

The Pale Rose

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Part Two

Wounds Inflicted

Chapter 7

(Two Years Later)

Orend scratched his beard and glared out the window. The white buildings continued as far as he could see from the second story room and as he glanced down he could see the mass of people slithering through the narrow street below like a river seeking its proper place.

He had come there expecting a quick resolutions to the task the emperor had given him. Instead, two years later, he was still there and no closer to finding the princess. He had not been able to find even the slavers. Everywhere he and his brother went they were met with a wall of silence or feigned ignorance. No one wanted to talk to them and getting to meet local officials and nobles was difficult even with the emperors writ.

He crumbled the piece of parchment in his hand and tossed it against the wall in frustration. It was another letter from home informing him that Theoden had had to purchase yet another piece of land from his family to keep the debt collectors away. How much of it did that old bastard already own? Last he had looked there were only a few pieces of land left along with the city mansion. If the princess wasn't found there would be nothing left for the two brothers to return to.

Orend scratched his arms and cursed again. He had come to hate the city. The food was terrible, the climate a hot mess because of the winds that blew from the south and through the narrow straight separating the land from Menedor. The people were rude and distant and the smell of their sweat clung to you every time you went outside. An hour long bath was barely enough to get rid of the stench. Worst of all the constant heat made his skin itch.

“Ah, there you are,” said Loren as he entered the room. He had cut his hair short and wore similar clothes as the natives. They had found that it was better to try and blend in instead of standing out. It made the people less reserved, though they still clammed up as soon as they realized they were talking to a foreigner.

“I hope you have some good news, brother. I could use some right about now,” said Orend and turned to face him.

Loren went to the flask of water sitting on the table that dominated the centre of the room. It was surrounded by comfortable chairs. “I believe so. I just received word that lord Zhuler will finally see us.” He poured himself a cup full of water and gulped it down quickly. Even warm water tasted like the finest wine after a walk through the dusty streets of the city.

“Finally!” Orend walked over to the table and poured himself some water as well. “He has been letting us wait for half a year now.”

Loren nodded and brushed some sand off from his white robe. “The lords of the land do not seem overly anxious to meet with us.”

“For two years they have been playing games with us. Even if we get to meet one we get nothing out of it. Curse them!” Orend took a long sip of water to calm himself down. “They thumb their noses even at the emperors writ! Barbarians the lot of them.”

Loren let his brother rage on. He had had two years to get used to his outbursts and seldom did he disagree with him. It had been a trying time that had soaked up a lot of gold and forced them to sell ever more of their family ownings to Theoden. “Oughund did say he had a promising lead on the slavers.”

Orend stopped his rant with an interested look. “He did?”

Loren nodded. “He took a couple of men with him and went to check it out. It might be that the pair we're looking for has finally returned with another batch of merchandise.” His lips curled in disgust as he said the word merchandise. There had been plenty of time to get familiar with the slave market and what he had found did not sit well with him. He had seen people treated worse than his own horse, young people who should have been home helping their parents or playing with others their age. The Kalunta family had never owned slaves and he was certain that would continue to be true.

The expression on his brothers face was very similar. “Let's hope he finds those bastards. We will have more than words with those two when they're found.”

“Remember, they are protected by law here,” said Loren.

Orend chuckled. "The law can't protect what it doesn't see or know about."

So far they hadn't had to bend too many laws to get what they had wanted, but both of them knew that finding the princess might require breaking a few. Worst case they would have to steal her back if the owner refused to hand her back, though given who she was that seemed unlikely. The emperor would have no problem marching his armies to recover her if things turned ugly.

"Lord Zhuler informed he'd see us this evening. Better get ready for it," said Loren and brushed some more dirt off his robe. "I for one need a good bath."

Orend snorted. "You'll be just as dirty once we get there."

"But at least I will know I was clean."

Orend spent the remaining hours of the day writing a letter to the emperor, informing him of their progress. It seemed almost pointless now as he never received an answer. In the beginning it had been different. Every report had gotten a response, words of encouragement and declarations of unwavering support and faith in his ability to handle the task.

A year later the tone of the messages changed and he'd get them more seldom. Two years later and he had gone six months without receiving anything from the emperor. Maybe he had lost faith or simply found no reason to reply any more. Orend had to admit his reports were not exactly uplifting to read as they mainly dealt with how uncooperative the natives were and an assortment of other problems that were hindering the efforts.

The fact that the princess was already dead in the eyes of the outside world made it that much more difficult to get anyone to reveal anything. They couldn't just go around announcing they were looking for her. People would have labelled them crazy and told even less about what they knew, so they presented it as searching for one of their own family members.

After finishing the letter – which did not offer much more than a status report and the emergence of possible leads – he sealed it with hot wax and handed it over to a courier. By the time the emperor had it in his hands, a week or more would have passed.

He then prepared for the evening and met Loren in the common room of the inn they were staying at. They had stayed there for nearly a year now and the

innkeeper was very pleased with having a steady income from them. He had even discounted prices for Orend and his men in an effort to make them stay longer. Orend and Loren both knew they'd leave the place the moment their task was complete or took them elsewhere and neither would miss the place.

It wasn't a bad inn. The usual crowd in the common room was not rowdy or too noisy and the cook knew what he was doing, though given that he prepared food to local tastes his skills were largely lost on the guests. The rooms were kept clean and so far they had been free of any lice.

Six men joined the two nobles as they ventured onto the street. The rest were with Oughund seeing if they could rouse up the slaver pair. As always the dust clung to every piece of clothing as they made their way through the crowd that still swelled on the narrow streets. The street stalls were closing, though some of the places selling food were still puffing out smells that made Orend's stomach turn.

The group found themselves on the better side of the city as the lamp lighters started making their rounds. The wealthy enjoyed the benefits of lit streets while the poorer had to make do in the darkness and carrying their own source of light.

They stopped at a mansion surrounded by a tall, chalk painted wall. Beyond it you could see the tops of trees, telling of the garden that surrounded the main house.

"This the place?" asked Orend and eyed the wooden gate. There were intricate iron ornaments on it, depicting deer being hunted by men on horseback.

"This is Lord Zhuler's mansion," confirmed Loren.

Both brothers took a moment to beat the worst dust out of their clothes before pulling a rope that hung from above the gate. They could hear a bell ring inside and a moment later the gate was opened.

"Ah, the young Kalunta," said the bald servant that had opened the gate. The fact he ignored all titles and failed to even call him a lord told of the attitude that prevailed among many in the city. He eyed the group of men closely. "Your men can come as far as the garden, but only you and your brother are welcome inside the house."

Orend glanced at his younger brother and received a shrug of shoulders in return.

“That is acceptable,” said Loren.

The bald servant nodded and showed them inside.

The garden was as lush as anything found in Ramyn and the nobles mansions there. The plants were of different variety, but did not lose in the display of colours nor in blanketing everything in a vibrant green. Gravel paths led all around the main house and the various flowerbeds and tall bushes that formed narrow corridors in places.

The six guards they had with them were directed to a table with enough chairs for all of them. There was a bowl of fruit and a clay pot filled with cold water for them to enjoy.

Having ensured their men would be all right the two were directed inside the main house. It was a two story tall, large stone building that expanded for a wide enough area to be considered a proper mansion. As everything in the city, it was painted white and had a block like look. It was as if cubes were the only thing the southerners knew how to build and stacking them together was the only way to construct a house.

What they lacked in exterior they made up on the inside decoration. Lush carpets covered the stone floors, the walls were lined with tapestries and paintings and there were small sculptures on pedestals all around the rooms and corridors they were guided through.

The room they finally arrived in was nothing short of rich. Gold and silver flashed in the lamp light, the finest of silks covered the man laying on the divan while a young girl poured wine in his golden cup. Another girl was busy massaging his shoulders.

“My lord, the Kalunta brothers,” announced the bald servant and showed the two men in.

Both men made a slight bow in recognition of their host. Lord Zhuler waved a hand, telling the two they were free to take a seat on the pillows in front of the table. He was a young man, perhaps Orend's age, with dark hair than ran over his shoulders. The dark tint of his skin was lighter than many others, but it was

still obvious he was one of the southerners. He was fit looking – not one of those mounds of lubber men who spent their days laying on divans tended to be.

“Wine?” asked the man without glancing over at his guests. He was busy reading a piece of parchment in his hands.

“Yes. Thank you. Very kind of you,” replied Loren. Their host motioned for the girl to pour some wine for them.

Orend glanced at his brother. He had developed a habit of not refusing a drink, though given the situation refusing might have been taken as an insult. He had to admit to his own throat feeling a little dry.

He turned his attention to the girl. She couldn't have been more than ten. He stared at her as she poured the wine. Dark hair and an expressionless face. He wondered if the princess was performing similar duties with who ever had bought her.

If it had indeed been the princess the slavers had picked up.

If she was still alive.

The life of a slave was not the most secure one and you could lose your head over the slightest of matters; a wrong look at the wrong time, spilling wine on a guest, being too slow to follow the masters orders.

Orend gave the girl a small smile as she turned to return to her masters side. She gave no indication of even noticing it.

“This is very good,” commented Loren as he took a sip of the dark red liquid. After tasting it Orend had to agree with the assessment.

Their host gave a gracious nod as he put down the piece of parchment and turned his attention to the guests. “I understand you are looking for someone? A lost relative, was it?” He had a smooth voice, though the accent with which he spoke the common tongue made him hard to understand at times.

“My niece,” replied Orend. “It has been two long years since we lost her. She was travelling south when she and her escorts were attacked. The bandits took her with them and sold her to a pair of slavers called Ben and Gip. We've tracked them all the way here, but the trail has gone cold now.”

Lord Zhuler nodded. “Once sold, it is very hard to track down anyone. Do you have a description of her?”

“We have provided that to your servant,” said Loren. They had provided the description several times in fact. Somehow it kept getting lost and never making it to the intended recipient.

“Ah, I will see it later then,” said the man and took a sip of wine. Orend wanted to point out he had a copy of the description with him, but their host continued before he could say a word. “I understand you have a writ from the emperor of Ramyn with you? Why is he so concerned with your situation as to grant such a thing to you?”

“It is a sign of the close relations our two families have,” replied Orend. A bold faced lie, but there was little their host could do to dispute it. “The empress was quite fond of my niece so she influenced things as well.”

“Ah, I see..” Zhuler rattled his fingers against the wooden frame of the divan. “And what is it that you want from me?”

“A man such as yourself has connections. Our only wish is that you make some inquiries on our behalf. Where she might be, where the slavers that sold her might be.” Orend sipped some of the wine. It really was magnificent. He made note to ask what it was so he could buy some later.

“And what will I gain in return?” asked Zhuler.

That was the question that was always asked. No one wanted to help for the sake of it. Everyone wanted something in return. There was little Orend and Loren could actually offer people like him.

“You will have a noble family within the empire – in your debt – if something is discovered that leads us to her,” said Orend and glanced at Loren. He was busy enjoying the wine and seemed to have no problem letting him do the talking. “Something like that can do wonders to smooth over things in commercial ventures.”

Trade benefits. That was about the only thing the Kalunta family could offer lords such as him, but it was a powerful incentive. There was a lot of gold to be made in Ramyn, especially with exotic goods from the south.

Zhuler considered the proposal for a moment. Finally he nodded. “Very well. I shall make the inquiries. If I learn anything, I will send you a message.”

“Thank you,” said Orend as sincerely as he could. It wasn't the first time he

heard such a promise only to hear nothing more from the person making it. Maybe this time would be different.

“Now then, our business is concluded. Shall we enjoy some entertainment?” Zhuler clapped his hands and servants appeared out of nowhere, carrying with them platters filled with food. Dancing girls appeared as well as musicians.

Even if the lords were unhelpful, at least they knew how to entertain.

It was late at night when Orend and Loren finally emerged from the house. They collected their men from the garden and left the mansion. Judging by the way the men were acting they had been given something stronger than water as well.

“Do you think we'll hear from him again?” asked Loren as they made their way through the empty streets. Lights shone from windows. It was not yet so late that everyone would be asleep.

Orend shrugged his shoulders. “We'll see, though I wouldn't hold my breath for it.”

As they made it back to the inn they found one of their men waiting there. He looked eager.

“What is it?” asked Orend as the man motioned them to a quiet corner of the common room.

“Oughund sent me. We found the slavers.”

Orend couldn't help but grin at the news. “Where are they?”

“We have them tied up in the cellar of an abandoned building. It's on the edge of the city.”

“Well, show us the way then. I can't wait to talk to them.”

And so they walked some more.

The closer they got to the edge of town the more space there was between buildings and the less lights there were shining from windows. The man guiding them finally led them to a building that looked like it had been through a fire. The roof had caved in and parts of the wall had crumbled, the white stone showed black marks. A few buildings on either side of it showed similar damage telling the fire had been more widespread.

“It's this way,” their guide said and showed them to what must have been

the kitchen. A wooden hatch was open with a ladder leading downwards. Orend looked around before climbing down. The area looked abandoned and he doubted there would be many people around. The perfect place for the sort of talk he had in mind for the two slavers.

The cellar was well lit thanks to the lanterns strewn all around it. There was a table by which Oughund was chopping up some sort of vegetable into a cup. There were two sturdy chairs, both of which had a man tied to them.

Orend took a good look at them. Both had bruises on their faces. It was clear neither had come along willingly. The larger man was conscious while the smaller one had his head hanging down, apparently still unconscious. Both had their mouths gagged so they couldn't shout for help.

"So these are the two?" asked Loren as he came down the ladder and shut the hatch after him. The rest of the men remained behind to stand guard in the ruins.

"That they are, my lord," replied Oughund and put a handful of the chopped vegetable into a cup. There were two more cups on the table, one with sand and another with salt. There was also a rusty spoon. "The larger is called Gip and the smaller one is Ben."

"And you are absolutely certain they're the ones?" demanded Orend. What was about to happen to them he did not wish on an innocent man.

"As certain as I can be," came the reply from the burly northerner.

"That's good enough for me," said Loren.

Orend nodded. He walked over to the larger man and removed his gag.

"You'll be sorry for this!" he bellowed out as soon as the cloth was removed. "We're law abiding slavers we are. You can't do this to us!"

Orend hit the man on the chin. "You better shut up and listen closely."

Gip spat out a tooth along with some blood and grunted, but he remained silent and watched the man in front of him with a degree of fear.

"We're going to ask you some questions and you'd better answer them truthfully," started Orend. He had played through the moment many times in his head. The two years he had spent in the hell-hole these people called home had changed his stance on torture. He had not liked threatening the dock worker with

his dagger, but he was certain he would enjoy the pain the two men before him would go through if they did not talk. "In case you are thinking about not talking I have some incentives for you."

Oughund took the cue and handed him a cup. Orend took out a small piece of the green vegetable that had been finely chopped. He showed it to Gip. "I don't know what you call this, but I do know how it is." He put the small piece in his own mouth. Immediately the heat burned his tongue and almost made him cough. He quickly spat out the piece before the oils could spread too much and light his entire mouth on fire.

"I believe there is a legend about this plant. It is said that if you eat three whole ones they'll burn through your stomach like acid and kill you." Orend grinned at the tied up man. "Oh, don't worry. We're not going to feed it to you. What we will do is rub it in your eyes. I imagine that will be quite painful. Perhaps you'll lose sight in one of your eyes. Or both. If that doesn't get you talking then we'll use the sand we have here. And if that fails we have some salt. And if even that fails, we have this nice spoon here." He picked up the rusty piece of metal. "I can assure you you will lose your vision if we have to use the spoon. You understand, don't you?"

The big man nodded.

"Good," Orend smiled and put the cup down on the table, next to the others. Loren gave him a quick grin as appreciation for the speech he had just given. He had made a persuasive case. "Now then, the question we have. Where is the girl?"

"What girl?" asked Gip.

"The one you took from Ramyn two years ago. On the road to Gerum. You sailed her here and sold her to someone. Who was it?"

"We had a lot of girls on that trip," replied Gip. He did not seem overly eager to dig through his memories.

"You would have met her by the side of the road. Blonde hair," continued Orend. "A well made dress on."

"I don't remember anyone like that," came the reply.

Orend nodded to two of the men. They quickly grabbed Gip's head and forced his eyelids open. Orend grabbed the cup and stepped closer. He took a fist

full of the chopped plant and smeared it over the man's eyes. He rubbed it in despite his struggling and screams. Even after stopping it took a while for Gip to stop screaming and thrashing around. He blinked furiously to try and get the plant pieces from his eyes. Tears flowed down his cheeks, snot hung from his nose, and his eyes had gained a red colour to them.

Orend poured some water over his hands. He did not want the burning oils in his own eyes. He then turned to face the prisoner once more. "Now, I hope that has jogged your memory. Tell me, who did you sell the girl to?"

Gip took in deep breaths. "Why do you care so much about her?"

"Because she is the daughter of the emperor of Ramyn," replied Orend. Maybe that piece of news would be further incentive to tell what he knew. Even in the state the man was in he managed to grow paler. You could see panic grow over him.

Next to him, Ben let out a muffled moan as he started to come to. As soon as he had his eyes open he started to struggle and tried to shout through the cloth over his mouth. Orend told him to shut up and quickly explained the situation to him. The moment Ben saw what they had already done to his friend he turned extremely co-operative.

"The princess? Her?" asked Ben, baffled at hearing they had sold such an important person as a slave. "Isn't she supposed to be dead?"

"No. Not unless you sold her to someone who has killed her," replied Orend.

"Pray that you haven't," added Loren from next to him while playing with his dagger.

Ben swallowed hard.

"Just tell them," pleaded Gip from next to him. "You remember it. You know me. I can't even remember what I ate for breakfast a week ago."

"Look, we don't just sell directly to the end buyer," said Ben. "We sell to a broker on the market. They handle the rest. So I don't know who she may have ended up with."

"But you remember which broker it was," said Orend. They had tried to get information out of those men. They simply refused to talk about their clients. Getting the right name would mean they'd be able to tie down one more person

for interrogation. They'd have a new lead that would no doubt send them to another.

