally, the wagon ground to a halt.

Seagulls cried in the sky and the sound of distant waves crashing and breaking was a tell tale sign they had arrived at a port of some sort. Suddenly, the canvas covering the back of the wagon was ripped aside and a man peered in. He frowned at seeing the girls chained up. For a moment he locked eyes with Eleria before she turned her gaze back to the floor.

"Hey, Gip. This isn't what we talked about," the man protested and turned away.

"What do you care? You'll get your gold," came the voice of Ben, followed

closely by the sound of coins changing hands. "It's not like what we're doing is illegal."

"You know the rules. You can't export slaves to the south unless you work for the Judiors." the man protested.

"Who says they're going to the south?" asked Gip.

"The cargo manifest for the ship you're getting on," came the reply. A few more coins exchanged owners.

"What cargo manifest?" asked Ben.

"That is odd. It seems to have gone missing," came the reply and a combined chuckle from all three men. A short moment later the wagon rolled on once more before stopping.

"All right. Out the lot of you," said Gip as he came to the back and undid the chains. The girls stood up and jumped down from the wagon. Ben was there to meet them and quickly herded them up a plank and onto a ship. He glanced around nervously, but no one was paying any attention. It was starting to get dark and the docks were largely empty, save for the few lights from other ships at anchor.

The crew watched silently as the girls were directed below deck and chained in place in a small, caged room. There were many other such rooms with people in them.

Eleria settled in a dark corner of the room and for the first time she wondered where she was going to end up.



Loren cursed and kicked the remains of the camp fire. The trail he had been following ended there. His prey had boarded a ship. He could have gone downstream or upstream. As good as Loren was, flowing water made it impossible to track which way they had gone.

If they'd gone up river to Ramyn it would be difficult to find them. With the amount of ships docked there every day remembering one was going to be difficult. On top of that, he had no idea what he was looking for. Even if he went to the city it was likely the ship in question had already departed for another

voyage by the time he arrived.

The story would be the same downstream, but even more so as there was no telling which city the ship would be going to. They might sail across the ocean all the way to Meledor for all he knew.

He cursed again.

He hated having to admit it, but the trail had gone cold on him.

Loren turned to his men. "Come on. There's nothing more we can do here. Let's head back and meet up with my brother."

He hoped his trail had not gone cold as quickly.



"Well?" asked Orend as he sat on his horse and watched Oughund meticulously inspect the side of the road.

"It's hard to say, my lord," replied the man. "Too many tracks. All I can say is ours lead here and then disappear."

"She must have been picked up by someone passing by," pondered Orend. He looked in both directions of the road. Which way had she gone? It was impossible to say. It could have been a passing by farmer that offered her a ride or something worse. If it had been more trouble then the wagon would have been headed away from Ramyn. The road led to the coast and ended up in the city of Gerum. It was a prosperous port and a hub for trade with the southern realms.

Orend knew what the south most sought after and the princess unfortunately fit their demands perfectly. It was not a hard decision in the end. If the princess had gotten a ride from a farmer than she was likely safe. If she had gotten in the wrong kind of wagon then she needed to be found quickly.

"All right men. We head for Gerum!"

Orend sent his horse galloping and the men quickly followed.

The group rode on until dark and made camp. They started off again in the early morning. The road was unusually empty so when they ran into an old man with a heavy looking bag over his shoulder they stopped to ask if he had seen anything unusual on the road.

"No, my lord, can't say that I have," the man replied in a thick coastal

accent.

“Are you certain? You haven't seen a blonde haired girl?”

The man scratched his head. “Well, there was this canvas covered wagon I ran into a few days ago. Slavers, so I set up my camp well away from them, but they were letting their merchandise out as I walked by. I think I saw a blonde girl being let out to do her business.”

“You're certain? Describe her!” demanded Orend. What was the chance of another blonde girl her age being seen on the road? In the hands of slavers no less?

“I didn't stick around to stare, my lord. You know how the slavers can be. If I had I might be in that wagon now. I did notice her clothes. Torn as they were, they were high quality. Something a wealthy merchants daughter would wear. All them slavers see is the meat inside the clothes. I used to be a tailors apprentice, see, so I notice these things,” the old timer looked proud of the fact.

“Do you remember anything more of the girl?”

The man scratched his head. After a moment he went on to give a vague description that hit more than one point on the description Orend had been provided with. The princess was someone few had actually seen. Even Orend himself had only caught a few brief glimpses of her during some festivities. There was certainly no chance that a commoner would know what she looked like.

“You say they were headed for the coast?” asked Orend as the old man finished his description.

The man nodded. “Where else would a slaver go, my lord?”

“True enough,” agreed Orend and flipped a coin to the man. “Thank you for the information.”

The old man grinned and pocketed the coin.

“Very kind of you, my lord.” He was left to watch as Orend and his men rode on in a cloud of dust. Only a day later he was stopped again by Loren and asked if he had seen a group of men riding by. He counted his blessing as another coin slipped into his pocket for such little work.

Orend pushed the horses hard and arrived in the city of Gerum only a few days after running into the old man. The port city laid on a sandy stretch of

coast. Its buildings sprawled in an incoherent maze that only a few main roads brought some sense into. Most buildings were from wood, though there were some made from stone that stood out. The narrow streets were crowded and the larger roads leading to the docks were filled with wagons transporting goods to and fro.

Everyone gave way to the group of men galloping towards the docks. They could see there was no slowing down in them and anyone not fast enough to move out of the way would find themselves trampled by the hooves of their horses.

The dock-master was the first person Orend went to. He was certain to have answers. If the slavers had come to the city they would have shipped their catch instead of sending it on over land. There had to be a ship manifest that told as much since slave trade was closely regulated by the empire.

“How can I help you?” asked the dock-master – a lazy looking man dressed in a leather vest that looked too small on him. His bulging stomach half rested on the edge of his desk.

Orend looked around the small office he had barged into. There were rows of shelves filled with papers. There were charts and maps in there as well and from the roof hung an old fishnet giving the room a sea like feel.

“I need information,” said Orend.

“What sort of information?” the dock-master’s brown eyes narrowed and he wiped a bead of sweat from the tip of his bulgy nose.

“A cargo manifest for slaves,” said Orend and took a seat in the single free chair in the room. On his side he had a view out the window and to his men who were tending to the horses with some fresh water and feed.

“We have a lot of those,” said the dock-master. “I will need some more specific information.”

“I would like to see all of them for the past week,” said Orend and took a relaxed position in his seat, telling the man he was not going anywhere any time soon.

“I can't just give them all out,” the man protested.

“To me you can,” said Orend and threw a scrolled up parchment to the man.

He watched as the man's eyes widened as he saw what was written on it.

“Please wait a moment, sir. I will get you what you want.”

“I assumed as much,” said Orend and leaned forward to grab the parchment. He rolled it up and tucked it safely inside a pocket in his cloak. The emperor had given him a writ instructing that he be given any assistance he demanded. There were some limits to what he could demand – walking to a garrison and demanding a thousand soldiers would have landed him in trouble – but most bureaucrats and such would be obliged to give him what he wanted or face the wrath of the emperor.

Most were wise enough to know the Arena and that it was a place they did not want to end up in unless they were a paying customer. Being the entertainment would not have been a pleasant experience.

The dock-master went through the shelves and rounded a corner to go to the back of the office. After a moment he returned with a thick, leather bound book and set it on his desk. He opened it and flipped through pages. “Ah, here we go. What you're looking for starts from here.”

He turned the book so Orend could flip through the pages. In his mind he thanked the emperor for the strict regulation of the business. Every slave that was shipped outside the empire had to have a description written of them in the manifest. There was a good reason for it as in the past slavers had taken away people that had to be later tracked down. Knowing where they went was a big help in that.

He flipped through manifest after manifest, searching for the girl he was certain to have been shipped out. Description after description, child after child, men and women, but nothing matching the princess. Finally he had to close the book with a disappointed sigh. The hope for an easy lead had been crushed.

“Did you find what you were looking for, my lord?” asked the dock-master as he returned from the back room. It had taken Orend only an hour to go through the manifests.

He shook his head. “No. Is there any way someone could have slipped some slaves past the inspections?”

The dock-master looked amused. “Are you asking if my underlings can be

bribed?”

“I suppose I am.”

“Of course they can be. Everyone can be, from the lowly dock workers to the emperors bureaucrats. The only question is the price.”

Orend sighed. “Then I am lost.”

“What are you looking for, if I may ask, my lord? Having a writ from the emperor it must be something important.”

“The imperial princess,” replied Orend. There was no reason to keep it hidden. The news would spread from the capital soon enough. The only reason he was ahead of the news was the near lethal pace with which they had ridden.

There was a moment of shocked silence as the dock-master came to grips with the news. He dug out a piece of cloth and wiped some sweat from his forehead. “There is one man you should talk to, my lord. I've suspected him for a while now of taking bribes, but so far I haven't found any concrete evidence.”

“Who?” asked Orend in a keen voice. If there was even the slightest sliver of hope for an additional lead, he would take it and tear through anything to get to it.

“Perine,” said the dock-master as he took a seat. “That little bastard is always sneaking around. Something very fishy about him.”

“Where can I find him?”

The dock-master leafed through some papers. “He's working the third and fourth pier today.”

Orend stood up. “I'll have words with him.”

“Send my regards,” said the dock-master just as the nobleman shut the door behind him. He watched through the window as he gathered his men and rode away.



Cheid spent a comfortable night at an inn Skander placed him in. It was situated right by the Towers of Magic and looking out the window he could see the five pillar like stone towers reach high above him. The bridge leading to them looked like it was fragile and would fall apart at any moment, but it remained in

place despite the large amount of people traversing it in both directions. Far below the brown waters of the river splashed against the base of the towers. The entrance to the towers was among the higher stories of the ground layer, putting it over a hundred feet above the water level.