"Yes, yes I do!" said Ben, eager to be done with the entire affair. "It was Toroves. We sell most of our girls to him."

Orend glanced at Loren. The younger man nodded. It was a familiar name.

"Very well," he said. "You'll have to wait here until we can get to him and verify what you have said. If you have told the truth you might yet live. If you have lied then your friend will find himself without eyes."

"It's the truth! I swear!" assured Ben.

Orend turned away from the pair. "Oughund, Loren, you find that man in the morning. If you can, bring him here. If you can't do it during the day then wait for night to come, but you must bring him here. Understand?"

"Yes, my lord," replied the burly northerner. He seemed slightly disappointed that the torture had not gone on longer.

"What do we do when we get him here?" asked Loren.

"Then you come and get me, little brother. Then, we do the same thing we did tonight."

Both Loren and Oughund grinned.

Ben and Gip both let out a relieved gasp as the three men climbed out of the cellar. For now, they were safe from harm.

Chapter 8

The orb flickered. The strands of light swirling inside it pulsed, expanded then contracted, as if it were alive.

“That's it, boy. Concentrate on putting more energy into it,” instructed Roderic. He was standing right next to Cheid, one hand on his shoulder.

Cheid did as his master instructed. It was a simple training spell that helped students learn how to control the flow of energy they put into spells. In many cases it was a crucial skill, not only to ensure a successful spell, but also to ensure it was not too powerful nor too weak. For someone who was attending only his second year in the Towers it was still a difficult thing.

The orb grew slightly. The lights swirled around quicker.

“Careful now. Not too much,” said Roderic. Over the two years he had become a personal tutor for Cheid. It was not that uncommon for a master to take a student under their wing and give them personal lessons on top of the common lectures everyone took. It was more the rule than an exception.

The old wizard fascinated Cheid. He was from Mandor originally so he had many stories to share of the souther kingdom and how life was there. He had of course been on numerous expeditions and adventures, stories of which could have filled months worth of evenings and indeed had. It was not that rare for the two to meet a few times a month in his quarters, Roderic enjoying some wine while Cheid ate some honey pastries and listened to a few of his stories.

It was a relationship the young boy cherished.

Cheid put in a bit more energy. The sphere ballooned and popped and the lights inside it escaped and slithered through the air like snakes escaping. His shoulders slumped as he realized the mistake he had made.

Roderic gave his shoulder an encouraging pat. “That was well done. The longest time you've been able to control the sphere. Just remember to be patient and most of all to be delicate in what you do and you'll soon have the hang of it.”

“Yes, master,” replied Cheid. He felt frustrated even though he had been

praised. The progress towards controlled spells was taking longer than he had thought. The bursts of raw energy that had given him a glimpse to the power he could wield were still far away from his reach. At the moment the best he could do was summon a sphere of light and maintaining even that was a chore. He could start a camp fire, but shooting flames out of his hands to set a man on fire was a mere dream.

Roderic gave the boy a look. "Perhaps this is enough for today. You have lobby duty, do you not?"

Cheid nodded.

"Off you go then, boy. We'll continue tomorrow."

Cheid left the training chamber. It was a similar room to where he had been put through the test. Nothing to break there and strong walls to keep in any destructive forces that might be unleashed.

He walked down the corridor to the transport disc.

"The lobby," he said to the invisible elemental spirit and the disc started its journey down the chute. He had to admit life at the Towers was not that bad. While the study schedule was intense and free time was a rarity, he had never gone hungry and he received a new robe four times a year. The emperor supported the Towers financially and any older students and masters that still resided within them had to pay a modes share on anything they earned. No one complained about it as they had themselves benefited from the system when they were younger. They saw the value of it.

He had made friends, though none of them knew his real identity. If they had the city guard would have already rounded him up and sent him to the Arena.

Two years had not been enough time to wipe away the anger Cheid felt over the events that had taken place. It was also a source of frustration as he had not managed to make any headway in finding out who were responsible for it and how to get revenge on them.

At the same time he realized he was still young. Much too young to carry out any sort of revenge plan. The power to do so still eluded him, but perhaps a few more years and he'd be ready for it. He figured that by fifteen he'd be able to use

magic well enough to bring down revenge on any single man. That is if he managed to get some extra tutoring.

Since arriving at the Towers Skander had left him on his own for a lot of the time. He checked in on him a few times a year, not too often to raise suspicions that there was something more between the two than a casual interest in a talent the old wizard had found.

Their encounters did not last long and what they discussed was limited to how Cheid's education was going. He wanted to ask him more, perhaps to even consider taking him on as a private student, but he knew it was too soon for that. Perhaps a few years from now, when he had had time to prove his worth.

Cheid was pulled from his thoughts as the disc came to a halt and the buzz from the lobby slammed against him. There were many people there today, much more than usual. He made his way to the desk where the student signed in for their duties. He was pleased to see Dolon there. He was one of the older students tasked with overseeing the entire lobby and its greeters.

"Hey, Cheid," the boy greeted him. He wasn't much older than fifteen. His sandy brown hair was cut short and his blue eyes reminded of a cloudless summer sky.

"Hey, Dolon," replied Cheid. Among those working in the lobby there was not worth put in titles. It was more a gathering of friends. "Busy day?"

"Yeah. Do you mind starting earlier than you're supposed to? We're a bit swamped right now."

Truth be told Cheid had wanted to grab a quick bite to eat before starting. The inn just across the bridge served the best meat pies and he had hoped to go grab a slice, but as he looked around the lobby and the angry faces of some of the people waiting to be guided to see their host, he decided it would be better to start right away. The longer people had to wait the more they'd take it out on him and the less likely they were to slip a coin or two in his pocket.

"Fine, but you owe me one," said Cheid and signed his name on the book before grabbing the necklace that indicated he was on duty. It was solid metal and felt heavy around his neck.

Dolon curled his lips. "I already owe you two."

Cheid grinned. "Don't worry. I won't collect all at once."

"You better not. I'd be ruined," noted Dolon as he stashed the book back behind the counter.

"You'll be ruined anyway, with the rate you're building up debts," said Cheid and started the very simple spell that would reveal the tags that were put on everyone in the lobby. It would allow him to find the next person in need of guidance.

"True. I'll be paying these off when I'm as old as Skander," said Dolon in a resigned voice. He was too kind a person, though the debts he now owed didn't amount to anything more than swapping duties now and then and maybe a few copper coins.

Cheid completed the spell and symbols started appearing above the visitors heads. He scanned the crowd and found the next one in need of a guide and started towards the man. As he got closer he realized it was a frequent visitor and that he had guided him several times before.

"Lord Vorwough," Cheid greeted the man with a slight bow. "Here to meet with master Veer?"

The man wore the clothing suitable for a noble like himself. Fine silks, deep tones of expensive colours, gold trinkets – very boastful. He looked down at Cheid over his sculpture like nose. Despite the apparent contempt, he smiled. "Ah, young Cheid. You remember me. And indeed, you are correct in who I am seeking."

"Do you have an appointment?" inquired Cheid. If the man did he would be taken straight up to see the master. If he did not, Cheid would have to go and ask if the wizard was free and wanted to meet with the person. If he lied it would be unlikely he'd get to meet anyone for a while.

"Yes, I have an appointment," replied the man. He was not that old, barely half way into his second decade, but he came off as being in control of his own life. Cheid knew very little of him besides the fact he was the oldest son of his family, a family he was not that familiar with, but that still held considerable sway within the Empire.

"Then if you will follow me please," said Cheid and turned towards the

transport discs. He glanced back to see if the man did as told. Sometimes the visitors had such thick heads that you needed to hold their hand so they'd follow you. Vorwough was no such man, but habits died hard. Besides, with the rate he was visiting Veer he could have easily taken the route himself, but rules were rules and even nobles had to follow them in the Towers. No outsider would venture beyond the lobby on their own and without guidance.

They were lucky and a transport disc was immediately available to take them where they wanted to go. They had to share it with a few others being guided, but that was how it went often times, especially during the busy hours of the day. Had they been unlucky they'd have had to wait for a disc for minutes, depending on how many stops it had to make.

Some of the guided left earlier than they did, on other stops students stepped on or got off. As the disc climbed higher, the fewer people got on and soon only Cheid and Vorwough were left standing there, waiting for the right floor.

"Busy day?" asked Vorwough.

"Looks that way, my lord," replied Cheid. They had talked before, if you could call exchanging a few idle words that.

"How are your studies going?"

It was an unexpected question. No guest had ever asked that of him. "I believe I am doing quite well, my lord."

"I have heard," said Vorwough and examined Cheid. "They're saying you are quite talented."

"I would not know what others say about me, my lord."

"The masters talk. Master Roderic often mentions you, or so I have been told."

While the fact the masters talked of him made Cheid feel a warm flicker inside, he could not shrug the strange feeling he had about the way the man was talking. Why had he brought up something like this?

"I look forward to your graduation. I'm certain there is business we can do together," continued Vorwough.

So that's what it was? Setting up the young student to be ready to serve

when he had gained enough power?

“That would be a privilege, my lord,” replied Cheid. He had never given much thought to the idea of conducting business. There were other things that occupied his mind and the likelihood of him being at the towers at such a point was not high. There were two paths that he saw open; in the other he would be dead while in the other one he would be on the run.

Revenge tended to close paths that would otherwise be open to you.

The disc came to a halt and Cheid led the guest through the corridors. They stopped at a wooden door that was not any different from the dozen or so they had passed by. A knock and a voice from inside the room told them to enter.

Vorwough waited in the corridor as Cheid opened the door and entered.

“Forgive the disturbance, master Veer,” he said and bowed slightly. “Lord Vorwough is here to meet you.”

It was a single chamber room. The bed, the desk, the bookshelves, all shared the same space. Veer was busily flipping through pages on a book. Cheid had never liked the man. There was something off about him. Maybe it was the scars on his face – a reminder of a failed potion brew, or so he had heard – but he always seemed to be plotting something. If you turned your back to him you tended to worry whether you'd find a dagger in your back.

The man looked up from the book. His oily black hair hung over his face in strands. “Good. I've been expecting him. Show him in.”

Cheid bowed and left the room. “You can go in, my lord,” he said to the man waiting in the corridor.

“Thank you,” said Vorwough as he passed by and dropped a coin in Cheid's hand. It was a heavy silver coin, valuable enough that he'd be able to buy some of the things he had been wanting to. He didn't have time to thank the man before the door was slammed shut.

Cheid pocketed the coin and headed back to the transport disc. There would be many others waiting to be guided.

The hours passed by quickly as he sought out wizards who people were going to meet and guided people to them. It was a lot of walking and standing around as the disc lifted him to the higher stories and then descended down

again. Cheid had done it enough for his body to get used to it. On the first day his feet had been killing him only a few hours in, but now he barely noticed all the walking he did.

It was a clever way to get the students to do some exercise. You needed a body that could take a bit of punishment to do magic. The spell revealing the tag on the guests was also good practice for the future as it gave experience in gathering the energies needed and putting them to use. Even a simple spell, repeated enough times, gave you much needed confidence and skill.

By the end of his shift Cheid had earned a few more copper coins in his pocket. The rest of the guests had been far less generous with their tips and some had outright complained and refused to give anything because of how long they had had to wait. Dealing with annoyed guests was never pleasant and in that regard the day had been among the worst he had had to deal with so far.

He was happy to take off the necklace and sign out on the book. It was getting late, though he still had a few hours before the last meal of the day would be served. There were no lessons so he had some of that rare free time. The transport disc took him to the floor where his room was. He still shared it with the same two boys he had since the first day.

Both of them were in the room when he opened the door. They sat by the single table in the room, apparently playing cards.

“Hey, Cheid,” greeted Percy. His brown eyes quickly glanced at him before returning to the cards. His blonde hair looked like a wild bush that none had dared to trim.

“You want to join in?” asked Leit. There was a free chair, but Cheid was not much of a card player. He had given it a try only to lose a weeks worth of tips to Leit. The black haired boy knew how to play cards and he'd reaped somewhat of a reputation for it amongst the younger students.

“Not today, Leit,” replied Cheid and went for the travel trunk at the end of his bed.

“See, I told you you scared him off from the game,” said Percy and laid out a card on the table.

Leit shrugged his thin shoulders. He was tall enough that the chair he sat on

forced his knees to face slightly upwards. "You can't play cards without losing once in a while." He placed his own card on the table.

"I think Leit here has misunderstood that saying, Cheid. He thinks it's all right only to lose once and ignore the while part."

"I don't know, Percy. I don't think I've seen him lose even once," said Cheid as he stashed a few of the coins he had earned inside a small lock box. He had accumulated a decent nest egg and losing even a bit of it with card games was not part of his plan.

"What are you implying?" demanded Leit. He had the sort of voice that grated your nerves when he got upset.

"We've heard the rumours. They say you cheat to win," said Percy with a grin on his face.

Leit snorted. "Sore losers talk. I can't help it if Baech blesses me with his gifts." Baech was the god of luck and while skill played a large part in card games, luck still had its place. Though it was questionable whether he really blessed Leit.

"Just be careful. People will grow tired of losing and then they'll come looking for payback," said Cheid as he closed and locked his travel trunk. He glanced outside and sighed. It was too late to go out and do what he had planned.

"What are you going to do?" asked Percy as he laid out his cards.

"Me?" asked Cheid. "I was going to go to the city to buy some things, but I suppose it's too late for that now. The shops would be closed by the time I'd get there. Maybe I'll go to the library instead. There's a book I've been meaning to read."

"You're as wild as always," noted Leit dryly as he laid out his cards.

Percy cursed.

Leit grinned and grabbed the coins from the table.

Cheid knew his lifestyle was not exactly what many other students led. Others always seemed to make some time for entertainment. The older students went to inns to enjoy music and beer while the younger ones tended to remain within the towers playing games and coming up with other ways to entertain themselves.

None of that held much appeal for Cheid and more often than not he found himself being the bookworm and trying to get ahead in the studies, though he often came face to face with the limits of not having a master there to guide him. Alone, he did not dare to try and test some of the things he had read. Roderic, while a source of much information, would not let him get too far ahead others nor was he the type to help him make experiments reserved for older students.

“Don't mind him,” said Percy as he shuffled the deck of cards. The loss apparently did not sting him that much. “It's good that you take the studies seriously instead of loafing around like we do.”

“Give it a few years and he'll be going to the inns with us and you know it,” said Leit. “We've got plenty of time to turn him to our side.”

Cheid chuckled. He had a hard time denying that things might just go as Leit suggested. “Maybe, but for now I think I'll go to the library.”

“See you at dinner,” said Percy and started dealing out cards.

“Will do,” said Cheid and left the room. The library was a few stories below, but the disc made the trip quickly.

The library itself was an impressive sight. From the main entrance you could only see a small part of it because of the tall shelves, but as you stepped in further you could see the upper levels of the library and the numerous rows of book laden shelves as the layers stacked up and up. In the middle there was the librarians desks where you could ask for help. From there, if you looked up, you could see a hole that gave you glimpses to the floors above.

There was another open, well lit area with desk and chairs arranged in rows. There were students sitting there with stacks of books next to them, doing some research their master had told them to do or just soaking up information for the pleasure of it.

Cheid walked past them all and disappeared into the maze the shelves formed. If you did not understand the system used it would be near impossible to find a book you were looking for. Even if you understood it it could be difficult. That was why most people simply asked the librarians for help, but with the book he was looking for that was not an option.

They would have refused to give it to someone as low in rank as he was.

He had heard some older students talking about it. A book that focused on deadly magic – magic used in battles and to turn the tides of war. While most of the really dangerous books were properly locked up and watched over by the librarians, there were still some that were openly available and a second year student could find perilous to read. Not so much because the text itself could pose a danger, but because the topics and ideas presented were too advanced for them to fully understand and if they tried the experiments outlined in them the consequences could be fatal.

The smell of old parchment only grew stronger as Cheid ventured further between the shelves. Some would have found it an unpleasant scent, but he had grown to like it. At times it was like you were breathing history and knowledge. This was especially the case with books that had samples of herbs preserved inside them.

As he passed shelves he paid close attention to the labels on each of them. There were symbols there, telling what the books were about and who they were by. He passed a few students and made certain none were around when he finally reached the shelf he had heard about. It was a corner of the library that did not seem to attract that many people. You could see trails in the dust covering the floor. For a moment Cheid thought he'd need to tell the librarians about that so they'd come and do some cleaning, but then they'd ask what he had been doing there and it was a question he did not feel like answering.

Turning his attention to the books, he ran his finger around the backs of the books, hoping to run into the right one. Many of the names were unfamiliar, though some of the titles peaked his interest – *The Creation of Flames*, *Theory of Lethal Energies*, *Berrickles' Book of Destruction* – all sounded like books he'd need to read at some point for the sake of his revenge.

His finger stopped at a book and pulled it out. It wasn't a thick book and the leather cover was so worn out it looked like it could fall apart at the slightest touch. He could barely make out the title, once a bright golden colour, now faded almost into nothingness: *Book of Disorder*.

Cheid glanced around himself before cracking open the book. In the dim light it was hard to make out the faded words. He flipped through a few pages,

being careful not to tear or damage them, frail as they were. There was a lot he did not understand and the old form of language used in the book made for a tough read. What he did understand brought a grin on his face. The absolute horror of the spells discussed made him want to put the book down and run away, but the inner voice that nagged him about revenge held fast and flipped through more pages.

He would not be able to use the spells in the book with the skills he had now. It would have been foolish to even try. The intricate constructs the magical energies needed were beyond him – for now.

He forced himself to close the book. He wanted to take it with him or even just sit with it by one of the desks reserved for studying, but it was too early for that. Sneaking it out of the library would not happen under the watchful eyes of the librarians. They were strict about taking out books without signing for them. There were special spells to ensure it did not happen and Cheid had no idea how to counter them. He had confirmed the existence of the book and now knew where to find it. That was enough for the day.

The book was put back in its place and the boy walked away. He had promised to see his friends in the dining hall so that was where he headed. The plans for his revenge were finally starting to gain some solid foundation on which to build.