Skander had come up with a detailed background for Cheid as they'd talked. Everything about it was ready; his parents names, how Skander happened upon him on a journey and heard about his strange ability, how he dropped by and took him with him after a brief test to ensure he'd get the education he needed. It was all very standard and not that different from an average students story.

The morning brought with it the test the wizard had mentioned. Cheid felt nervous as he walked across the bridge towards the central tower, the one dedicated to the art of Free magic. It was surrounded by four other towers dedicated to the four elements: earth, air, water, and fire. Together they formed one face of a dice.

Skander himself had come to collect him and led the way. He glanced at the boy next to him. "Don't be nervous, boy. You'll pass no problem. Even if you don't, no harm will come to you."

Cheid was determined not to fail. If there was magic he could control, he needed it. The people he sought revenge on were too powerful to face without it. Even with it he'd need to be careful. Most importantly, the old wizard would have to be kept out of it. He'd only try to stop it and that would cause further problems.

"I'll try my best," he assured and Skander nodded. They walked inside the central tower. It opened to a large hall with people scattered all over it in small groups and others simply standing on their own. There were young students going around, greeting everyone who came in seeking to meet with a wizard.

There was always something for a wizard to do, be it enchanting an item or helping with moulding a piece of land or serving as a protector to important nobles. There was gold to be made in the profession and there were those willing to pay for it.

Skander led the boy to one of the transport points. A shaft led up and down. A disc floated down from above and the two stepped on it. Skander uttered the

place he wanted to get to and the disc rose up. Cheid was no stranger to how it worked. He had used the larger ones in the city several times. Elemental spirits were chained to obey the commands and move the discs around.

Stories whisked past them with brief glimpses to students walking in the halls. Most of them wore robes with their rank embroidered on them. Seniority was important within the towers, that much Skander had explained. The more years you had spent studying the more freedoms you were given and the less years you had under your belt in studying the more restrictions you had and the more duties you had.

The disc stopped and let them out to a corridor that did not look any different from the others they had passed by. Skander led the way and passed a few doors before opening one. Cheid stepped inside and found himself in an empty chamber. There was nothing there, save for a few sources of light that had been conjured up. The stone walls were bare and there was no furniture.

“Ah, good, we made it in time,” said an old man as he pushed his way into the room. He was followed by two others, one of whom closed the door behind him.

“You're never late and you know it, Roderic,” said Skander with a small smile.

“And you always bring us hidden talents,” the man replied with an equal smile. He had a white moustache that had been meticulously curved upwards at its tips. Roderic turned his attention to Cheid and eyed him with his green eyes. Cheid eyed him right back, taking note of his stocky body build and the scar that ran across his forehead. “So, this is your newest offering?”

Skander nodded. “I believe he will be of use.”

Roderic walked around Cheid and rubbed his chin as he examined the boy. “We shall see, we shall see. What say you, boy? Are you ready for the test?”

“That's what I'm here for,” replied Cheid.

“Very well then,” said Roderic and guided the boy to the middle of the room. “Now then, let me explain what we're going to do. In order to determine your potential and whether you can truly control magic, we're going to use a spell to give you some energy. If you're a normal person lacking the ability to control it

then nothing will happen. If, however, you have an affinity to the art then we will see some interesting results that will tell us what your vocation will be. Do you understand?"

Cheid nodded. It seemed straightforward enough. He didn't need to do anything. With curiosity he followed as Roderic made his preparations. The two younger men that had followed him in seemed to be his assistants. They stood on either side of the older man and had a focused expression on their faces. Cheid gave a quick glance towards Skander who had stepped to the side and received an encouraging nod from him.

"We shall begin," declared Roderic and took the few steps separating him from Cheid. He laid both hands on the boys shoulders and muttered something.

A tingling feeling that was familiar rushed through Cheid's body. Roderic quickly stepped back and observed him.

"Do you feel it?" he asked.

"I do," replied Cheid and examined himself, expecting to see something that had not been there before, but everything looked the same as it always did. The power that had been given him seemed to swell and the tingling intensified, quickly taking over his entire body. He wanted to scratch the worst spots, but decided it would have been embarrassing, so he only bit down hard. He needed to pass the test. He needed the power. Revenge demanded it.

"Ah, here it comes," muttered Roderic with an eager expression.

Cheid felt it. The power taking on a form. The feeling in his body went from tingling into pain. It was mild at first, but quickly intensified as more and more of the power gathered down his arms, towards the tips of his fingers. It was enough to make him scream and that he did. His hands shot out to his sides. With it the power was released.

Strands of black energy lashed out, hitting the walls and sending pieces of stone around the room. Like snakes the ten strands slithered around, seeking something new to hit. They found Roderic and struck him, sending him flying down on his ass. His two assistants quickly threw themselves away from him. Both hit the floor hard and remained there, laying as flat as they could, hoping the strands of energy would not find them.

The entire thing lasted only seconds. The energy ran out quickly and with it the strength from Cheids feet. He slumped down to his knees. The strands of energy disappeared. The deep gasps for breath from the boy were the only sound in the room.

Then there was a delighted chuckle.

Cheid looked up and saw Roderic pushing himself up to a sitting position. Whisks of smoke rose from the tips of his moustache. He did not seem at all upset over the close brush with death. His chuckle turned into all out laughter. “By the gods, Skander. This boy is magnificent.”

“If a bit unpolished,” came the reply from the master of the fifth tower. He had thrown himself on the floor much like the two assistants and was in the process of getting up. There was a distinct lack of dignity in the whole situation.

“Pfeh. That's what they come here for!” replied Roderic as he hoisted himself up to his feet. He brushed off some stone dust from his shoulders. The strands of energy had carved deep grooves in the wall behind him. “Still, glad I had my protective spells on. Otherwise I'd be a pile of ash.” The man chuckled at that and made his way to Cheid who was still on his knees, barely able to comprehend what had happened or what was going on around him.

Roderic knelt down in front of him so he could look him in the eyes. “Boy, you have potential. You will be a great one some day.”

“Free Magic?” muttered Cheid. Even in his cloudy mind it rang out. He had expected to be a fire elemental as it had been fire that had saved his life, but it seemed there was greater potential in him.

Roderic nodded. “Welcome to the Towers of Magic, new student.”



“Where is Perine?”

The dock worker pointed towards a poorly dressed man who was busy yelling at a captain. It looked like there would be blood if he continued with the shouting as the captains hand was slowly inching its way towards the sword at his hip.

“Thanks.” Orend rode on with his men in tow.

"Look here. You're not allowed to unload your cargo on that section of the pier. You're obstructing traffic!" shouted Perine.

The captain spat out a large wad of something dark right at the man's feet. "Ain't no place else to unload it so stop your shouting."

"You're wrecking the entire pier and its schedule!"

"Don't worry about it. The cargo will be picked up soon enough."

"Right, I'll have to report this to the dock-master. Your ship will be ba.."

"Are you Perine?" asked Orend as he dismounted, interrupting the conversation. He had no reason to try and be polite and let the conversation run its course.

"I am, but I'm in the middle of a conversation here."

"Not any more. Why don't you go see to your cargo, captain?"

The man nodded and walked away.

"Now wait just a moment. Who do you think you are?" Perine demanded in a shrill voice.

"I am Orend Kalunta and I will have words with you." His reply was further enhanced by his men dismounting behind him and fingering their weapons as they surrounded the man. They formed a tight circle from which there was no escape.

The rat faced man glanced around nervously. The severity of the situation slowly dawned on him. "What do you want from me?"

"We understand you are the man to talk to if you want to slip something through that you don't want ending up in the cargo manifests." Orend stared down the man.

"What? No, you've got the wrong man," replied Perine. "I'm the one who inspects the papers. I demand full accuracy."

"The word we heard from the dock-master was that a few coins could turn your head and loosen your standards. Maybe even disappear a few papers here and there."

A quick moment of panic crossed the man's face. "The dock-master must have me confused with someone else. I'd never do something like that."

Orend pulled out a dagger from his belt. Without hesitation he quickly drew

blood from Perine's cheek. He tried to get away, but strong hands grabbed him from either side and held him still.

“You would do well to answer me truthfully. I'm working with the emperors writ at my heart and torturing you would not be any problem. But I'm a nice man. I don't want to burden your underlings with having to clean your stinky insides from the pier. So just tell me what I want to know. Did you help slip some slaves aboard a ship that shouldn't have had them?”

Such threats were nothing new for Orend. At times it had been the only way to keep the debt collectors away. Still, he did not like resorting to such measures.

Perine looked around wild eyed, hoping for some escape, but there was none to be had. He licked his lips and turned his attention the man with the dagger. “See, I don't do things like that.”

“Wrong answer,” said Orend and nodded to one of his men. He grabbed Perine's hand and stretched it out. Orend grabbed one of the fingers and placed the dagger on it. “I must apologize for the lack of proper instruments, but I'm certain the finger will come off eventually.” He pressed the sharp edge against the man's skin so it drew blood. “Now, last chance before you become Perine Nine Fingers.”

Perine tried to struggle, but the hold on him was firm. He tried to scream, but no one on the pier paid any attention to what was unfolding. They were wise enough to mind their own business. He felt the dagger dig in a little deeper. “Stop! Stop! I'll tell you!” he screamed out. The coins he had gotten were not worth losing a finger over.

“So talk,” said Orend and took the dagger away.

“I did it. I helped a couple of slavers get some slaves onto a ship headed south.”

“When was this?”

“A few days ago.” Perine was starting to sob. He knew what he was telling would cost him his job. He figured that was still better than losing a finger – or more.

“Where were they headed?” Orend demanded. Only a few days lead. If he was

quick there might still be a chance to catch up to them before they sold their cargo.

“I don't know where they'll unload the slaves, I swear.”

“I didn't ask that. I asked where they were headed and what the ship is called.”

Perine dug his memory. He had destroyed the ship manifest. There was no record of it ever being at the dock so he couldn't just go back and shift through paper to get the name. “*The Wandering Shark!* That's the ship's name. Their destination's Geshe, but they could unload the slaves anywhere in between.”