Chapter 9

Her feet hurt. Not because she had been standing for the entire day, but because earlier she had been forced to walk on the sharp gravel of the inside yard and the stones had made numerous little cuts on her feet. The years had thickened the skin, but not enough to withstand the sharp rocks.

Eleria knew her master had done it on purpose. It was rare for her to be ordered to go outside because of her fair skin. Great care was taken to ensure she remained pale, but the master liked to play with his belongings, cause some extra grief and pain in their already miserable lives. He had all sorts of little ways to make those he owned bleed, but not so much as to hinder their ability to work.

She had been allowed to clean the cuts and wrap them in cloth to keep the dirt out, but she was not granted any rest for it. It had been hours since it happened and even though she had been standing or walking all that time the bleeding had managed to stop.

“Wine!” came a demanding voice, drawing her attention away from the pain. She quickly grabbed the pitcher of wine from the small table and headed towards her master. The smell of incense grew stronger as she got closer. It burned her nostrils and nearly made her eyes water. She had been around it for two years now but it still had that effect.

Her master rested comfortably – naked – in a chair while a young girl massaged his shoulders. She wasn't much older than Eleria and the submissive expression on her face was enough to tell of the life she had led up to that point. There was no fight left in her.

Eleria poured the wine to the cup the man held out. She kept her eyes averted, doing her best to ignore the girl's head going up and down in his lap. At least that was one duty she had been spared from so far, but she knew it would not last. Her master had his eyes on her.

Sometimes he would touch her; a stroke of the cheek, running some of her blonde hair through his fingers, a caress of her arm. She knew the man was only

waiting for the right time. The moment she'd blossom into a woman he'd be there to pluck her.

“Stop, stop,” demanded the man and grabbed a handful of black hair, pulling the girl's head from his lap. The look of fear on her face was overwhelming. “What did I tell you? Watch the teeth!”

“Yes, master,” said the girl in a quiet voice. She had the body of a woman with well shaped breasts and a curve at her hips that gave her a shapely look.

“Now do it properly or I'll send you to train with the dogs,” snapped the man and pushed her back down. He let out a content sigh as she went back to work, The dogs.

Eleria had been introduced to the practice on her third day at lord Darkin Bosaf's mansion. It was the preferred method of punishment. Depending on the master's mood the dogs would either tear you to pieces or rape you. She had come to expect cruel ways of punishment – the arena in Ramyn had its own share of them after all – but the dogs were something that instilled its own kind of fear after seeing them.

“Having problems there, Darkin?” came another male voice. He was a frequent visitor. They called him lord Zhuler. He was having his own fun with a girl on his lap. She was facing away from him, her hips going up and down, lips parted in heavy breathing.

Darkin snorted. “She's new. There are still some rough edges to her. How's Jasmine treating you?”

Zhuler reached around her and pinched and twisted a jutting nipple. A small gasp escaped the girl's lips, making the man laugh. “Tightly.”

Eleria's master joined in on the laugh. “I told you. A twist of a nipple and she'll squeeze you harder than the regents tax men.”

It was not uncommon for the two men to sit in Darkin's opulent chamber, enjoying themselves as they were now, before getting down to the real business of the day. Eleria had to stand there and watch as they had their fun. They used the two older girls in every way imaginable before being satisfied and sending them away.

She had to stay to serve them more drinks.

"I heard you met with some foreigners?" inquired Darkin as he patted some sweat from his pudgy body before putting on his silk shirt and trousers.

"Ah, yes," replied Zhuler. He had already dressed himself and was back sitting in his chair. He was plucking away at a cluster of grapes. There was a whole platter of fruit on the small table next to him. "Nothing important. They're just looking for a missing person."

"I heard they had a writ from the emperor of Ramyn," noted Darkin as he took his own seat and motioned for some more wine. Eleria obliged. "He's not a man to give out one lightly."

Eleria had trouble holding her hands steady as she poured the wine. She wanted to shut her ears so she wouldn't have to listen to the men. Hearing them talk of her father, remind her of everything she had lost, caused more pain than the sharp gravel of the yard. She dared not let a small glimmer of hope enter her mind that they were searching for her. It had been two years. Surely they had already given up on her. She had after all heard news that declared her dead.

"That is the only reason I met with them," replied Zhuler. He munched down a grape and leaned back in his chair. Had the situation been anything other, Eleria might have liked the man. He was pleasant enough to look at and for a southerner he seemed to treat people well, even slaves. "They did not ask for much, just to make some inquiries on their behalf. A small price to pay for what they offer in return."

Darkin rubbed his chin. Eleria had noticed he did that often when considering things. "Perhaps I should agree to meet with them as well."

"You won't lose much by doing so, though they are horrible company," replied his guest.

"You can't expect much from the northerners," agreed Darkin.

From there the discussion moved to local business and the dealings the two had under way. They talked about the recent tax hike the regent had instituted and the rumour that there would be more strict regulations on certain areas of commerce.

By the time Eleria was ordered out it was dark outside. Her feet felt like they were on fire as she made her way over the cool stone floor and towards the

quarters set aside for the slaves. The kitchen was on the way there and she dropped the empty wine flask there. The cook was still there and was nice enough to allow her to take a piece of bread with her. It'd be her last meal of the day along with a cup of water.

She pushed open the wooden door and entered the dimly lit room. It wasn't much and the single barred window did not provide much light in the approaching night. She shared it with another girl and there was barely enough room for their two sleeping places to be next to each other.

The first thing she heard were the sobs. She saw the curled up figure on the other bed.

Eleria hobbled over and winced as she sat down next to her. It felt good to get off her legs. For a moment she just sat there and wiggled her toes. Finally, she broke the piece of bread in two and offered the other half to the sobbing figure.

It took a moment for the figure to react, but then a small hand extended and grabbed the bread.

"What did he do, Tanny?" asked Eleria and took a bite from the dry bread. Tanny was four years older. She was from the south, sold to slavery by her parents to cover a debt. Her duties were mainly to look after the son of their master. The boy was around the same age as her and known for his cruel nature towards slaves. If possible, he was worse than his father.

Tanny rolled up from under the blanket. She wore no shirt so Eleria immediately spotted the iron ring that had appeared on one of her nipples.

"He gave you iron," said Eleria in a flat voice.

The other girl nodded and sobbed.

Once you received iron you were fast on the road to becoming the personal play toy of who ever forced them to you. There'd be more rings put on her, from head to toe. Eleria had witnessed parties where such slaves had been hung from the ceiling from rings put through the skin on their back. Others had been posed for the guests delight, free to be used in any way the guests chose.

If there was one thing a slave wanted to avoid, that was receiving iron.

"I'm sorry," Eleria whispered to the sobbing girl.

"He said there would be more," said Tanny and looked at Eleria with tear

filled eyes. "As soon as this one heals he'll put in another. He laughed when they put it in. My screams of pain made him laugh."

Eleria knew the masters made little effort to make it a painless process. On the contrary, they made it last. She didn't want to hear any more so she wrapped her small arms around Tanny and let her cry against her shoulder. It wasn't the first time she had consoled the older girl and she doubted it would be the last. What she feared was that some day the masters son would take things too far and she'd come back to find the room empty.

It was a long time before Tanny calmed down and finally fell asleep. Eleria finished her bread and drank some water before laying down on the rough bed she had. She had barely fallen asleep when one of the older slaves kicked both of the girls up and back to their daily duties.



Loren cursed and ran after the man. Oughund and the two other men followed close behind.

"See if you can get ahead of him!" shouted Loren and the two men parted ways to different side streets, covering both sides of the escape route their victim was taking.

They had spent the entire day observing the slave merchant. Loren had made an effort to talk with the man, hoping he'd willingly reveal what he knew, but he was met with a wall of silence and the muscle of two of his guards politely driving him away.

Those two guards now laid dead on the street some way back, their blood staining his blade.

Loren and his men had waited for the market to shut down and the merchant to head home. It had taken longer than he had dared hope and the streets were now empty save for a few drunken inn goers and the few and far between city guard patrols.

It was unlikely anyone would interfere no matter how much noise the merchant made during his escape. Though Loren had to admit, for someone whose business was sitting around all day, the man could run. A threat to your

life tended to give one some extra strength, but he was still no match for the toughened men of the north. Even their two year stay in the south had not made them soft or dulled their edge.

The distance closed.

Loren thanked the god of luck for the route the merchant had chosen. There were not many side streets the man could take, making his escape route a very predictable one. He pushed on harder, gaining the escaping victim with every step.

The chase ended when one of the men he had sent to get ahead rounded a corner and tackled down the merchant. The struggle ended quickly as Loren set his cold steel against his neck.

“Come with us quietly and you might yet live,” said Loren in a cold voice.

The merchant nodded. Oughund pulled him up roughly, gagged him and tied his hands before finally blindfolding him. Where they were going was not exactly a secret, but anything to bring a bit more fear in their prisoners mind was worth it.

They had no trouble making their way to the edge of town and to the cellar where the two slavers were still tied up. A single city guard patrol crossed their path, but quick reactions ensured they saw nothing suspicious.

The merchant was quickly tied to the third chair and his blindfold removed.

“Welcome, Toroves,” croaked Ben as the merchant tried to make sense of his surroundings. Gip grinned at the man.

“You!” shrieked Toroves. “You brought this on me, didn't you?”

“Can't deny it,” said Ben and spat on the ground.

“You'll pay for this! You'll never sell another slave!”

“If I were you I'd worry more about what the man wants,” replied Ben and nodded towards Loren and Orend who were coming down the ladder. That shut the merchants mouth as he tried to make sense of who the men were.

“So this is him?” asked Orend and eyed the merchant. He noted Oughund was busy chopping up another one of the hot vegetables. He had to admit it had worked like a charm.

It had been a dull day for Orend. Much of it had gone by with him strolling

through the streets of the city, trying to figure out something they had yet to try if the merchant proved to be a dead end. So far they had not heard back anything from the lord they had asked for help, but a single day was not much time to ask questions.

From the streets he had ended up in their room at the inn. He had eaten and enjoyed some wine. That was about all he could do as he did not want to disturb his brother in catching the merchant. He had headed for the edge of town and their little secret chamber as soon as darkness had started to creep over the city. He had arrived only minutes after the prisoner had been brought there.

“That is him,” assured Loren.

“What do you want with me?” demanded Toroves.

“Ah, that is the question, isn't it?” said Orend and stepped closer to the merchant. “What do we want? What could men who abduct you and then scuttle you to an abandoned cellar possibly want?”

“Gold?” asked Toroves.

Both Ben and Gip burst out laughing, drawing a dark look from the man.

“Ain't no gold going to get you out of this one,” said Ben and continued laughing. Even Orend grinned at how the two were treating the merchant. They were playing right into his hands.

“What then?” demanded Toroves.

“Information,” replied Orend. “More specifically, on one of your clients. You sold them a slave two years ago and we need to find her.”

“I'm out of business if I start telling who bought what,” protested Toroves. The buyers were fully aware that sometimes a slave would be sought after by someone. They wanted to be certain their identity was safe with the merchants. Some went as far as using middle men to carry out purchases, but there were those who did not want to deal with the added price such a thing would incur.

“You should ask your two friends whether it's worth it to try and protect the identities of your clients,” said Orend and went to the table where he picked up the first cup.

“You should talk,” encouraged Ben. Getting the merchant to talk would mean they'd be free to go.

"I can't!" shouted the merchant. "It will ruin me!"

Orend nodded and two men grabbed hold of his head and forced his eyes open.

"You should talk if you appreciate having your eyesight," encouraged Loren as his brother took his place in front of the man.

The screaming started the moment the first pieces of the chopped up vegetable hit his eyes. Orend made sure to rub it in good and thoroughly despite the thrashing and struggling his victim was doing.

Ben and Gip looked on in silence at the show. The screaming didn't stop for a good while after Orend ceased rubbing the plant in the merchant's eyes. The oils still continued their torturous burning and even furious blinking failed to wash them off.

"Oh, I forgot to explain the rules, didn't I?"

"Yes you did, Orend," noted Loren, though he couldn't hide the small smirk on his face. His brother rarely forgot anything and it was rarer for him to do anything without a carefully considered plan. He suspected the explanation given to the merchant went unheard for the most part as the man was still sobbing and blinking furiously to try and see, but as soon as Orend took out the spoon and mentioned it as the last resort there was a change in the man's attitude, albeit a small one. Loren suspected they would have to do some more convincing, but that the man would eventually give up and talk.

And he was right. The sand that went into the merchant's eyes next had him screaming for his mother, but still he did not talk. Ben and Gip had to be gagged because their remarks were starting to hurt the effort. It was the salt that finally broke the man. His eyes were red and tears dripped from them like rain. He probably would never regain his vision which would almost certainly mean the end for his time as a slave merchant. How would you be in the trade if you could not assess what you were buying?

"So, the girl I described to you earlier. Who did you sell her to?" demanded Orend as he handed the cup of salt to Oughund.

Toroves sobbed and took deep breaths. "It was a middleman called Baen, but I know he works for lord Bosaf. He's the one who has the girl you're looking for."

“And you are certain of this?”

“Yes!” The man cried it out with such passion there was no lie in it.

Orend walked over to Loren and spoke in a soft voice. “Lord Bosaf sent us a letter today. He wanted to meet us.”

“We are in luck then,” replied Loren. “We accept his invitation and get to scout the place, see if the princess really is there.”

“If she is there then we need a plan so we can take her with us immediately,” said Orend. “She has suffered enough. I will not leave her as a slave longer than need be.”

“He might give her up if we simply state who she is,” offered Loren.

“Or he might summon his guards and have us throw out, or killed,” countered Orend.

Both men fell silent as they tried to come up with some solution.

“What do we do with them, my lord?” asked Oughund, interrupting the silence. Orend turned around not sure what the northerner meant, but as he nodded towards the captives his intentions became clear. He considered it for a moment. The merchant might still be useful, but the other two had served their purpose. They were nothing more than a loose end to be cleaned away.

“Leave the merchant be for now,” he ordered. “The other two, well, we did promise to let them go. See them off like you did your guests on the northern shores of lake Cerena.”

Oughund nodded and grinned.

Orend decided it was best to leave then. Despite the hardening the two years in the south had done to his heart, he did not want to witness what the two men were about to go through. There would be nothing but small pieces of them left by morning. Easily enough disposed of by feeding it all to the stray dogs that infested the city alleys. By the lake it had been the fish that had done the cleaning up.

Loren climbed up the ladder after his brother. He had heard the stories of what had happened on that shore. It was not something he wanted to witness either.

“So how do we go forward?” he asked as the two brother started heading

towards the inn. Several of their men followed close by to ensure their safety on the empty streets.

“We'll start with the basics,” replied Orend. “Find out where lord Bosaf lives. Scout the place, find out as much about it as possible. If we can find some way to sneak a few people in, all the better.”

Loren nodded. He peered into a dark alley. The sound of cats fighting had drawn his attention. There was nothing of interest there so he released the grip on his sword. His hand had acted on its own to the surprising sound.

“If he doesn't have too many guards then we can take the place. If he treats us like lord Zhuler did then our men will be inside his mansion,” continued Orend.

“That's a lot of ifs, brother,” noted Loren. The sort of plan they were talking about did not have room for many of those. They needed to be as certain about it as they were about the sun rising the next day. Otherwise lives would be needlessly lost and put in danger and they didn't have many of those to spare.

“We'll just have to work on thinning those out,” replied Orend.

After arriving at the inn both men went straight to sleep. It had been a long day and they would need to have their wits about them to pull off what they were planning.

The morning came far sooner than either of them wanted. It was another hot day as even in the early morning the heat was enough to make sweat run just from getting up from bed. The two brothers ate breakfast in silence before Loren headed out with Oughund to scout out the mansion of lord Bosaf. Orend remained behind and started working on arranging meeting the man in an official capacity.

“Are the bodies disposed of?” asked Loren as they walked the street towards the better part of town. It was still early and few people were up and about. Even shopkeepers were still setting up their businesses for the day and laying out their goods.

“They are, my lord,” replied Oughund with a satisfied smile.

“And the merchant is secure?”

“He is, my lord. I doubt he has the courage left to try anything. Not after

what he witnessed.”

A shiver ran down Loren's spine. He was glad he had left the cellar. “Let's just hope the information he gave us is correct.”

They had to ask for directions a few times before finding the right mansion. It was typical of the area; walls surrounded the main building, guards at the gate, seemingly no real way to get in besides climbing the wall or going through the front gate. They kept an eye on it for the day, noting where the guards went on their patrols and how the servants moved in and out.

The servants entrance on the side of the mansion looked to be the best option to get it. It was a small door with a single guard in place. If they could take out that single man they'd have free access to the place. The biggest obstacle after that would be the lack of information of the insides of the estate. They had no idea where everything was.

“What do you think, should we grab one of the servants?” asked Loren from Oughund as he leaned against the wall of another mansion. Lingered about for an entire day without getting noticed was not an easy nor an exciting task. You had to disappear at times and while you were there you had to pretend you had a reason to be there. Loren was starting to hate stopping random passers by to ask for fake directions to somewhere or pretending to meet an old friend and have a long talk with them on the street when one of Oughunds men came by. Had the streets been busier there wouldn't have been a problem, but the better part of town did not have much traffic apart from the servants and occasional visitor and lords being carried around in their divans.

“A servant sent out for errands that doesn't come back raises suspicions,” noted Oughund.

“They might think he has ran off.”

“They might, my lord, but they might also go looking for him. We have no idea why they were sent out. It could be something very important.”

Loren had to admit the man was right. Simply grabbing a servant was too risky. Trying to talk one up and find out things that way would be suspicious as well and servants weren't likely to tell such things to a complete stranger.

“Let's hope my brother has some ideas then. Going in there without any clue

about the layout would be foolish.”

“That it would be, my lord,” agreed Oughund and walked away. The guards at the main gate were looking their way so Loren started in the other direction. It looked like there was not much more to be seen there, but they stayed for a few more hours just to be certain before getting together and heading back to the inn.

“How was it?” demanded Orend the moment Loren stepped into the room. The older brother sat by a desk with quill in hand and a half finished letter in front of him.