“You're certain of this?”

Perine sobbed. “I swear it's true. That's all I can offer you.”

Orend grunted and shoved the man away from him. He had hoped for more, but he now had a ship name and a direction. That was more than he had had until now. “Did you see the slaves?”

“Only a glimpse.”

“Was there a blonde girl there?”

Wrinkles appeared on Perine's forehead. “I think so. It was dark, but I think I saw one girl with blonde hair. Ben and Gip were talking about her, how she'd fetch a nice pile of coin in the south.”

“Ben and Gip?”

“The two slavers.”

Now Orend had names to look for. That would make some things easier. Men always had reputations, someone would know where to find them. The two men would tell where they had sold the slaves and that would lead him right to the princess. “These men, they went with the ship?”

Perine nodded.

“Tell me everything you know about them. Where they like to stop, their favourite drink, food, colour..everything you know.”

And Perine talked. Everything he knew about the two men, he shared with Orend. Granted, it was not much, but he left no nugget of information to himself. He breathed a sigh of relief when Orend ordered two of his men to escort him to the dock-master. He might lose his job, but at least his body was still intact.

Orend cursed how late it had gotten. Getting a ship would have to wait until morning. Then the real chase would begin.

Chapter 6

The sea did not suit Eleria. Even though the rolls of the ship were gentle it still made her feel like someone was inside her stomach, doing their best to shove everything up her throat and out her mouth. The only reason it didn't happen was because there was barely any food to be puked out. All Eleria and the other to-be-slaves got was bread and water in barely adequate portions.

How long the voyage lasted she did not know. Even though the apathy that had taken over her released its grip ever so slightly, she still did not have the presence of mind to note the passage of days. She could hear the footsteps of the crew as they walked above, the shouting of the captain as sails needed adjusting, the creek of the boards and ropes as wind pushed the ship and waves crashed against its bow.

The only people she actually saw were the ones who brought them food. Even those were vague figures in the darkness that engulfed their little corner of the ship. Light was reserved for those actually needing it. When all you could do was stare at a wall it didn't really matter whether you could see the grain of the wood or whether it was all blackness.

Still no one dared to speak. Even when they were left alone for hours, the silence never broke. Even the sobs were stifled quickly. She had caught glimpses of the girls she was with. They were all around her age, none but a few years older than she was. Eleria wondered if she was as dirty as the rest of them and whether she had that same resigned expression on her face.

There did not seem to be any will left to struggle. They had all accepted that there was no escape and that their life was no longer in their own hands. It was the two men that would decide where they went, how they would live and how they would die.

At least until a new owner bought them.

The two men had made no effort to keep it a secret. Once the ship reached its destination the girls would be sold to the highest bidder. In the south that

would mean a life of servitude if you were lucky. The unlucky ones would be worked in the mines or used as entertainment in various festivals that would include gladiators and exotic animals devouring defenceless men and women.

Eleria had been to the arena in Ramyn. She knew that it would not be a pleasant end.

As the days passed the air got hotter and hotter. Combined with the ocean it made it feel like a wet blanket was over you, gluing your hair against your skin along with your clothes. There was no breeze below deck to take the worst edge off. All they got was a few more rations of water just so no one would die due to dehydration. They were valuable merchandise after all and their two captors had to ensure they'd get their moneys worth.

It was one of those hot days when there was a change. The crew above was more lively and the captain made continuous shouts though they were muffled enough that Eleria couldn't tell his exact words. After a while the ship gently bumped into something before coming to a complete halt. Things started to settle down above deck, but the calm did not last long for the captives under deck.

A hatch opened and Gip and Ben came down.

"All right my pretties," started Ben. "Time to move. Get up and climb on deck." Gip opened the cell door and undid the chains that had the girls shackled in place. Some struggled to get up after sitting for such a long period of time without proper room to stretch their legs. Eleria sought support from a wall until her feet remembered their purpose once more. The stairs leading up deck seemed longer than when she had come down, but she braved onward towards the sunlight.

Even though the breeze was warm, it was enough to feel cool against her burning skin. The stale air below deck was replaced by the fresh smell of sea and fish. She was half blinded by the sunlight and had to cover her eyes for a good while before she could see anything.

Blinking furiously she stood on the deck and looked on along the length of the ship. The dock area that opened beyond it looked like any other. If you'd seen one dock, you'd seen them all. There was not much different about them. There were the piers, the pulley systems to lift heavy loads, the usual crowd of people

going about their business, groups of sailors returning from leave or headed for it – some more drunk and rowdy than others – and then there was the row of warehouses that were spilling out good at the other end while loading in at the other.

The only difference were the people at this dock. Most of them had a darker skin. Not quite dark black, but a sort of light brown. Most were dressed in white to stave off the searing heat of the sun and many had cloth wrapped around their heads, forming a turban.

“Stop your daydreaming and get going,” snapped Ben as he emerged from below deck. Gip followed him closely and chained the girls to each other before letting them step on the plank leading onto the pier. Eleria did as she was told and moved with the rest of the girls. She saw the slender piece of wood Gip had in his hand. She had seen it used. It would bend and not break and leave behind a red stripe that would sometimes bleed. The man did not seem to always realize his own strength or if he did, he did not care. Ben had scolded him a few times for fear of him leaving permanent marks.

His concern wasn't for the pain it caused, but rather the loss of value a scar would bring with it.

“Follow tight, girls. Any of you try anything and you'll regret it,” said Gip and led the way through the pier. Ben followed closely behind.

Walking in the shackles was cumbersome and more than once a girl tripped and fell down, garnering curses from both men as they watched impatiently the girls try to get up again. A few well placed hits from Gips cane finally got everyone to be careful enough that they could move on without interruption.

The sting of the cane hitting her back lingered on for a long time for Eleria. It was the first time it had been used on her and all because the girl in front of her had fallen down. Gip believed in collective punishment. If the one next to you did something to garner his anger he'd hit you too.

Still, the pain from the hit seemed insignificant to her. A deeper pain resided inside her, a pain she was afraid to even glance at. She kept her distance from that knot for she knew unravelling it would wash away the last remains of what made her who she was. It was the part that wanted her to scream, to cry, to curl

up in a safe place and wither away.

It was best kept locked away for now.

Gip led their small convoy through the pier and onwards to the city beyond it. The streets were lined by box like stone buildings covered in chalk paint. Compared to the tall buildings of Ramyn these were low. None seemed to have more than a single story to them. The streets were narrow and made up of beaten soil. A good rain would have everyone making their way knee deep in mud, though given the climate it felt like rain was a rare enough occurrence to make a little mud seem like once a year affair.

Eleria did her best to get a glimpse of what was going on. They passed shops selling exotic food, artisans selling the fruits of their labour, jewellery that looked to be made from materials she had never seen before. Had the circumstances been different she would have loved to go from shop to shop and browse all the pretty things she saw. As it stood she put her head down and stared at the ground.

Being reminded of the freedom she had lost was enough to bring tears to her eyes. She blinked furiously to hide them.

For the first time she wondered whether anyone even knew she was alive. The attack had been a brutal one and she remembered seeing the smoke rising from the estate. They must have burned everything. Had the fires been destructive enough they might never even suspect that she had managed to escape that hell.

She shook her head to dispel the thoughts. What good would worrying about it do? There was nothing she could do to change anything. Her fate was no longer her own.

The maze of streets they navigated left her feeling confused. There was no way she could have found her way back to the docks without getting lost. The further into the city they got the more people there were on the street. Their robes shuffled as they passed by, many not giving the parade of little girl even a second look. Those that did seemed more interested in assessing their price rather than feeling sorry for their unfortunate state.

“Hurry up or we'll miss the midday auction.” Gip underlined his words with

a smack of the cane. "We want to be rid of you as soon as possible."

"Gold in your purse is better than girls on your chains," agreed Greg from the back of the line.

Eleria's feet were starting to hurt. She had not walked so much in days, if not weeks now. She didn't have a strong grasp of how long it had been. She hadn't walked much even before her current predicament. An imperial princess usually got to use carriages to go from place to place.

Finally, they arrived at a large market area. There were stalls lined up one after another along with stages where the sellers were busy displaying their merchandise; slaves from all corners of the world, young and old, men and women. Some were touted as skilled workers and made to display their physical prowess while some women were being sold as mere tools for physical pleasures. The lucky ones were sold as household keepers.

Gip and Greg navigated the area as if it were their second home – for all Eleria knew it *was* their home – and finally stopped at a stall to talk to a man. There was some haggling and the man emerged from behind the counter to take a closer look at the girls. Some he took a closer look at, inspecting their teeth, feeling their legs and arms as if he were buying a horse. Many times he shook his head and snapped his tongue in apparent disapproval to drive the price down. He eyed Eleria with genuine interest and remarked something to the two men. A wide grin appeared on both their faces.

A bit more haggling and Greg and Gip walked away with a purse full of coins. They did not care one way or the other what happened to the girls. They'd gotten their money and now it was time to celebrate and take it easy until the next trip.

The girls found themselves being separated. Eleria was in the bunch that got paraded onto the small stage the slave marketer used to display his goods. She didn't listen to the words being said. She barely looked up at the crowd that had stopped to hear the man's sale pitch. She didn't pay attention to the raised hands in the crowd as the price went up. When the sale was finally concluded and she was led from the stage to her new owner, she did not look up.

The haze had returned and with a numb mind she followed her owner to her

new life.



Orend looked across the vast ocean that spread in front of him. Leaning against the railing he enjoyed the cool breeze and the occasional splash of water that reached up to him as the ship broke through a wave. It had taken him longer to find a ship headed the way he needed to go, but at the same time it had given Loren enough time to catch up with him.

The older brother had had to admit the right thing had been done in returning. His trail had gone cold and searching for someone in Ramyn was a hopeless task with no description to give around. Him returning would however allow them to track down the slavers more quickly. Two people could cover much more people and places.