Loren grabbed some water for himself and gulped it down before responding. “As we expected. Walls, guards, the usual deal. There's a servants entrance on one side that looks like our best bet in getting anyone in. Only a single guard there.” He threw himself onto the soft pillows lining a divan opposite to his brother.

Orend frowned. “I'd hoped it would be easier than that.”

“You know these southerners by now. The lords are big on safety as are the rich. Rich lords all the more so.” Loren poured himself some more water and gulped it down. He wished it were the wine they had gotten to enjoy when they had visited lord Zhuler. “The biggest problem is that we have no idea what the mansion is like from the inside.”

“I have secured a meeting with him for the day after tomorrow,” replied Orend. “We will get a look then at least.”

“Will we strike then?” asked Loren.

“If the princess is there, we will take her.” The firmness of Orend's voice left no room to argue.

“Then it doesn't really matter whether we know the inside of the mansion or not.”

“We have tomorrow. I'm sure there are people who will tell us what we need for the right amount of money,” suggested Orend. There were always people who knew the layout of a place and were willing to part with that information. The problem was finding them. Fortunately for the brothers, they had spent two years dealing with the lowest scum the city had to offer. You couldn't spend such an amount of time in a place and not learn the names of people who could give you

information.

The only problem was it would cost.

“Do we have enough gold to pay for the kind of information?” asked Loren. “It is a lords mansion. That isn't going to be cheap.”

Orend pulled out a small chest from one of the lockable drawers of the desk. He unlocked the chest with a key that hung from his neck. He pulled out several pouches from it. Each let out a cling as they hit the desk.

Loren raised an eyebrow. “Where did you get all that?” As far as he knew they were supposed to be nearly broke.

His older brother got a look of disgust on him. “This is the last allowance we've gotten from home. It arrived today. It's what was left over from the sale of that pasture land we had in the north, near the mountains.”

“I remember that place,” said Loren in a quiet tone. “It was where I first learned to ride a horse. Father had gotten it for me for my sixth birthday and we all went out for the day in the pasture.”

A sorrowful smile passed Orend's lips. “Better days.”

“Better days indeed,” said Loren and drank the last of the water.

Chapter 10

“**W**e do not work like those who have a direct connection to one of the elemental planes. Our power comes from within so we have to use that to weave a connection to them if we want to make use of them,” explained master Jedar. He had the sort of voice that could put a hyperactive eight year old to sleep. The rumour among the students was that he had failed doing a voice altering spell and that had changed his voice permanently.

Cheid glanced around the lecture room. There were twenty or so students there, all about his age, several of them in early stages of falling asleep. Heads were rested against palms, eyes were drooping, yawns ran through the ranks like waves.

The subject of the class was interesting, but the masters voice did its job. The old man drew a figure on the chalkboard to illustrate his point. In the centre there was free magic, surrounded on four sides by the elements; fire and water, air and earth on the opposite sides of each other.

“You all know this figure. It shows why someone with an affinity to the element of fire can not make a connection to the element of water,” Jedar continued to drone on as he drew a line that was cut off by the free magic in the centre. “It is blocked and only someone who can do free magic can draw on the power of all four elements, if they so choose. This is what this class is about.”

Cheid yawned. He couldn't help it.

“Cheid, why don't you come and give us a demonstration,” ordered Jedar and motioned for him to step in front of the class.

Hesitantly, he got up from his seat and made his way down the steps to the front. The seats where the students sat went up after every row and formed a half circle to give everyone a good view of what the teacher was doing. The master put his skeleton like hand on his shoulder and turned him to face the class. Even the sleepy ones had woken up. A demonstration was always worth seeing, either for the failure or the success.

“Now then, Cheid, what was the first piece of magic you did?”

“Fire,” he replied without going into details. They didn't need to know he had burned someone alive.

“Ohh, dangerous,” noted Jedar. “And have you been able to do that same spell after it?”

“No,” admitted Cheid. He could bring forth a small flame, not much more than what a small candle would produce. It paled in comparison to what he had unleashed on the man attacking him.

“Let's see if we can change that,” said the master. “Don't worry. You won't be able to match your first spell with a first try. But you should get a stronger response. Are you ready?”

“I think so,” said Cheid, feeling slightly nervous. He hoped the master was right. Burning down the entire class would not look good. The other students had come alive and were watching intently.

“Good. Now, get in touch with that inner power. Feel it out. Bring forth fire the way you usually do.”

Cheid reached inside himself to that now familiar place. He grabbed some energy, moulded it in his mind and extended his hand. He placed the energy in the palm of his hand and gave it form. A small flame flickered into being and danced above his skin, giving off heat but not burning it.

“Very good,” Jedar complimented. The skinny man leaned back against the desk reserved for the lecturer. “Now do the same, but instead of forming that inner energy into flames, make it into a string and cast it out towards the elemental plane. Use it as a conduit and draw the energy from there.”

“But..how do I know where to cast it?” asked Cheid.

The master shrugged his bony shoulders that barely held up the robe he was wearing. “That I can not say. It varies from person to person. There is a pattern to it that you will find if you search for it. Some find hand gestures help them navigate it, some find incantations help them through it, some even use both. Others need none of it. You will know what you need when you find it.”

Cheid closed his eyes and focused. The masters advice had not been that helpful. He reached inside himself and took the same amount of energy as before.

He shaped it into what could have been a string used to sew together a fine dress and started looking for that direction Jedar had said he'd find. He quickly started to feel frustrated with it and he was about to give up, but then he noticed something, a strand of energy much like the one he had shaped. He opened his eyes and the strand was still there. He tried to cast his own towards it, but it was met with an invisible force that threw it right back at him.

Cheid shuddered. It was nothing but a small jolt, but enough to tell him he would not be getting to his goal that easily.

“You need to find the right path,” instructed Jedar. “It is your barrier. Where the holes in it are is something you need to find for yourself.”

Cheid closed his eyes again and started feeling around for the holes the master had mentioned. Without even realizing it his fingers started making small gestures as he poked around. He uttered a few words silently to himself.

There!

He found a small hole, barely big enough to cast his strand of energy through and he did so. It wrapped itself to the one from the fire element and Cheid could feel the power surge to him. He quickly moulded it into the flame on his palm and opened his eyes.

What had previously been the flame from a candle was now one from a large torch. The other students let out noises of wonderment and admiration. Cheid could feel the strain it put on him just keeping the spell going. Sweat started to run down his forehead and he had to force the energies to stay stable, but it soon grew to be too much and the flame pattered out.

“That was well done,” complimented Jedar and patted Cheid on the shoulder. He was breathing heavily, as if he had run across the city. “Some of you might be wondering why this is being taught to you when you can barely make use of the inner power you have.”

The master stepped back behind his desk and let his gaze run over everyone in the room. “The answer is simple: time. For most of you it will take a decade to fully explore these barriers between the elemental planes. Even after you have them fully mapped it will be another decade before you can fully utilize their power.”

Cheid climbed up back to his seat. It seemed like the demonstration was over. A decade? He grumbled inside himself. He'd make certain it would take less time. Even the small strand had increased the power of the fire ten fold. If he had twenty of them, or a couple of larger ones, he'd be able to do the same sort of damage his first spells had done.

"I realize that the first spells most of you have done were far more impressive than what Cheid just did," continued Jedar. "It is easy to pull power when there is no thought behind it. It is powerful, but it is risky for yourself as well as those around you. When you add intent and planning behind it it becomes much more difficult to draw the power, but at the same time what ever you are trying to accomplish becomes that much more powerful. It is directed, it is safer. Those two alone make it worth much more than the random bursts of power an uneducated mind may or may not be able to produce."

The truth in the words did not escape Cheid. What had a sword been in his hands? A sharp piece of metal that, with luck, had allowed him to take a life. Had he been properly trained, a true master, he might have been able to make a difference with it. Perhaps he would have been able to save that maid instead of being saved by her. With true mastery of the energies that were allowing him to get a glimpse of them there would be little he would not be able to do.

"The training chambers have been reserved for you for the rest of the day," continued Jedar. "Some of the older students will be there to supervise you as you start training. We will continue there after lunch."

With the lecture seemingly concluded the students started to slowly leave the room and head towards the dining hall. Cheid felt like he didn't have the strength just yet so he remained seated for a bit longer. Finally feeling like he had gathered enough strength, he stood up and left the room only to run into Skander in the hallway.

"Ah, Cheid, how have you been doing?" the old wizard asked.

"I have been good," replied Cheid, unsure what the man wanted. Even when they ran into each other, he usually did not acknowledge him in any way.

Skander gave him an assessing look. "Why don't you come with me for a bit?"

Cheid couldn't say no to him so he followed the wizard to the transport disc. He was surprised when he ordered it to go to his personal quarters, all the way to the top of the tower. It was rare to get an invitation there, at least for someone as young as Cheid. The master of the tower liked his privacy and even the other masters had a hard time getting the chance to visit him there.

The disc came to a halt in a small chamber with a single door leading out. Skander wasted no time opening it and motioning for Cheid to follow. The room beyond the door was lined with bookshelves. There were several chairs for guests to make use of and in front of the large window was a desk with two tangled dragons carved into the side facing anyone entering the room.

The view from the window oversaw the imperial palace. The Towers of Magic were tall and the tips went as high as the third layer of the floating central islands. They were the few places where you could get a good view of the palace grounds.

Two doors led out of the room, one was closed, the other open, revealing a room filled with alchemy equipment and magic potion ingredients.

"Have a seat, boy," said Skander as he rounded the large desk and took his seat in the comfortable looking padded chair. Cheid took a seat in one of the chairs that were arranged in a half circle in front of the desk. The sunlight coming from the window behind Skander made Cheid squint as he tried to make out his facial expressions.

"You've been to our library, haven't you?" asked the old wizard, his voice void of any accusations of wrong doing.

"It is a wonderful collection of knowledge, master Skander," replied Cheid. "It has been of great help to me along with the classes."

Skander hemmed. "That it is, but it can also be dangerous. Too much knowledge too soon and one might find themselves in trouble."

Cheid did not have to wonder what the man was implying at. He knew. Somehow he knew he had sought out more dangerous books than he should have been. But why was he going about it in such a roundabout way?

"Only yesterday we found some books that should have been in the restricted section scattered among the less dangerous works," continued

Skander. "Of course, we collected them to where they belonged, but it illustrates the point of how dangerous a place it can be if you're not careful." He stared at Cheid as he spoke and made the boy squirm in his seat.

Anger was the first feeling to wash over Cheid. The fact that books he wanted to read had been taken away, out of his reach, seemed so unjust. He wanted to shout at the old wizard, but what good would that do? It might get him thrown out of the towers all together.

"I understand how you feel. Everything was taken away from you, but you can't live your life with the sole purpose of revenge," said Skander.

Cheid chuckled. He didn't really know where it came from. "You understand? No, no you don't," he said in a cold voice while fighting back tears. Crying now would just pain him as the little kid he was. "You haven't had to watch everything in your life burn down. You haven't had to see your father executed by the order of the man he dedicated his whole life to. And what has happened? Have the men responsible been caught? Have they had to pay for what they've done? No! They sit in their palace and live on like nothing happened. It's not right!"

He was now yelling out right and nearly standing up from his seat. He finally realized how immature he was acting and slumped down in his seat. "I'll make things right. I'll make them pay," he muttered finally.

Skander had listened to his little outburst with a calm expression. "You will do no such thing," he said in a calm voice and stood up. "Revenge will not make you feel any better."

"It won't make me feel any worse either."

Skander sighed. "You say that only because you are young and have not had to experience the emptiness revenge provides." The old wizard rounded the table and stood in front of Cheid. He towered over him and looked down on him. He did not look judgemental. Instead there was sympathy in the way he looked at him. "Abandon the path of revenge. Live your life looking forward. You've made friends here, the masters speak well of you. If you so choose you can make something of yourself and bring good to this world. I cannot protect you if you do something rash." He glanced back through the window, making it clear who he was referring to.

For a moment Cheid considered it. Life in the towers had not been bad. He liked the things he was learning. Then he remembered the sight of the axe falling down. He remembered the men murdering the woman who saved him. There was no way to forget it all and just move on. There was but one thing he could promise the old wizard. "I'm not going to do anything rash." He met his gaze with moist eyes, but gave not an inch. "You won't have to worry about me causing problems for you or the Towers."

He spoke the truth. He did not want to drag anyone else into what the revenge would entail. If things did not work out then he'd take the full blame for it without pointing fingers at anyone else.

Skander examined him for a moment. Then he sighed. "I suppose that is the best I'll be getting out of you for now." He walked back behind his desk. "I have your word on it now, young Cheid. Do not make me regret for accepting it."

"I won't."

"Now get back to your classes. I've kept you long enough," said Skander and began shifting through a pile of papers on his desk.

As Cheid opened the door the old wizard called his name one more time, making him stop and turn.

"Stay away from books you're not supposed to be reading just yet," said Skander with a stern gaze. "I have my eyes on you."

A shiver ran down the boy's spine. He could only nod before closing the door and waiting for the transport disc to arrive. There had been something about the way the words had been said that made him feel like it would be a bad idea to try and go against the old wizard's words.

He had some time to think as he waited for the disc and then for it to take him to the level where the dining hall was. It was still too early for him to do anything but lay the very foundations for his revenge and gather information. Five, maybe ten years would go before he'd be ready to take any action. Surely Skander would loosen his surveillance by then if nothing suspicious happened?

Cheid decided it was best to act like the talk had reached him, like he had given up on getting back at the men who had robbed him of everything dear. While he couldn't do much himself, there might be others who could do the work

for him. That would require gold or perhaps some other way to compensate them for their efforts, but something would be needed.

He'd have time to plan it.

The disc came to a halt and Cheid entered straight to the large dining hall. It took up the entire floor along with the kitchen and could easily accommodate every student and master in the tower. There were lines of tables and benches, many filled with students enjoying their meal and chattering about what ever hot topic was making its round among them. Orbs of light hovered above the tables, lighting the area as if it were daylight.

As he walked towards the tables where the food was laid out he spotted his two room-mates sitting at a table. He waved at them and they motioned for him to join them. Cheid nodded and headed to fill his plate.

He was in luck as one of the kitchen hands was just bringing out a steaming bowl full of oven roasted potatoes. Cheid quickly grabbed a wooden plate and popped a couple of the potatoes on it. He drizzled over some melted garlic butter and stuck a couple of slices of some dark bread on the side. A few thin slices from the mutton crowned the plate.

Just the smell of the food made him feel better about everything as he made his way to the table and took a seat next to his friends.

"Where have you been? We thought you'd miss the entire meal," asked Percy. Leit was busy cleaning his plate from the last drops of butter.

"A master wanted to have a talk with me," replied Cheid and dug into one of the brown crusted potatoes. The butter had turned the yellow insides into a creamy mush. The taste was still amazing. The Towers kept its occupants well fed, of that there was no room to argue.

"Which one?" asked Leit. "Not Jedar I hope? A one on one talk with him could put you to sleep for good."

Percy chuckled.

"No, it wasn't Jedar. It wasn't that important." said Cheid with a smile. He'd rather not say he had talked with Skander, in his personal quarters no less. There would be no end to the questions.

"I heard you were used as an example in class today?" Percy was always on

top of the gossip. If someone did something that was worth mentioning even in passing there was a good chance he'd hear about it. He'd probably spread it around too.

"I learned how to connect to the elemental plane of fire," said Cheid as he munched down the crispy skin of the potato along with a slice of mutton. "We're supposed to go practice it for the rest of the day."

"Oh, that's awesome," said Percy enthusiastically. "I can't wait for us to get to it tomorrow."

"We'd better watch out Cheid. He'll fill our room with water tomorrow night, trying to show off what he's learned," said Leit and looked at his plate with a slightly sad expression. He glanced at the serving station, but decided with a sigh not to get more.

"I don't think we'll have to worry. At most he'll fill a bucket," said Cheid and started on his second potato. "It was tough. It took a lot just to keep a simple torch flame going."

"Nothing a little practice won't fix," said Percy.

"A lot of practice," noted Cheid.

"Fine, a lot of practice," admitted Percy. He wasn't the best of wizards. He had trouble casting even the simple spell needed to work in the lobby.

"Come on. We'd better go or we'll be late for the lecture," said Leit and stood up.

"Ah, right. We'll see you tonight," said Percy and followed the already walking away Leit.

Cheid simply waved his hands as farewell and continued his meal. He felt better with a full stomach. Some of the strength the spell earlier had sapped away was returning. He took the plate and utensils to a water filled bucket before departing for the training chambers.

As soon as Cheid stepped off the transport disc he ran into Jedar. The master was pacing the hallway lined with strong looking doors.

"Ah, there you are. You're late," said the bony wizard.

"My apologies. The demonstration in the classroom really took my strength away," replied Cheid. He decided it would not do any good to tell him about

Skander taking up his time. There would be questions asked.

“Are you feeling all right now?” asked Jedar with slight concern on his face. “I forgot it was your first time doing it. It can be taxing.”

“Nothing a few potatoes didn't fix,” replied Cheid with a smile.

“Ah, good. Now then, let me introduce to your training supervisor.” Jedar led the way and showed him into one of the chambers. An older student was there waiting. He was perhaps six years older than Cheid. He had an honest face and a round body that seemed to tell the full story of how well the students were fed. “Cheid, this is Arden. He'll look after you while you train and ensure you're safe.”

“Good to meet you,” said the older boy and examined Cheid.

A small explosion made the floor and walls rumble.

“Oh for the love of..” muttered Jedar and turned to leave the room. He turned around at the door. “Will you two be all right?”

“We will be fine, master,” assured Arden.

“Good. Now get training.” Jedar left the room.

“What was that about?” asked Cheid.

“One of the other students probably failed a spell,” replied Arden. “Despite us seniors helping out, it is still the master who is ultimately responsible for everyone's safety. An explosion like that could leave people injured so he's rushing to see how bad it was.”

“I see.” It was all Cheid could bring himself to say about the situation. If it was that dangerous then why had the master allowed him to do it in front of a classroom in an unprotected room? Sometimes even the masters seemed to make stupid decisions.

“So I heard you made a fire. Why don't we focus on improving that?” said Arden as he took his position opposite to Cheid who was standing in the middle of the empty room.

And that was what they did. Cheid got more familiar with the barrier he needed to break through and even the small amount of training had him feeling more confident about being able to do such spells. Still, it did not take many tries until he was feeling too tired to even make the simple lobby duty spell.

“You did well,” commended Arden.

“Thanks,” said Cheid in between deep breaths for fresh air. He was sitting on the floor, his back resting against the cool stone wall. “It's harder on your body than I'd have thought.”

“Nothing training won't help with,” assured Arden. “Just don't get into a fight with someone from the other four towers. You'll lose. Badly.”

“Why?” asked Cheid.

“They're more powerful than you are right now, even kids your age. They have no barrier to break through to pull out the power of their element. They have access to all that power just like you have to your inner pool.”

Cheid chuckled. It was slightly disappointing to hear that he could have had a route to his revenge sooner if he had been born with affinity to something else, but at the same time he recognized what it meant. “I guess I'll have to wait a decade before picking a fight with them, then.”

Arden nodded. “Time is your friend. The more of it goes by, the more powerful you will become.” He grinned. “Not that you'll want to fight them even after a decade. They're nice people all around.”

“You know many?” asked Cheid. As far as he could tell the students from the various Towers kept to their own kind most of the time. It was a simple result of living in the same place and going to the same classes.

“Oh yes, I know quite a few,” replied Arden. “We have a guild of sorts that meets up every now and then at local taverns or in one of the Towers. We have students of all ages among our group. Maybe you'd like to join us some time?”

Cheid considered it. Getting friends from the other towers did not seem like a bad idea. Maybe it would open up some new doors for him. “It sounds interesting,” he finally admitted, not wanting to seem too eager. “I'd love to come and see what you do.”

“That's great. I'll let you know when we're meeting up the next time.”

Cheid smiled. Making new friends never hurt anything, especially when they had something they could teach you.

Chapter 11

“Are you certain the information is good?” asked Orend and eyed the piece of paper laid out on the desk in front of him. It had been a shady person that had sold it and there was no guarantee the layout of the mansion depicted on it was accurate to any degree.

Loren shrugged his shoulders and sipped some wine from his cup. “The seller came highly recommended.” He had spent the early hours of the day dealing with the shady figures of the underground, hunting for a map such as the one they now had. He had visited many shops selling the sort of things no law abiding citizen would have had a need for; poisons, drugs, weapons you could hide on yourself easily and that would be hard to find.

The sort of people who frequented that world were not the kind you wanted to run into on a dark street. They'd just as soon as cut your throat as they would greet you. They were suspicious of anyone coming in and asking questions so it had been difficult to make any headway into finding the map.

Finally, with enough gold having exchanged hands, he had been guided to the right man and after a sizeable amount more coins had been given he had gotten the map. Given the world he had been in, selling a fake item or information was as good as signing your own death warrant so he had confidence in the map being genuine and as accurate as possible.

“With this we can plan,” said Orend, having examined the map. It was a good map and if it was accurate they now knew where the slaves were held, where the guards slept, where the personal chambers of lord Bosaf were, and most important, where they could sneak in a few of their own men.

“Say we find her there and take her with us, what then?” asked Loren. “If we have to kill some people that will certainly make us a target to be chased after.”

Orend looked up from the map at his little brother. The thought of planning their escape had not even crossed his mind as of yet. He sighed and rubbed his eyes. “You're right. We need a plan to get out of here as quickly as possible.”

“A ship?” suggested Loren as he walked over to the divan and laid down on

his side. His feet were sore from the standing and walking he had had to do. His old boots were starting to get worn down and uncomfortable. He made a mental note to buy a pair of new ones when they returned to Ramyn.

If they returned.

Orend considered the suggestion. It would be the quickest way back home, but getting one ready on such short notice would be difficult. And expensive. Finally, he had to shake his head. "I don't think we can manage that."

"Horses then?" suggested Loren.

Orend nodded. "Seems like the best option. Horses and the supplies we need. We can ride north as soon as we have her and Oughund is good enough to lose anyone coming after us."

"It'll be a long ride," noted Loren.

"We could just ride up to Dimun and take a ship from there," suggested Orend. Riding all the way to Ramyn was not an appealing thought. There'd be hills and forests to get past, rivers to cross, not to mention the two kingdom borders they would have to navigate through. Not only was it a long way, but it was dangerous as well, with bandits hiding in the hills and the forest was rumoured to have orc tribes roaming it, despite the best efforts of the elves living there.

"That sounds like a plan. Riding through all that land would be risky, considering what we'd have with us," said Loren and finished his wine. He stood up and returned to the map. "Now let's plan tonight."



The evening had brought with it a rare bit of rain over the city, though calling it rain was a bit of a stretch. It was more a blanket of mist that made everything damp, but did not gather puddles of water or turn the beaten dirt streets instantly into mud.

Orend pulled up the hood of his cape to keep himself dry, though as he walked forward the misty rain simply came in under the hood. Next to him Loren was having similar problems keeping himself dry. The plan to go with horses did not seem as appealing as it had earlier and the dry cabin a ship would have

offered was more appealing the further they walked in the rain.

They had sent Oughund ahead with a few men. By the time they'd arrive with the rest of the men for the official meeting, he should have been in position with the rest. They'd sneak in the moment Orend and Loren went inside. They'd stay hidden until there was trouble or they saw the two nobles leave unharmed.

They rounded a corner with their men and arrived in front of the gates of Lord Bosaf's estate. The guards stopped them and asked why they were there and then dispatched for a guide as soon as they were informed that the meeting was a scheduled one.

A servant quickly came to guide them inside while a couple of slaves hurried along them, sheltering them from the rain with some large leaves that had been woven together to form a shade under which a few people could fit.

Orend shed off his cloak as soon as they were inside, as did Loren. The men that were with them kept theirs on. Loren was slightly surprised that their weapons had not been taken away, despite how openly they were carried, but then he saw how many guards there were just in the hall they were in. There was no reason to worry with such a small group of visitors.

They'd prove them wrong if need be, he thought.

The servant asked them to follow him once they'd had a moment to shed off their wet clothes. A slave arranged their clothes by a small fire so they'd be dry by the time they left. Orend made certain to get a good look at everyone they came across. If the princess was there, he did not want to miss her, but by the time they arrived at the chamber of their host he had not seen anyone fitting her description.

But there were still many slaves he had not seen. Maybe the talks with their host would reveal her.



Eleria sighed as she grabbed the chilled pitcher of wine. The kitchen staff paid her no attention as they went on with their food preparations. She dodged them to the best of her abilities as she made her way out. If she spilled any of the wine on the floor there would be consequences she did not want to face.

A kitchen hand bumped into her, almost making her lose balance. She struggled to keep the pitcher upright and somehow managed to do so.

“Watch where you're going, slave,” said the man before carrying on with his vegetable chopping.

“I'm sorry,” said Eleria and gathered herself. The people preparing the meals were servants with proper wages, not slaves. No master would trust his slaves for a meal. He'd find himself poisoned to death sooner or later.

The corridor felt cold after the heat of the kitchen and its ovens. Her bare feet on the stone floor sent chills up her spine. She made haste to the masters chambers. She was already late with the wine and his guests would have been waiting.

As she rounded a corner she had to move to the side and bow her head slightly. The masters son, Risil, was walking her way along with his usual entourage of slaves and servants. Tanny was among them and she looked as miserable as she had a couple of night ago, sobbing under her blanket.

The son stopped in front of Eleria and eyed her. She kept her head bowed down.

“So, you are my fathers favourite,” he said and reached out to lift up her head. He stared her down with his brown eyes. “I can see why.” He licked his lips and grinned.

“Tanny has told me about you,” he continued and glanced at the slave woman behind her. Elerias eyes went to her as well, seeking to blame her for bringing her to his attention, but the look on Tanny was enough to tell her the information had not been given willingly.

Risil chuckled as he saw the two exchange looks. “Oh, the things I had to do to get her to talk. I do so like playing with her.” He leaned in closer to Eleria and grabbed one of her hands, causing her to almost drop the wine pitcher. His hand caressed her from palm to shoulder. “My father will use you, but he will grow tired at some point. Then you will be mine to play with.” His voice had grown coarse. He licked his lips. “I can't wait. Your hands..already I wonder if they'll be too big for Tanny to handle? Will you be able to take hers?”

Eleria shivered even though she didn't fully understand the meaning behind

the words. She knew she was hearing her future laid out in front of her. There would be no escaping it. If she angered the man now it would not be forgotten and there would be a price to pay when the time came. "Young master, your attention flatters me, but your father is waiting for his wine." The words tasted like rotting meat in her mouth. She hoped the mention of his father would be enough to make him let her go about her duties. If she was any more late his father would have a punishment handed out.

Risil grinned again and let go of her hand. "Go on then. Help that fat bastard soak himself to death with it. The sooner you'll end up as my play thing."

Eleria made a shallow bow and quickly made her way past the entourage of the young noble. Tanny gave her a look that pleaded forgiveness. It was a look Eleria could not respond to then. She brushed past her and walked as quickly as she could without looking like she was running away.

Behind the first corner she stopped and leaned against a wall. Her hands shook so badly she had to put the pitcher down for a moment. Several deep breaths and a few minutes later she had the pitcher in her hands once more and she was headed to the masters chambers. The encounter with the young master weighed heavily on her mind, but the more urgent fear of punishment for being late forced her forward.

She entered the chambers as quietly as possible. She heard the voices. The master was already there as were the quests. She was late. She made her way to her usual spot and put down the pitcher on its metal tray. The metal sound made her immediately noticed.

"There you are," said lord Darkin with wine cup in hand. He did not raise his voice, but the discontent was evident on his face. She knew the look. She would suffer before the day was over. "Don't just stand there you stupid girl! Pour me some wine as well as for my guests."

Eleria took the pitcher again and entered the lit area of the room. She glanced to the side to see who the guests where. They were dressed in ragged clothes compared to the ones her master was wearing. Instead of fine silks they had rough looking clothes that any well prepared traveller might have on them. Their beards hid behind them the faces of men from the north, though the sun

had tanned their pale skin somewhat. Both were looking at her closely as she poured the wine to her master and then made her way towards them.

She first poured wine for the younger of the men. He smiled as thanks, but she dared not return it. Instead she went onto to pour for the older man with an expressionless face. She felt uncomfortable under the intense stare the man gave her. Just as she finished pouring the wine, the man spoke.

“Your lordship, may I?” he asked and motioned towards Eleria. She froze in place. Guests had been allowed to examine her more closely before. It was not a pleasant thing and she always dreaded those moment. Their hands did not always show the restraint her masters did.

Darkin grinned. “I see you have good taste. Go ahead,” he nodded in approval and gave Eleria a stern gaze, telling her to behave. Resigned, Eleria stepped closer to the man that had spoken.

His hands shook as he reached out and grabbed the hem of her shirt. He lifted it high enough to reveal her flat stomach and the lowest of her ribs. He reached underneath, his callus covered hand brushing against her skin and down her side. It stopped where her birthmark was, a small scar like patch of skin that was almost scab like. The man withdrew his hand and let her shirt fall down. He looked at her with an expression that was a mix of relief and disbelief.

“My apologies, your highness,” he said in a quiet voice, just loud enough for Eleria to hear it. She didn't know how to react to it. The man knew who she was.

Turning to face lord Darkin, the man said in firm voice. “This girl must come with us.”

Darkin looked surprised. “She is not for sale.”

“None the less she will come with us,” said the man.

“Why do you insist?” asked Darkin.

“She is the daughter of the emperor of Ramyn,” replied the man.

Darkin burst out laughing. “Don't be ridiculous. She is dead. Our regent sent his condolences to your emperor. You have been duped. I bought her from a honest dealer at the slave market. Her papers are in order.”

“None the less we will be taking her,” said the man. His companion stood up and observed the room, his hand resting on the hilt of his sword.

Eleria did not know what to make of the situation. The men looking to take her could not have been sane. There was no way the two of them would get out alive from the estate. And if she went with them the punishment would be harsh. She wanted to move, run away from it all, but she found herself standing still, waiting for the situation to resolve itself.

“Did Toroves put you up to this? He has a tendency for bad jokes,” said Darkin.

The older man stood up as well, his hand on the hilt of his sword as well. “This is no joke. We will take her with us. We were prepared to pay you, but as you have said she is not for sale, we will just have to use force then.”

Darkin burst out laughing again and rang the small bell resting on the table next to him. Four guards immediately appeared and surrounded the two men and Eleria. Swords were drawn and a stand-off ensued.

“What now, Orend?” asked the younger man as he eyed the guards and kept his blade at the ready.

“Now we go with the plan, Loren,” replied the older man. Both men grinned.

Loren let out a loud whistle that echoed out into the hallways. Not long after that they could hear sounds of fighting.

“What have you done?” demanded Darkin in a shrill voice. The situation seemed to be fast slipping from his control. Eleria started to think that maybe the two men had come in with a plan that could actually work.

“Just invited a few friends over,” said Loren in a casual voice.

“Kill them! Kill them all!” shouted Darkin and the guards advanced. Blades met, sparks flew and men grunted. Eleria scampered out of the way to avoid getting hit as the men brawled. She found herself standing behind the seats the two men had been sitting on.

The guards did not seem to be a match to their skill. One guard was already on the ground, his hands trying to desperately keep his inside where they belonged. Loren had the remaining guard on the defensive while his brother struck down one of the two up against him. The cries of pain were joined by others echoing down the hallways.

“Useless fools,” muttered Darkin and hoisted himself up from the divan. He

hobbled over to the wall and grabbed a curved sword from it holding place and headed towards the pair. With his pudgy build he looked out of place with the blade in hand, but there was a rage burning inside him that more than compensated for it.

Orend struck down the remaining guard just as Darkin joined the fray. The curved blade nicked his left arm, but did not cause any serious injury. He turned to face the enraged southern lord. His swings were wild and clumsy, telling of his lifestyle that did not involve swinging a sword as much as it did tilting the wine cup.

“Stop fighting and let us go and no one else will have to die,” grunted Orend as their blades met and the two men stood inches away from each other, both pressing forward with all their strength and weight. The blades screeched against each other.

“Let you go? After you so blatantly came and tried stealing something that is mine? Never!” Darkin spat out and grunted as Orend pressed on.

“So be it,” said Orend and pushed the curved blade aside. Before Darkin had time to recover the northerners blade had swung back and lunged forward, impaling the fat man. Blood spurted out of his mouth and he slid off the blade, slumping to the ground.

Eleria watched the life escape the man who had tormented her for two years. There was no joy in her as she watched the blood pool underneath him. There was no satisfaction in seeing it happen, despite everything he had done. What she felt was relief. With the man gone she might have a chance for freedom.

She paid no attention to Orend rushing to his brothers aid and the two men mercilessly chopping down the remaining guard as if he were a young tree. She wondered where she would run? The city was unknown to her. She had no money. Nothing with which to survive. Her thoughts were interrupted as the two men made their way to either side of her.

“My apologies, your highness,” said the one called Loren. “We are in a bit of hurry so I will have to take some liberties with your person.” Having said that, he grabbed her by the waist and hoisted her over his shoulder. Both men started hurrying out the room and down the hallway towards the sounds of fighting.

It was an uncomfortable position, her stomach pressed against the man's shoulder. With him running it was difficult to breathe as she continuously bounced against the shoulder. Only then it really dawned on her that the men had called her your highness. They knew who she was. Had her father sent them or were they just looking to use her? Maybe a ransom demand. But even that would mean she might get to see her parents once more. They would pay what ever was demanded.

They emerged onto the inner yard with the sharp gravel that had cut her feet only a few days ago. It was running red with blood and the rain that poured in through the opening in the roof only smeared it across a wider area. She saw bodies laying on the ground, guards of her former master, as the man carrying her ran forward. The noises of fighting came closer.

“Seems there are still some guards left,” noted Orend.

“We don't have time to fight with them,” said Loren. “Once they find out we killed the lord it'll be the whole city guard after us.”

They came to a room. It was apparent the companions of the two men had been pushed back from the open courtyard. All along the way there had been bodies slumped against walls or laying across the corridor. Eleria couldn't see what was happening ahead, but he could hear the screams as the two men rushed forward.

She had little doubt they had just stabbed some guards in the back. She saw the bodies as they moved on.

“Come on Oughund, we need to get out of here!” shouted Orend as they continued to run. Loren followed him closely.

“Yes, my lord,” came a voice and soon Eleria saw the source of it. The man was covered in blood, his beard tangled in bloody clots. Three others loomed behind him, one helped by the other two. It was clear the man was injured as he limped forward best he could. The bearded man grinned at her and she closed her eyes, not wanting to bear witness to what was going on.

The sound of fighting echoed in her ears for a good while more. Then they were outside. The misty rain fell on her face and the sounds of fighting stopped. All that remained was the heavy breathing of the men surrounding her and

sounds of their footsteps as they ran over the gravel path towards something. She heard a metal gate creak and a wall brush against her side as the man carrying her pushed through the opening.

She opened her eyes just as she was hoisted on top of a horse and Loren jumped behind her.

The bearded man came over and handed a cape to the man behind her. She soon found herself wrapped in the warmth of it and the hood pulled over her head. The man wrapped a hand around her to keep her from falling.

“Hang on tight, your highness. We will have to ride fast,” said Loren as he pushed his heel to the side of the horse, launching it into a quick gallop.

Eleria grabbed hold of the saddle knob in front of her even though the strong hand around her seemed like it would be enough to keep her safe. She glanced around from under her hood. The older man was riding next to them on the right, to the left was the bearded man. There were more men around them, perhaps a dozen, though the rain and fast speed made it hard to say.

Buildings whisked by in the darkness. The only reason she could make them out was the light shining from some of the windows. Her head was starting to spin. It didn't feel real that she had been taken from the house. She wrapped the cloak around her tighter. There was nothing she could do but wait and see what would come of it all.