Even the he had his doubts whether it would be that easy. Tracking down people in the south could be difficult. The natives were not exactly the most co-operative when it came to slaves and who had bought them. The writ from the emperor would help in at least getting the officials helping. Even if he wasn't their ruler the note would still carry significant weight as a favour to the Ramyn Empire was unlikely to be forgotten.

When the emperor had given the task to him Orend had thought it to be a route to quick disfavour, but now it seemed like it would be a long road to possible favour with him. He could not deny that there were still doubts harrowing his mind and the possibility of failure still loomed over everything, but at least there was more hope than when he had ridden from Ramyn with his brother.

Loren appeared from below deck and walked over to Orend. He had ridden hard with his men to catch up and sleep had been a rarity. Now, on the sea voyage he was making use of the free time and catching up with lost rest.

“Finally awake brother?” asked Orend as the younger man leaned against the railing next to him and yawned.

“Sort of,” admitted Loren though he still felt a bit tired. One more night of good sleep and he'd be as fresh as dew on grass in the morning. For a moment

the two stood there in silence and watched the waves sparkle in the sunlight.

“It'll be a long journey, won't it?” Loren finally asked.

“Doesn't look like it'll be a quick one,” admitted Orend.

“But an important one none the less.”

“That it will be,” Orend agreed. More than important, it would be a history defining journey for the Kalunta family and perhaps the entire Ramyn Empire. Success or failure, both would be recorded in the books for future generations to either admire or laugh at.

“So, what do we do when we get south?” asked Loren and turned to look at his brother.

“We'll find those slavers. Then we will find the princess and who ever she has been sold to.”

“You sound awfully certain that it is the princess. And that she has already been sold.”

Orend shrugged his shoulders. “The evidence is strong and slavers don't like to hold on to their merchandise for too long. I just hope we can find her before she gets sold to someone who abuses her.”

“She has been through enough as is,” admitted Loren in a quiet voice. The mere thought of the imperial princess being treated like a slave made the young man's blood boil. She shouldn't have to go through something like that. She should have been kept safe.

“The Strihin family should have to pay for their failure,” he finally said.

“Oh, the emperor will certainly see to that,” replied Orend. “When we return I doubt there will be any trace left of that family.”

“Good. When you're tasked with the safety of something so important and you fail, the price should be high.”

Orend nodded even though he didn't quite share those feelings. He had seen the results of the attack. An imperial garrison would have been hard pressed to survive against it. There was a limit at which point all you could do was raise your hands and say you did your best. The Strihin family had ran into that limit and lost everything. It seemed like too high a price.

But he said nothing and instead continued to look on at the breaking waves

with his brother.

He hoped they would not run into that limit in their task.



Cheid looked out the window of his room. It faced the southern shore and offered a view over that portion of the city. If you looked to the edges you could see two of the other Towers of Magic. He had hoped to have a view of the central island, but complaining about it would achieve nothing. It was a room he shared with two other young boys and he was already lucky to get that. Usually there would be six or even eight young students sharing a room.

The more the years went by the less students there were. Some met their limits and were sent away, some died doing an experiment and some simply vanished without a trace, though the common theory was that those who vanished had ventured to a plane other than their own and were as good as dead.

Magic was not a safe profession if you were not careful.

That much Cheid had learned even in the few short days he had been at the towers.

The boys he shared the room with didn't think there was anything special about him. As far as they were concerned he was just another farmers boy who happened to have a talent. That's what they were. One was the son of a farmer, the other the son of an innkeeper. Neither seemed too concerned about Cheid. What they were more interested in was what he could do now and how to best kill the free time they had.

Cheid had not seen much of Skander after the initial arrangements, but that was to be expected. He was the Tower Master and having him hovering around a first year student would have drawn too much attention. Not that the old man had time for it either. He had an entire tower to run as well as personal projects to tend to along with official ceremonies and various advisory positions within the city and the imperial court.

That he had had time to snag Cheid from the crowd was a small miracle in itself.

It would be a few weeks more before he'd be able to get into real lectures.

The Towers did their best to accommodate students no matter when they arrived, but some things needed to be taught before they could advance anywhere. There were rules to be laid down for the safety of everyone. It was those lessons that he was getting in private from various masters so that he would be able to enter at least some lectures to start learning.

It frustrated the young boy that he had to listen to old men telling him not to set himself on fire or use magic against his fellow class mates. He felt like the rules had been made with the thickest of village idiots in mind so that there would be no mishaps. Any normal person would have understood the risks and avoided them.

And most of all he barely understood how to make anything happen. How could he harm anyone or anything when he couldn't even muster a hint of what he had already felt course through him in times of need?

With a sigh he turned away from the window and went to his travel trunk. The three beds were set in a row, each with a small night-stand and a travel trunk at the end of the beds.

He pulled out a robe that indicated he was in the Towers for the first year and pulled it over his head. It was a bit too large for him and the hems of it dragged on the floor and sometimes made him stumble, but the woman responsible for the clothing said he'd grow into it soon enough and that it was better to have some room for growth.