The only stop the men made was at the city gate where they slipped a few coins to the guards so the gate would be opened. It did not take long for them to be outside the walls and riding on. They lit torches to get some lighting on the dark and slippery road, but despite the danger they did not stop. All through the night they rode on, well into the morning, before making a stop.

Eleria had fallen asleep despite the roughness of the horse ride. She was roused when the man behind her slid off the horse and shook her gently. They had stopped by the road. A few men were busy setting up a fire so they could cook a warm meal. The horses needed a few hours of rest before they could continue so there was no reason not to do it. She let the man help her down from the horse. The cloak she had around her was far too large and dragged on the ground. The older of the pair came to greet her.

“My apologies, your highness. It has been a busy night and there hasn't been time for proper introductions. My name is Orend Kalunta and this is my little brother, Loren,” he pointed to the man she had ridden with. Eleria was certain she had heard the family name somewhere, but she couldn't conjure up the memory.

“You have nothing to fear from us,” he continued. “We are here under orders from your father. We're here to take you home.”

Eleria eyed the pair from under her hood with suspicion. Were they really who they claimed to be? They certainly did not look like men his father would have trusted, in their ragged clothes and unclean beards.

Loren smiled. “I don't think she trusts us, brother.”

Orend frowned at him before digging out a rolled up piece of parchment from his pocket. He handed it to Eleria. She immediately recognized the seal on it. She opened it and read through the text. It took her a while due to lack of practice, but the letters came to her slowly. The writ was enough to convince her the men were who they claimed. She rolled up the parchment and handed it back to the man.

“I would like to go home,” she said and looked at the two men.

“We are on our way already,” said Orend with a feint smile. Hearing her speak for the first time was a good sign.

She was not completely lost.

Chapter 12

“**W**hat do you know about a group of students that is comprised of people from all five of the towers?” asked Cheid as he watched the two boys lay out their cards. He wasn't part of the game, apart from shuffling the cards and dealing them out. He didn't mind that duty. It let him in to the game and it made for a neutral one to keep both of the actual players happy and confident there was no foul play.

Percy frowned. “Why do you want to know about them?”

“I was invited to join them,” said Cheid and gathered the cards from the table. Leit pulled in the coins he had won. The room went dark suddenly, only the moonlight from the windows casting its pale light which was barely enough to see dark shapes.

“Leit. Your turn,” noted Cheid and waited while shuffling the cards in his hand. He was good enough at it not to need light.

“I know, I know,” said Leit and after a moment an orb of light flickered into being above the table. It hovered a few feet above it, barely the size of a small apple, but still bright enough to light the room as if it were daylight. Percy let out a deep breath and looked like a weight had been lifted from his shoulders.

Instead of using the usual lamps, the trio was making use of their card playing time to train their skills. The light spell was a simple one, but at the same time maintaining it was good practice towards other, more complicated things. They took turns in maintaining it which gave everyone time to rest until their turn came up.

“So about that group,” said Cheid after giving Percy some time to rest and dealing the cards to both players. It was always the roughest when the spell broke. That was when the full strain of it hit you and it took some time to get over the worst of it.

“Right, them,” said Percy and took another deep breath. He wiped a bead of sweat from his forehead and grabbed the cards Cheid had dealt to him. He frowned at them. “They call themselves the Quintet, on the account of all five

towers being involved.”

“Sounds cheesy,” noted Leit as he examined his cards. He did not look pleased.

Percy ignored his remark. “As far as I know they don't actually do anything, besides getting together and talking about things. All I can say for certain is that they're the source of many rumours. Usually the correct ones.”

“Sounds like they know things,” said Cheid, pleased at what he was hearing. If the group found the rumours that were true that meant they were able to investigate things. Or at least they had the ability to come across accurate information. If he could get the group to turn its attention towards the mystery surrounding the death of the princess then they might come up with some leads for him.

There was no reason not to try it.

Both players threw down cards on the table. Cheid collected them and dealt out new ones. “They're also known as a bit of a party group,” added Percy. The frown on his face disappeared. He lacked the emotionless face many card players preferred. It was easy to see when he had a bad hand and when a good one came his way.

“Right, weren't they the ones that got a lecture from *all five* Tower Masters two years ago?” asked Leit and threw a coin on the table. The obvious signs of a good hand for Percy did not seem to phase him.

Percy nodded and placed his own bet. “Apparently they were celebrating the birthday of one of their members at a tavern. Things got out of hand.”

“Out of hand?” asked Cheid.

“The way I heard it there were some spells cast, simple party tricks, you know the type. Making a pile of small stones into a human shape and having it dance like a puppet, flames telling stories, that sort of stuff. Apparently some elemental forces got loose. The tavern was pretty much destroyed.”

“I can see why that would upset the tower masters,” said Cheid. Wizards causing problem always reflected badly on the Towers and it was the masters that would face the outcry from the local officials. Having been in the same room with Skander he could barely imagine the feeling of having five such men glaring

at you after catching you doing something wrong.

“They were furious,” continued Percy as he frowned at the extra coin Leit added to the pot. “They wanted to disband the entire group, but their leader managed to convince them that they did more good than harm.”

“The man must have a tongue made of gold,” said Leit.

“Or a very brown one,” noted Cheid.

There was a chuckle from all three.

“The masters keep an eye on the group now. As far as I know they haven't been in any further trouble since then,” said Percy and laid out his cards. He had a good hand.

Leit frowned as he laid out his hand. He had lost.

“What's this? A loss for Leit?” asked Cheid, surprised. Usually Leit was the one winning.

“Can't win all the time,” he replied and shrugged his shoulders, though there was a somewhat pained look on his face as Percy pulled in his earnings.

Percy smiled like a man who had just found a nugget of gold while taking a piss in the river. “Play enough and you're bound to win some,” he noted.

Cheid could have pointed out that he had lost far more money than he had won, but he didn't want to ruin his friends good mood. “It sounds like a fun group to take a look at, then,” he finally said as he gathered up the cards.

“They're mostly harmless,” agreed Percy. “Just don't let them talk you into anything too crazy.”

“I won't,” assured Cheid. The plan was the other way around. He'd be the one to talk the group into doing crazy things.

The light went out again.

“My turn,” said Cheid as he shuffled the cards and started to build the spell.



“Everyone, this is Cheid,” said Arden and motioned towards him. A group of seven people all had their eyes on him. They were at a tavern not far from the Towers. It was one of those places that had students frequenting it, which kept it mostly clear from other customers.

Two of the seven looked to be about the same age as Arden while the rest were clearly younger. There was a girl about Cheid's age with a vibrant, copper coloured hair that was accompanied by a freckled, pale skin. There were two boys, maybe a few years older than him and two more girls that looked to be about the same as them.

"Some of the group isn't here," noted Arden. "The older ones are busy with their studies, a few are out with masters assisting them with jobs. We're sort of the new generation of the group."

"I see," said Chedi and inspected the group. There were two seats left over on the table.

"Let me introduce you to everyone," said Arden as the two took the vacant seats and started with the young copper haired girl. "This is Satu, she joined us only a few months ago. She's from the tower of Fire."

"Nice to meet you, Cheid," said the girl in a voice that bubbled with energy. When he looked at her he couldn't think of a more fitting appearance for someone dabbling in the element of fire. He had to admit there was a certain cuteness to her.

Arden continued with the introductions. There were Carla and Wess from the tower of Earth. They were the two older ones. Wess was a stocky man with a hint of beard around his chin. Carla was tall for a woman, comparable to Wess in that regard, and her brown eyes observed everything with an intensity that few could withstand for long. Cheid found himself averting his eyes more often than even with Skander.

The two younger boys, Gerard and Mathias, were from the towers of Water and Air, respectively. Gerard had an open smile as he greeted Cheid and welcomed him. Mathias simply nodded and brushed aside some of his long, nut brown hair as it fell across his field of vision.

Lastly there were the two girls, Jade from the tower of Free magic and Mona from the tower of Air. The two seemed to be good friends as they were whispering to each other all through out the introductions. Both eyed Cheid as their names were called out and he found himself blushing slightly under their watchful eyes. Jade had a slightly crooked nose, but she more than made up for it with her

smile and the delicate shape of the rest of her face. Mona had her black hair braided behind her. As she smiled dimples appeared on her cheeks.

With the introductions done Arden ordered some wine for himself and offered to pay for Cheid's drink as well. He went for some water.

"So, anything exciting happen since the last time we met?" asked Arden after the waitress had brought the drinks he ordered. He sipped some wine from his cup.

Cheid sat there observing everyone. He wasn't quite certain what would follow. Were they going to talk about inconsequential daily events?

"I burned the beard off my master," said Satu. She was looking down, embarrassed at the confession. There was laughter from around the table.

"How did you manage that?" asked Cheid, genuinely curious. How the other towers managed their students training was a bit of a mystery to him. In the Free magic tower the instructor would have been safe behind his protective spells. It would have made sense for that to be the case at the other towers.

"It was a honest accident," the girl defended herself after everyone turned their attention to her. "I was asked to light some candles. Practice for accuracy. The master was standing pretty close to the candles. I was not accurate." She looked down during the entire explanation, blushing slightly.

"I bet the rest of the class loved it," said Gerard with a chuckle.

"There was some snickering after he had extinguished his beard," admitted Satu with a feint smile. There were more chuckles from around the table.

"If you want, there might be a trick I can teach you that will help with your accuracy," said Arden.

"Really?" asked the little girl and looked up at him with grateful eyes.

Arden nodded. "That's part of what we do, after all. We help each other."

The other older members nodded around the table.

Cheid was starting to like the group. The conversation moved from Satu's mishap to other matters. There was speculation on who would be among the new masters of the Earth tower. They had recently lost two of the older ones, both to simple old age instead of the more usual mishap with magic or some other unnatural cause.

“There was an interesting rumour I heard when I went to the palace with my master,” said Wess as the speculation about the rank rising died down. Everyone perked their ears, especially Cheid. Anything from the palace would be of interest to him. “Theoden, the advisor to the emperor, needed us for a small matter, but as we were waiting to see him I overheard him talking to a messenger in another room.”

“How do you overhear someone in another room?” asked Carla and glared at him.

“With subtle effort,” replied Wess with a grin and continued his explanation. “You all remember the death of the emperors daughter two years ago?”

There were nods around the table. You'd have to have been dead not to have heard about it. Even then you'd probably have heard whispers from the other dead. Cheid's curiosity peaked at that point.

Wess looked around himself before continuing. “Apparently, her death is not as certain as it has been made out to be. The emperor dispatched a noble to find her body, be she dead or alive. They've been searching for two years, but apparently they have now made progress on the matter.” He leaned in closer to the group. “There's a possibility the princess might still be alive.”

The only sound was Cheid choking on his water. He had chosen a poor time to take a sip. Arden gave him a few good whacks on the back.

“That's quite a rumour,” noted Mathias. His voice was barely a whisper yet everyone at the table clearly heard what he said.

“It's not the first one of its kind,” added Gerard.

“But the source is quite high up, if we are to believe Wess,” said Carla and stared at the man next to her.

“Wess wouldn't lie,” protested Jade. She glanced at him quickly before looking away.

“It's probably true,” said Cheid, finally having regained his ability to speak. Everyone at the table turned their attention to him. They expected an explanation. “Think about it. It's been two years. They haven't found a body in that time. They must have dug through the ruins several times by now. If she was there, they'd have found her.”

He had not really given her fate that much thought during the years that had gone by. She had been declared dead, officially, and there had been a mock funeral even though no body had been found. There had been no reason for him to think she was alive. He had witnessed the destruction first hand and even though he had ran through the events in his head countless times, he could not see a way for her to escape. The buildings had crumbled in such a way that if she were inside there would have been little chance of survival. If the crumbling ceilings had not gotten her, then the fire would have.

His thoughts must have seeped onto his face as the looks he was getting from the others were turning into overly curious ones. Cheid sipped some of his drink and shrugged his shoulders. "I've spent some time looking into her disappearance. It just never sat right with me that they didn't find the people responsible for it."

There were approving murmurs from the others.

"It is shameful that the men who did it have remained at large," agreed Wess. "Which is why it would be shocking to find the princess alive. She'd be the only survivor. She might be able to tell who was responsible for it."

Cheid had his doubts about it. Even if she were alive how much could she have seen? To survive she must have hidden well or somehow escaped which meant avoiding the attackers as much as possible. When you were doing something like that, you rarely learned much about those you were evading.

"Is there really no rumours about who did it?" asked Cheid finally, hoping to push the discussion towards something of interest to him.

"Just the usual ones," said Wess. "Power struggle among the nobles, some ambitions towards the throne from powerful families. The usual things the nobles get up to."

The answer wasn't exactly satisfying for Cheid. If there were rumours about the princess living then there had to be more precise ones about who was behind the attack. You couldn't arrange such a large attack without someone talking. Someone must have boasted after a few tankard of ale and started a rumour.

"If any of you hear anything, I'd be interested in learning about it," said Cheid and garnered some more curious looks. He sipped some water. "Like I said,

I'm interested in the case.”

The others nodded, ensuring Cheid he had made his first steps in building some intelligence gathering resources. He didn't pay much attention to the conversations that followed. They were mostly about inconsequential things, though a few the ones dealing with spells perked his interests momentarily.

He did not notice the way Satu kept an eye on him. She glanced over at him every now and then and while he wasn't looking she outright stared at him. It was a curious sort of observation rather than anything else.

The members started to slowly disappear to do their own things. Some had studies they needed to do, books to be read, while others were simply looking to get a good nights sleep.

Cheid left while Arden, Satu, Wess and Carla were still busily talking about the politics of the Earth tower. He did not get to walk far down the street before he heard footsteps coming after him. It was late and the streets were mostly empty, save for the few others heading home from taverns.

“Cheid, wait!” came the familiar voice of Satu, making him stop to wait for her. The girl came running as best she could in her robe. She stopped in front of him and took a moment to get her breath back.

“What is it?” asked Cheid, worried something was wrong. Why else would she have ran after him?

She gave him a look. “I just wanted to walk to the towers with you. The streets aren't the safest for a lone girl like me.”

A brief smile passed Cheid's lips. “Given that you can set people on fire I think it's not you who'd have to worry.”

The girl gave him a frown. “I can't cast spells if I'm unconscious.”

Cheid couldn't argue against that. He knew how the gangs operated. They'd sneak up on you from some dark alley, knock you out and drag you to their hideout before selling you to the highest bidder. The robes they wore should have been enough deterrent to keep most away, but there were a few rare cases where a young student disappeared on the way to the towers after an evening at a tavern.

“Fine. Come on then,” he finally said and started walking again.

Satu moved next to him and matched his pace. The pair took a ramp to an upper level which would lead them to the bridge that connected the towers to the main island. It was dark enough that some of the main passage ways had lamps lit. Once you got closer to the towers the lamps went from oil to being powered by magic. It was yet another way the towers gave their students practice, though seeing as it was magic used outside it was reserved for some of the older students.

“Why did you join the group?” asked Satu after they had walked in silence for a while.

Cheid shrugged his shoulders. “It sounded interesting when Arden told me about it and invited me. I figured you can't know too many people.”

“So what did you think about us?” the girl brushed aside a lock of hair that had fallen over her right eye.

“You certainly like your rumours,” said Cheid, doing his best to ignore how close the girl was. In the tavern he had noticed the scent that was floating around her. It was an odd mix of something sweet with just a hint of smoke, perhaps remnants of her masters beard. It was not an unpleasant smell, but very distracting.

“You didn't seem to mind them though,” the girl pointed out as they rounded a corner. Up the street they could see the clearing that preceded the bridge leading to the Towers.

“Who doesn't like rumours and speculation?” asked Cheid. The questions were starting to get into territory he did not want to talk about. Admitting he had a special interest in the case of the princess had been risky enough already. If he now needed to explain it further, he might slip and let loose something that should have stayed hidden.

“I'm not particularly fond of it,” said the girl and kicked a loose stone as she walked.

“Then why did you join the group?” asked Cheid, hoping to steer the conversation to her instead.

“To get some extra tips,” replied Satu. “I'm not very good at magic so I need more help than others,” she admitted in a silent voice that Cheid could barely

hear. She looked away from him.

“You have plenty of time to get better,” said Cheid, uncertain as to how best handle the girl. “I’m not very good either, but that’s because I’ve only just started. If we work hard I’m certain we will be fine.” He hoped the words would be enough to encourage the girl.

“Will you help me?” asked the girl and gave him a pleading look. It made him feel uncomfortable and his neck itch. He reached out to scratch it.

“I’m not sure of how much help I can be, but I’ll try,” said Cheid. Saying no would have been rude and he couldn’t see a downside to it, save for maybe lost time. But he might learn something from her which would more than make up for any lost time.

The guards at the bridge let them through without much questions. The high rails made it difficult for either of them to see beyond them. Both needed to stand on their toes to be able to see over them. In the darkness there was not much to see and even during the day the brown river flowing below was not much of a sight to behold.

“Will you come to the next meeting?” asked the girl as they entered the lobby of the tower of Free magic. It was the central hub to the towers from which bridges led to the other four towers.

Now that Cheid thought about it, the towers were arranged much like the graph master Jedar had used in his lecture. It made sense and explained why the tower of Free magic – which was the youngest of the five – was at the centre of it all. He made a note to look it up in the library to see if his conclusion was true. Knowing a little history wouldn’t hurt either.

“Depends on when it is. I might have other things to do,” said Cheid. The girl gave him a disappointed look, forcing him to reconsider his words. Why was it so important to keep her happy? He barely knew her. “I’ll try to be there,” he assured the girl and got a small smile as a reward.

In his mind he cursed the girl. She was pulling his string like a puppet master, much like Eleria had done back in the days. All she had to do was give one look and he was ready to make allowances for her. She was dangerous in a non-obvious way. He’d need to be careful around her or she might talk him into

doing something that would end up badly.

“Well, good night then,” said Satu with a smile and started towards the tower of Fire.