Cheid didn't mind. What he wore was not important. What he learned on the other hand, that was. At least once he'd get to the good lectures.

He closed the trunk and left the room. The corridor was empty. Everyone was at lectures or the library or doing something else. It was that time of day where few had free time. He walked over to the transport point and waited for a disc to arrive.

The lesson he was going to actually had him feeling slightly interested. Roderic would be the one holding it and the subject was the basic differences between the kinds of magic. He doubted it would go into any details, but would serve more as a base for digging in deeper later on. It wasn't strictly speaking something he should have been taught at this point, but Roderic had taken a

liking to him after the test. For what reason was beyond Cheid, but as long as he was going to offer extra lessons he'd be happy to entertain the old wizard.

The transport disc arrived and whisked him up to where master Roderic's chambers were. The top most rooms of the tower were reserved for the Tower Master and below those were the other senior wizards. The higher up the tower you lived the higher ranked you were.

It made sense not only because of the way ranks worked, but because of how the towers became narrower the higher up you went. The lower levels had plenty of room to house the students, but higher up it became more and more difficult to fit more than a few decently sized chambers on the same floor.

It took the disc quite a while to climb all the way to the level where master Roderic resided. He was of high rank so he shared the floor with only three others. Their names were clearly marked on the four doors that lined the corridor. Cheid walked up to the farther most door on the left and knocked. He entered after hearing a voice from inside and the click of a lock.

Cheid found himself in a comfortable chamber with soft rugs on the floor and walls lined by bookshelves. There was a fireplace on the left, a desk and an assortment of chairs directly opposite to the door and a door to the right led to what he could only believe to be the masters bedchamber.

“Ah, Cheid. Please, have a seat,” said Roderic from behind his desk. Compared to the other masters there was very little clutter on it. The papers and books he had there were neatly stacked and ordered.

Cheid took a seat in one of the chairs directly facing the desk and the man sitting behind it.

“So, how have you liked your time here so far?”

“It has been less educational than I expected,” replied Cheid. He saw no reason to lie. Telling the truth, that he was getting bored, might serve to get something more interesting out of the master.

Roderic nodded. “While the safety lessons are important I know they can be a bit tedious for someone who has just discovered they have magic at their fingertips. I know I felt that way when I was a student. Perhaps we can spark your interests a bit more today?”

Cheid smiled at the co-conspirator like expression on the old man's face. "That would be great, master Roderic."

"Very well then. Tell me, do you know the difference between the forms of magic?"

"The four are based on the elements while the Free Magic is.." Cheid tried to continue the sentence, but could not. To his own surprise he had no clue how Free Magic was different from the elemental ones.

Roderic grinned. "Do you know how elemental magic works?"

"The spell caster draws energy from the elements and elemental spirits that surround us all and use that to cast their spells." A very simplified answer that was fairly common knowledge. Cheid had heard it from various sources over the years, including his father, even though he had not been big on magic. Only reason he had told of it was to reveal the vulnerabilities and limits of some elementalists. There was only so much someone attuned to the element of fire could do. They wouldn't be able to summon anything to do with the element of water for example, which allowed for some interesting tricks when fighting them without magic on your side.

"And Free Magic?"

Cheid had to shrug his shoulders. He had no clue how it worked and as he realized that he knew why he was unable to muster the magic he had already wielded. He lacked the understanding for it.

"Elemental magic is easy, though you have to be born with the affinity for it," started Roderic and leaned back in his chair. He crossed his hands over the mound of his stomach. "You draw your powers from outside yourself, from your surroundings and directly from the elemental planes themselves. You mould the energies and bend them to your will. With Free Magic that main source of your power comes from within you. That isn't to say you can't draw power from your surroundings. You can and you should as it is less of a toll on your strength."

"Does it use the elemental spirits or the planes?" asked Cheid. He could understand the point about it coming from inside the caster. The times the magic had flowed through him it had felt more like it was coming from somewhere within instead of condensing from the outside.

“The power we have inside us? No. It uses something else,” replied Roderic and tapped his stomach with his fingers. “What that is, we do not actually know for certain. One theory is that there is magic floating all around us and we simply pull that in over time, creating a pool from which we can draw from. But so far no one has been able to conduct an experiment that would provide us with a full answer.”

Cheid found the answer disappointing. He had expected the old wizards to know all the answers, but it seemed even the oldest and wisest did not know all there was to know about magic and how it worked. “If we do not know what gives Free Magic its power then how can we use it?”

The questions sent them on an hour long discussion about the matter and the various theories surrounding it. It was the sort of lecture Cheid had expected to be a part of and completely wiped away any boredom he had felt about his earlier lessons. Bits came forward that actually gave those earlier lessons more context and made him appreciate that they had been explained to him already.

By the time he left the room and headed back towards his own quarters he was convinced magic would be an interesting topic to study, not only because of its uses, but because it was genuinely intriguing.

Still, he could not allow the main focus of his studies to escape his mind.

Revenge against the men that had attacked the family estate.

Revenge against the emperor.

There would be blood.