“Good night,” said Cheid and watched the girl disappear through the door. He shook his head and went for the transport disc. Sleep sounded like a good idea to let the stirred emotions settle down.

Chapter 13

Guilt. It gnawed at Eleria the moment she woke up and came to the realization she was not in the small room, laying on a stack of mouldy hay. She was the only one to have escaped. The rest would be there, taking on the full brunt of the young masters anger. He would likely kill more than a few slaves during his sorrow infused rampage. Would he kill Tanny? Why could they not have saved them all? Why only her?

She laid under the warm blanket and listened to the men going about their morning chores. She could smell meat being fried over the fire. It made her stomach growl. How long had it been since she had eaten anything but stale bread? The momentary distraction the smell of food offered her was quickly swept away the brooding thoughts. Though she felt secure with the men there was still a worry in the back of her mind that they'd be chased down and killed. She'd be dragged back to that mansion to face the angered master.

The mere thought made her want to pull the blanket tightly over herself and just lay there.

"The messenger left?" came the voice of Orend. Eleria perked her ears, hoping to catch the conversation.

"Several hours ago," came the voice of his younger brother. "He'll be ahead of us by a day or two by the time we arrive at the city. He'll have arranged a ship for us and gone ahead to alert the emperor."

Orend grunted. "We'll have an entire legion waiting for us when we arrive." He did not sound pleased at the prospect even though it would lift all responsibility from his shoulders.

"At least our task is finally complete," reminded Loren. He sounded relieved, even pleased, as he should have been. "Let's just hope Theoden holds up his end of the deal and returns our lands."

"He doesn't have a choice. The man overseeing its fulfilment will not stand for any trickery."

What sort of a deal had the men made? Eleria rose up from her sleeping

place and stretched. It was still early in the morning and the sun was barely rising above the horizon. She had gotten a new pair of clothes from the men. To her surprise they fit her well enough. They were common travellers clothes, a sturdy shirt and trousers, leather boots and a cape with a large hood. Compared to what she had been wearing for the past two years they were luxurious.

“Good morning, your highness,” said Loren, being the first one to notice her sitting up.

Eleria nodded sleepily at him.

She had not talked much since being rescued. She knew the men worried about that and when they thought she was not looking they shared concerned looks with each other. It wasn't that she couldn't speak, but for two years it had been beaten into her that she was not to speak unless given permission. Every time someone talked to her there was a rush of fear that she had done something wrong and that a beating was imminent. The best she could muster in those situations was averting her eyes and nodding.

Then there was the question of what would she even talk with them about? Recount the horrors she had been through? That was not something she was willing to talk about with these total strangers.

“We will have breakfast soon. Then we will ride on,” said Loren. Despite her apprehensions about talking with them, Eleria did like the man. He had been nothing but courteous with her ever since carrying her out the hell she had been in. She nodded again in response and stretched a second time. A yawn escaped her lips.

The men had set her up close to the fire with a comfortable bedroll and blanket, but had started a second fire to cook breakfast. It looked like they had done it solely to allow her to sleep a little longer. She had slept in the same set of clothes they had given her in the evening, but it didn't bother her. They were still cleaner than what she had been wearing before.

She ruffled her hair a bit before looking around for a place with some privacy. Her bladder was about to burst. She spotted some bushes some way from the camp and started to head there, hoping none of the men would follow. She glanced back only to see Loren following her, though he kept a respectable

distance.

She thought about returning to the camp, but there was no way for her to hold on much longer. Soiling herself in front of the men would have been the ultimate shame so she headed for the bush. Loren kept his distance and allowed her enough privacy to do her business. She glared at him as she walked past the man back towards camp.

“Forgive me, your highness,” said Loren and followed her. She had to struggle not to jump at hearing his voice. “We have spent two years searching for you. It would kill us if we were to let anything happen to you now that we have found you.”

Eleria gave the man an apologetic look before continuing back to camp. The man shook his head and followed her.

The breakfast was a simple one. Fried bacon, beans, some bread, but it was still miles above what Eleria had grown accustomed to. Being the first one to get a serving had her feeling suspicious as she was used to getting scraps at the end of the night and maybe a meagre meal during the day if the master didn't keep her too busy.

But hunger would cure even the most suspicious of people.

She ate more than her share, though the entire time she glanced at the men around her and kept a close eye on what they were doing. Any sign of suspicious gestures and..what? She'd run away? Grovel on the ground and beg for her life? Neither seemed like an option worth going for. In the end there was no need for such things.

While the men looked rough on the outside the moment they sat down and started eating they were just like any other men on the road. There was laughter, smiles, conversation in loud voices and jokes being told at the expense of other members of the group. Eleria focused on her food and only listened with half an ear, but what she heard was enough to put her mind at ease.

Once everyone had had their meal the men started to break down camp. Bedrolls were loaded onto the horses, pots and pans shoved into saddle bags. Eleria counted the horses and compared it to the amount of men. There was no horse for her so she'd have to share with someone once more.

“Your highness,” came the voice of Loren. This time she could not help herself. The sound made her jump and turn around to face the man. The expression on her face was one of pure terror and she was already on her way to her knees to beg for her life before realizing what she was doing.

She looked up at the man. She expected anger, but what she saw was a mix of pity and compassion. She was not certain that was any better. She straightened herself and tried to act as if nothing had happened. It took a moment for Loren to recover from the situation as well.

“My apologies, you highness. I did not mean to startle you.” It sounded like a weak apology, but it was the best Loren could muster.

Eleria eyed him with a bit less fear, so it seemed to have worked.

“We're almost ready to leave. Sadly, we do not have a horse for you, so you will have to ride with someone. Seeing as you rode with me last night, perhaps you would feel most comfortable doing it again?”

After a bit of hesitation, Eleria nodded. She remembered the strong hand that had kept her on the horse. It had been the only thing keeping her from screaming at times. There was no one else she'd trust to keep her on a horse.

She followed the man to his horse and allowed him to help her on. She wrapped her cloak tightly around herself even though the day looked to be a clear and warm one. Loren hoisted himself up behind her and wrapped a hand around her. After a moment of waiting the group rode on down the road.

The scenery bounced on by and soon Eleria found herself yawning. The breakfast weighed heavily in her stomach, making her drowsy. Once she found that leaning back against Loren's chest made for a comfortable and safe position she nodded off into sleep. She had a lot of debt in that department.

She woke up as the horse slowed down into a gentle walk. She remained still to hear what the two men were talking about.

“Brother, you've seen her. Asking something like that from her now. I don't think it's wise,” said Loren.

Eleria peered from under the hood of her cloak only to see another horse trotting along next to them. She dared not turn her head in fear of alerting the two men that she was awake.

"But she's the only survivor. She will eventually have to answer questions," came the voice Orend.

"Eventually, but not now," said Loren firmly. "We get her home to her father. If the emperor demands we investigate more then we do that, but for now just leave her be. She has spent two years as a slave. She does not need to go back remembering that night this moment."

Orend let out a frustrated noise. "Fine. You're right, of course. We shouldn't push her. Let's just get her home."

Eleria watched the other horse get ahead of them. Loren sunk his feet to the horses sides, sending it galloping after his brother. The conversation raised questions in her mind and memories she had not thought about in years. She remembered Tabitha and the way she had been treated, the hellish escape from the burning building, wandering the countryside and the eventual capture into slavery.

A stifled sob escaped her. Loren didn't notice it over the heavy breathing of the horse the the sound of its hooves beating the ground. How was she going to tell any of it to anyone? There was not much she could offer in the way of identifying the attackers. She had barely gotten a glimpse of them.

She continued to brood on the thoughts as they rode on. They took a few small breaks during the day to eat a meal, stretch their legs and to let the horses rest a bit. It was especially rough on Loren's horse as it had to carry two people, even though Eleria did not put that much additional weight on it.

As darkness fell they set up camp on the side of the road much like they had the previous night. The men gave Eleria her peace and did not pester her about the events that had led to her slavery. The mood was cheerful among the men as they knew they were headed home. Some were talking about their families and how it had been two years since they last saw them.

Musings like that stung Eleria. She was the reason for their separation from their families. How could she ever make up for that? It was such thoughts that kept her awake for a long time as she huddled under the blanket by the fire. When she finally fell asleep the dreams she had made her snap awake frequently. It was not a refreshing night for her.

How many days passed like that was lost on Eleria, until one day, after having dozed off while riding, Loren gently shook her awake.

“We've arrived in Dimun,” said the man. They had made the journey quicker than many would have expected.

Eleria rubbed her eyes and peered from under her hood just as they rode through the gates. The city was not as big as she had expected. The architecture was different from the white square houses of Sidan. Here there were red tiled roofs that met at an angle, the houses were made of grey stone and there were paved streets and plenty of room to walk. There were less people which added to the spacious atmosphere.

The climate was cooler even though they had ridden for only a few days. The wind seemed to be blowing from the north while in Sidan it mostly came from the south. Maybe that explained it. At least it was enough to stop Eleria from asking about it.

The ride through the city did not take long. The people there were dressed more like their neighbours up north; trousers and shirts being the main items along with practical dresses for women. Few wore the turbans and bag like robes that they did in the south. The cobblestone covered streets made for a noisy ride, but at least the people ahead were warned in time to get out of the way.

As soon as they arrived at the dock the smell of seawater and fish hit them. It was not the largest of docks, but there were still several large sea faring vessels there getting loaded and unloaded. Workers were busily making their way around, some carrying goods, others bags over their shoulders. Sailors were forming groups and there were bursts of laughter from them from time to time.

Loren stayed on his horse while his brother flung himself down and ventured forward to talk with a man that had motioned to him. After a moment of talking with the man he walked over to where Loren and the rest were waiting for him.

“We have our ship,” he said and looked up at his little brother. Eleria looked down at him as well.

“All the way to Ramyn?” asked Loren.

Orend nodded. “He also found a local wizard here. Word has been sent ahead. The emperor should already know his daughter is safe.” He gave Eleria a

reassuring smile.

“When do we depart?” asked Loren.

“In a few hours. They're loading up the ship right now. We can go aboard already.”

“Let's do that then. If someone is still chasing after us they'll have a harder time finding us aboard a ship.”

“Good point,” said Orend and led the group to their ship. It was a fairly large three mast. The crew was busy loading in crates and barrels and dealing with the dock official that was griping about some papers.

Loren helped Eleria down from the horse and handed the reigns to a sailor who'd have the pleasure of trying to persuade the steed to make its way over a ramp to get on-board the ship. The horses were paid for and the two brothers were not in a situation where leaving them behind was an option. Selling them quickly would have meant getting a lower price for them.

Eleria kept her hood up as she eyed the ramp leading to the ship. The last time she had walked up one it had been her ticket to slavery. The ride had not been a comfortable one in the small cell she had been stuffed in. She felt hesitant about getting aboard another ship.

Loren stopped half way across as he realized she was not following him. He eyed the small girl as she hesitated to step onto the ramp and then walked back.

“There's nothing to be afraid, your highness,” he said and put a hand on her shoulder. She jumped a bit, but at least she did not move away from his touch. “There's a large cabin waiting for you with a real bed. We'll have warm food and shelter from the weather.”

She glanced up at the man. The reassuring smile he gave her was enough to convince her to take the first steps onto the ramp. He followed close behind, never letting go of her. As they stepped on the deck Loren was quick to guide her to the aft where her cabin was.

Eleria was pleased to note the man had not lied to her. The bed was roomy enough for two people to sleep in and the mattress looked miles better than the stack of hay she had grown accustomed to. There were a few chairs there as well as a large window that offered a view to the seas the ship would be ploughing

through. A large lantern swayed gently from the roof as the small waves at the dock rocked the ship. There was even a small vanity with a mirror.

The memories of the small, fully packed cell she had sailed in the last time still haunted her, but the cabin made it all just a little bit more bearable.

“I take it the cabin is acceptable, your highness?” asked Loren from the door.

Eleria spun around and smiled at him with an eager nod. She almost thanked him out loud, but the behaviour that she had come to display buried that thought quickly. She did not know that the earnest smile of happiness was more than enough to convince the man she would be fine in the cabin.

One of the men from the group came and handed a saddle bag to Loren who in turn placed it on one of the chairs in the cabin. “There are some things here you might find useful,” he said and started towards the cabin door. “I’ll leave you to get comfortable. My brother and I will come see you once we’re under way and ready for some food.”

Eleria almost wanted to go after him and grab his sleeve so he wouldn’t go, but that would have made her look foolish. The cabin door closed and then he was gone. For a moment she just stood in the middle of the cabin, looking around. Finally, she took off her cloak and placed it on one of the chairs and started to dig through the saddlebag.

She was pleased to find a brush and a few other items that would allow her to tackle the mess that was her hair. At the very bottom she found a simple dress. It was far from the ones she had worn at the palace, but it was a piece of women’s clothing she had not worn in ages and a welcome change to the trousers and shirt she currently had on.

Now all she needed was a bath.

The saddlebag offered not much more so Eleria stopped and stared at the door. Was it even possible to have a bath on a ship? Well, it certainly was possible the times she had been aboard as a princess, but now she was just an ordinary traveller. Did the ship have the capability for it? More importantly, would they go to the trouble just for her? Heating up water in large quantities was not exactly the easiest thing on a ship.

Hesitantly, she made her way to the door and cracked it. She had full view of

the deck in front of her. For a moment she just watched the crewmen going about their business; tying ropes, carrying supplies aboard and below deck, a few were mopping up the deck with fresh water. She tried to spot a familiar face, but the only one she could find was the large, bearded man called Oughund. Approaching him seemed like a terrifying proposition. So she waited and hoped someone else would appear, but she had no such luck.

Biting down on her lower lip, she opened the door and started towards the big man. What choice did she have? Stay in the cabin and do nothing? Wait for Loren and his brother to come and save her again? No. She needed to start doing things on her own like she had used to do before being beaten up and broken by the slavers.

The thought gave her pause for a moment. Was she broken? Had they permanently changed her? Of that she had little doubt, but was she beyond repair? Would time heal the wounds inflicted or would the scars remain forever and bother her?

No. Focus on now, said the little voice inside her.

Oughund was talking to a sailor when Eleria nudged his sleeve. The man looked down, surprised to see her. "Well, hello little one. What are you doing out from your cabin?" The man looked around, probably hoping for Loren or Orend to appear. Once he was talking, he did not seem as intimidating as he did when silent.

"A bath," said Eleria and looked up at the man.

"A bath?" asked Oughund and eyed the little girl. She did have dirt all over her face and clothes. She looked exactly like someone who had ridden for a week without cleaning themselves. He turned to the sailor he had been talking to. "Can you arrange a bath for her?"

The sailor glanced at Eleria and rubbed his stub covered chin. "We don't have a proper bath. All we have is a large wooden basin we use for washing clothes now and then. I suppose the girl could fit in that."

Oughund turned to the girl. "Will that do?"

Eleria nodded and smiled. She didn't have to soak in the water even though she'd have loved to do that. If she could even wash herself with a piece of cloth

that would be more than she'd had time for on the road.

“All right. I'll see to it you get it in your cabin. Now you go back in and wait for it, all right?”

Eleria nodded again and turned to head back to her cabin. She heard him talking to the sailor a bit more about arranging it. She garnered a few looks from those working on the deck as she made her way back to the cabin. It made her wish she had worn the cloak.

The moment the cabin door slammed shut behind her she let out a sigh of relief, though a smile appeared on her quickly. She'd done it. She'd talked to a man that looked like he'd just as well cut her in half as talk to her. No one had beaten her for it nor had there been any shouting. She'd known there wouldn't be any such things, but getting rid of the ingrained fears in one fell swoop was as likely as finding a needle in a haystack.

It didn't take long for the door to be opened and a couple of sailor carrying a wooden basin entering. It was large enough that Eleria would be able to soak herself waist deep in water, plenty to have a decent bath. It took a bit longer until the men started carrying in buckets full of hot water. They left several full ones for her to use herself if need be before leaving and closing the door.

For a moment Eleria thought about blocking the door with something. She decided against it since the chairs looked heavy built and moving them would be quite the chore. Who would come in without knocking anyway?

She threw her clothes into a pile on the floor and dipped her toe into the steaming vat of water. It was hot enough that she almost couldn't stand it, but very slowly she inched her way into it. By the time she was in it to her waist the water almost overflowed. The men had estimated how much water to put in frighteningly accurately.

They had brought a bar of soap as well as a coarse piece of cloth with which she could scrub herself clean. After soaking herself completely Eleria grabbed the items and began the process of making herself presentable once more. The water quickly turned a darker colour as she scrubbed away the filth and dust that covered her body. She soaped her hair and ran her fingers through it to try and sort out most of the tangles. She reached out for one of the buckets to rinse

herself clean with water that had not soaked up all the dirt.

Satisfied with the results, she grabbed a towel from the chair and dried herself off before putting on the dress and sitting in front of the vanity to brush her hair. She barely noticed the ship leaving the dock and setting sail across the ocean. The waves were not that big so the ship almost glided over the water and did not sway in a terrible manner.

A few of the sailors knocked on the door and came in to collect the vat away. By then Eleria was happy with how her hair looked. It was once more shiny and did not look like it had been neglected for years. The only thing she was unhappy with was the way it had been cut. Her masters had not exactly spent effort in ensuring the quality of the cutting was high. There were uneven bits to it that would need to be fixed.

Still, when Loren and his brother knocked on the door and entered she felt more like a princess than an escaped slave. For a moment the two men could only stare at her as a couple of sailors brought in food and drinks.

“You look lovely, your highness,” said Orend as he closed the door behind the sailors. They'd set up three plates on the small table. There was a platter filled with boiled potatoes along with what looked to be a bowl filled with gravy. There were pieces of meat floating in the dark liquid. The smell was not unpleasant either. A loaf of bread crowned the setting.

Eleria gave the two men a shy smile before taking a seat by the table. Dining with the two was a less frightening idea that she had thought it would be. They took their seats opposite to her and started filling plates. The first one they handed to her. It was a larger portion than she thought she'd be able to eat.

“It will take us some time to reach Ramyn,” started Orend as he sliced a potato into little pieces and tossed them in the gravy he had pooled on his plate. “Is there anything you would like to know before then?” He gave Eleria a look.

She stopped eating for a moment and considered the question. She had been away for two years. A lot must have happened during that time. Knowing at least some of it would make it easier to fit back in. Finally, having gathered her courage, she looked at Orend. “What happened after the..attack?” Her voice sounded thin and weak.

Loren glanced at his brother with a look that seemed to warn him not to go into too much detail. Still, the explanation took most of the meal. How the Strihin family had been declared non-existent, how the emperor had struggled to find her with their help, how he had finally given up under pressure from the nobility to declare her dead so the question of inheritance would become clearer. He then went on to detail the efforts he and his brother had put forth to finding her.

"I'm afraid there is not much I can tell you on what has happened in the court," Orend finished his explanation. "We have been away just as you have, your highness." He took out a piece of cloth from his pocket and wiped away some of the gravy that had clung to his moustache.

Eleria sat in silence, digesting everything she had heard. The fate of the Strihin family was what stung her the most. Why had her father gone to such extreme with them? There was nothing more they could have done to keep her safe. Executing nobles in public? Had grief made him mad? Upon hearing the news she also realized Cheid was likely dead as well. Orend had said no one survived the attack. She had always held a small flame alive deep within her, a hope that her long time friend had somehow made it out of the burning hell the mansion had been turned into.

Now that hope was all but dead.

"We know this is a lot to take in," said Loren and tore himself a piece from the loaf of bread. "You need to remember you're not alone and that you are not a slave. You are the princess of Ramyn and there are plenty of people who are looking forward to seeing you again. Myself and my brother are here for you for the entire journey. There's nothing for you to be afraid here."

"They haven't caught the men responsible for it, have they?" asked Eleria. She couldn't bring herself to say the attack. Simply referring to it as it made asking the question easier.

"No, they haven't," admitted Orend. Eleria could see it troubled the man and at the same time served as a source of frustration. She could see similar emotions on the face of Loren.

"Then I am not safe," said Eleria in a quiet voice. Having spent two years observing her master and how he conducted business had given her a view into

how the mind of someone like that worked. Political enemies would remain so until they were dead. Someone had wanted her dead and they would still want that once they found out about her return. They would try again.

The two men exchanged concerned looks. It was a fear they had hoped to keep away from her. Now that she had found it on her own there was not much they could do besides standing by her.

The ship continued to rock gently among the waves as the trio contemplated what would be waiting for them at their destination.

Chapter 14

Cheid found himself sitting in a familiar chair, staring out the window at the view over the imperial palace. He did his best to look past the imposing figure of Skander that was sitting behind the desk, between him and the view. Why the tower master had called him there was a mystery to him. Cheid had not gotten into any trouble as far as he knew.

“I hear you've joined the Quintet,” said Skander and eyed the boy in front of him. He had sent for him for a very specific reason.

“I have,” replied Cheid. That couldn't have been the reason he had been summoned? The group had caused no problems and being a part of it did not seem like something worth objecting over.

“That's good. Getting to know your fellow students. Those will be contacts that will be useful as the years roll by.” Skander leaned back in his chair. “But that's not why I asked you here.”

Cheid perked up even though he did not know whether to expect something good or bad.

“I tell you this only because of who you are. You deserve to hear it, but you must promise not to tell anyone. Not a soul. Understand?” the look the old wizard gave with the demand left no room to squirm.

“I promise,” said Cheid, curious to hear what made him demand such silence. It had to be something important.

Skander eyed him for a while before continuing. “Two years ago, when your family mansion was attacked, the emperor did not simply ignore it. True, he did little in public, but behind the scenes he tasked a noble family with finding his daughter – whether it be alive or just her dead body. For two years they have searched in the south.”

Cheid sat silent, listening. He had suspected as much from the rumours that had been circling, but it was nice to get confirmation from someone he trusted not to lie too much. Skander would hide pieces of information, but he'd never lie.

“Yesterday, word was received from an air elemental in Dimun. The two

noble brother searching for her have accomplished their mission. They have found her alive and are sailing with her here to Ramyn.” Skander kept a close eye on Cheid as he finished. He expected a reaction, perhaps happiness, but the boy sat there as if he had been told rocks came in different shapes and sizes.

It was difficult for Cheid to decide how he should feel. Happy that Eleria was safe, of course, but did that mean his father and the rest of his family had been outcast and slaughtered for nothing? Would the emperor even acknowledge it? Why could they not have found her sooner? Why had it taken two years?

“Cheid?” asked Skander with a look of concern. The silence was not what he had expected from him.

The boy snapped from his thoughts and blinked, looking almost surprised. A hesitant smile crossed his face. “That is good news.”

“Somehow I expected you'd be happier. You were close to her, after all,” noted Skander.

“I am happy,” said Cheid, though he did not sound convincing even to himself. There was bitterness in his voice that revealed his true feelings. “It's just..if she's alive then what did my family die for?”

Skander had a hard time facing the boy. The way his family had been killed had been unnecessary, but the emperor had decreed it and it was an action even he could not take back. In a moment of sorrow and rage the man ruling an empire had made a mistake. He'd never admit to it nor would anyone be taking him to task for it, but it was the truth none the less. How unjust it all must seem to the boy sitting in front of him.

“There is no bringing back your family,” said Skander softly. “But another one lived through the hell you went through. A friend you thought dead is alive. How is that not a good thing?”

Cheid sighed. “What does it matter? I can't see her. If I do, I'll end up dead. The guards will drag me away and the beasts at the arena will tear me to pieces.”

“You may not get to see her face to face, but no one will notice if you watch from a crowd,” said Skander with a small smile. He figured seeing her even from a distance would give him some closure, perhaps even some relief over the matter.

Cheid did not look as certain about it. “It wouldn't hurt,” he finally admitted.

“When will she be here?”

“A week or so,” said Skander. “It's probably easier if I get you when her ship appears down river.”

Cheid nodded.

Skander frowned at him. “Cheer up lad. It's not every day a dead loved one comes back. Well, actually alive anyway.”

A grin passed Cheid's lips. He'd heard the stories of undead. For a moment he had considered learning the art and using it to bring back his family, but the price you had to pay was too high. Rotting corpses, no matter the soul in them, would not be the same as the living person. “It will be nice to see her,” he finally admitted.

That much he could come to grips with.

Skander nodded. “I will call on you when it's time. Remember, not a word to anyone. Especially in the Quintet. The rumours would send the city into chaos as everyone would rush to the docks to see her. She does not need a large crowd in her face the moment she steps on ground.”

Cheid stood up, giving a nod to the old wizard. The meeting was over so he left to get back to his classes. The whole way down an uneasiness wallowed inside him. There was something missing from the picture, something he felt was important. Try as he did, Cheid could put his finger on it. It eluded him like an annoying fly.

The disc came to a halt and Cheid got off, heading for the lecture room he was supposed to have been in twenty minutes ago. Somehow, the lecture did not seem as important as it had before.

Days passed and Cheid attended his lectures. Even though the Quintet met during that time he told them nothing about the princess being alive. Going against the wishes of Skander did not seem like a wise idea. He was a bit surprised to hear nothing of it, not even rumours. Usually something big like that would have gotten out the moment it left the room it had been initially revealed in. It meant very few people knew about it – possibly only the emperor, Skander and the men who had found Eleria.

Finally, one day, as Cheid was exiting an early morning lecture about the

theory behind combining elements to create spells, Skander pulled him to the side. The old wizard wasn't dressed in his usual robes and that alone was enough to tell Cheid it was time. It also attracted some curious glances from the other students as they passed by.

“Come, boy. I've arranged the rest of the day off for you.” He wore a brown shirt and a pair of pants that could have been worn by any dock worker. Yet another indication of where they were going.

“Maybe I should change?” asked Cheid. He had grown over the years and the towers had provided him with robes, but he had thought it a good idea to keep a set of fitting clothes so he could go on the streets without the stigma of being a student from the towers. There were people who'd treat you differently for it and those who would outright avoid you.

Tongues loosened when people thought they were talking to an ordinary boy.

Skander eyed him and nodded. “Be quick about it. I will wait for you in the lobby.”

Cheid rushed to his rooms to change. The wait at the transport disc had him tapping his foot impatiently and the moment it came to halt in its destination he rushed off. His enthusiasm was a stark contrast to the melancholy that he had exhibited upon hearing the news. He had had time to digest it and work on his own emotions. He had come to the conclusion that no matter the death of his family, the fact Eleria was alive was a good thing. Nothing was her fault so why should he hold resentment against her?

He was happy to find the room empty. Explaining things to his room-mates would have taken time. He opened his travellers trunk and pulled out the set of clothes: a rough cotton shirt and brown trousers. It was a practical set, not too well made and he could easily pass off as the son of Skander.

Well, grandson. The wizard was *old*.

The robe was quickly stuffed in the trunk and Cheid rushed out the door and down to the lobby. He found Skander waiting there, doing his best to not be pestered by people who recognized him despite the outfit. In the towers he was well known, but down in the docks he'd just be another old man.

Skander nodded approvingly at his clothes. “Those will do. Let's go.”

“Where are we going?” asked Cheid.

“The south dock,” replied Skander as they stepped onto the bridge and started making their way to the city.

It made sense. Most of the ships coming from the sea docked at the southern end of the island. The northern dock was largely reserved for ships going up the river to Wroth. Exceptions happened, but that was how the ships often went.

As they made their way down the ramps and through the city streets Cheid grew restless with anticipation. The people he passed on the street seemed as indifferent as ever. There was no large crowd gathering. The secret had been kept until the end, which surprised Cheid. It had to mean there would be no imperial guard to meet her either. Were they planning to get her to the palace unnoticed? That might have been the wisest plan. No one would pay attention to a small group departing from a ship. It happened dozens of times every day.

People would, however, notice a squad of imperial guards escorting them.

Skander led them through the streets and onto the docks. It was as busy a place as it always was; you could barely take a step without bumping into a passing worker or sailor. At times you had to make room to let through a cart or carriage carrying barrels or sacks of goods. The smell of fish was ever present and the birds circling above held their usual concert.

The old wizard honed in on a particular dock just as a ship was docking. They arrived just in time to see the mooring lines tossed and tied and the walkway extended to the pier. Some moments passed before anything more happened and Cheid nearly strained his neck trying to see over the crowd. Skander finally guided Cheid to a spot with a better view for someone his size.

Then he saw the passengers departing. Six men came down to the pier first, each looking ready to draw out the swords they made no attempt to hide. They were followed by a smaller figure flanked by two men. Despite the cape and its hood, Cheid caught a glimpse of the blonde hair under it. His prayers were answered when the figure turned his head, giving him a glimpse of the face that he had been led to see.

Even from a distance it was obvious the girl he had known was gone, despite living. There was a hardness to her and the way she looked around told how

uncomfortable she was in the whole situation. The girl Cheid knew would have barely noticed the buzzing crowd and she certainly wouldn't have gone on without pestering her companions with question.

“What happened to her?” asked Cheid as he kept an eye on her. She stood among the men, waiting for the horses to be unloaded.

“This is not the place for that discussion,” noted Skander and looked around. No one was paying any attention to them. The people crowding the pier ensured Eleria was unlikely to get a glimpse of Cheid, especially since she was paying little attention to anything but keeping her distance to everyone.

That couldn't have meant anything good. Cheid kept his eye on the girl as long as he could, but she was finally hoisted on one of the horses while a man climbed up behind her. The group of almost dozen rode off towards the nearest transport point.

There was a moment of longing as Eleria disappeared from his sight that almost made him rush forward to follow her. The firm hand of Skander on his shoulder held him in place and soon dragged him back towards the towers. Cheid fell to a steady walk along his side.

“What happened to her?” he asked as soon as they'd left the buzzing dock and entered the more quiet side streets. The old wizard did not seem to be in much of a hurry to get back.

“I'm unsure whether I should even tell you,” said Skander. He glanced down at Cheid with the sort of concern a parent might show over telling bad news to their child.

“I saw her,” reminded Cheid. “I know it can't be anything good.”

“Still, the knowledge is a burden you might do without,” said Skander and continued walking. The day had gone on long enough that the taverns were getting ready to serve midday meals which brought out all sorts of delicious smells lingering on the street.

“I need to know,” said Cheid and did his best to keep his stomach from growling as they passed a bakery. The smell of fresh bread was so thick he had to swallow hard to avoid drooling. “I lived through it just as she did. I need to know what happened to her after it. It might even help find the culprits.”

Skander gave him a look. Cheid knew he had said too much.

"I hope you're not still hung up on revenge," said the old wizard and walked onward with a brisker pace.

"No," said Cheid quickly. "It's just..when you do something bad your victims will want justice. I'd expect the emperor to want it just as I do."

Skander muttered something Cheid could not quite hear, but the old wizard did stop to regard him for a moment.

"All right. We might as well get something to eat while we talk," said Skander and directed the boy towards a tavern. They entered the common room and were met with the smell of fresh food and spilt beer. They headed for a table in a quiet corner. Despite the time of day there were plenty of tables free and one of the wenches was quick to get their order. It did not take long for her to return with bread, cheese and an entire chicken with crispy skin.

"So?" asked Cheid after assembling his chicken covered sandwich. Juices ran down his chin as he took a bite. It was good, but the fact Skander had paid for it made it even better.

Skander sighed and took a bite out of a chicken leg. "The message we received wasn't overly detailed. A lot was left unsaid. But, apparently, she was found by slavers who sold her to some lord in the south. For two years she had been there until the men found her."

Cheid felt his appetite disappear, though he continued chewing on the bread. The chicken suddenly did not seem as juicy. He had heard the way slaves were treated in the south. It was not a good life, especially for the women and young girls.

"I don't know the full details. The message was lacking, as I said. So the details of her ordeal are something I don't know, but you can probably guess it was not a good experience for her," continued Skander, seemingly unfazed by what he was saying.

"I wish I had been able to help her," said Cheid in a quiet voice. How different her life would have been if he had managed to stay with her and guide her back to Ramyn. His father would have still been alive along with the rest of his family.

“Do not wallow on the past, thinking what you could and could not have done,” said Skander in a stern voice while waving an almost completely eaten chicken leg at Cheid. “That will accomplish nothing but make you hate yourself. You were too young, but you did the best you could. Expecting miracles from you would be foolish at best, dangerous at worst.”

The old wizard spoke the truth and Cheid knew it, but accepting it was hard. There was always a bit of his mind offering some way he could have done things differently and perhaps changed how it all turned out. With a resigned sigh he bit into his sandwich once more and tried to forget all the doubts he had.



Eleria had to admit that a sea voyage was not all that bad when you weren't locked below deck the entire way with barely any sunlight or food and drink. She often found herself at the bow of the ship, leaning against the railing, staring down as the ship ploughed through waves and cast droplets of salty water all around. She enjoyed the wind and the freshness of it.

For two years she had been stuck inside the house of her master and that had offered little opportunity to simply enjoy the weather. The simple pleasure of being free to go out on the deck to enjoy the warm sun was a luxury she had forgotten all about.

The voyage went on without incident. She spent a lot of time with Loren who managed to coax her into sharing bits of what she had gone through. Though the memories were unpleasant and painful, sharing them seemed to ease the hurt they caused. Loren was always nothing short of understanding and caring.

In the evenings she dined together with Loren and his brother. Orend was not as approachable as his little brother, but Eleria found herself growing to trust him. With every detail they revealed about how they had found her, the more she respected the pair. They had sacrificed so much for her, for the empire, that she intended to see them rewarded even if it meant hurting her father. At the very least she would ensure Theoden kept to his end of the deal they had made, though she knew the old advisor well enough to know there would not be trouble in that regard.

When the ship left behind the ocean and entered the river Ramyn, Eleria started to grow anxious. She started to worry once more about all the things that would be waiting for her, least of which not being the possibility of another attempt at her life. The plan to get her safely to the palace was sound enough, but what would happen after that? Would she trade her slave prison into one of the court and the worry of her father?

It seemed like a poor change. The threat on her life weighed on her, but the taste of freedom compared to the prison she had been set free from made her resolute not to allow it to happen again. Even if her father insisted on it, she would find a way to retain the ability to go outside and do things like she normally would as a princess.

When the ship finally arrived in view of Ramyn, Eleria was among the first on deck to look at the city she thought never to see again. The floating layers were as majestic as she remembered. The river had ships going in both directions in an almost constant stream. As the ship made its way to the dock the sounds of people talking carried over the water along with the usual noises of a dock.

“You should pack your things,” said Loren as he walked over to the bow to stand next to her. He looked on as the pier came closer and the men on the deck started throwing the mooring ropes. The amount of people buzzing around surprised even him. He had forgotten how large the city was and how busy it got during the days.

Eleria nodded and headed to her cabin. Packing the meagre things she had into the saddlebag did not take long even though she had made herself comfortable during the journey. Soon she was back on deck only to find the ship fully docked and the men waiting for her to appear. She pulled up the hood of her cape and went to Loren and his brother.

“Are you ready?” asked Orend with slight worry in his voice as he surveyed the crowd. He was certain they would blend in, but if there was someone who had gotten information about the princess being found, there would be plenty of opportunities to make an attempt at her life.

“I am,” said Eleria as confidently as she could. Despite her earlier enthusiasm, the thought of entering the swelling crowd was not appealing and

made her retreat behind the hard shell that she had built up over the years.

Orend glanced at Loren who gave the order. A group of men went down the ramp to the pier as a front guard. The two brothers followed with the princess while the rest of the men came behind them with the horses.

Eleria looked around her with the sort of paranoia only years of abuse could bring about. The stone pier felt strange under her feet after the time at sea. She expected there to be swaying, but there was none. It felt solid. She was thankful for the sea of calm the men formed around her. She could keep her distance to everyone, though Loren stuck close to her. She didn't mind him doing so.

It took a while to get the horses to shore, but once they were the men were quick to mount. Loren hoisted Eleria to her usual seat in front of him before they galloped away towards the nearest transport point.

The people gave them plenty of room. From under her hood Eleria observed the passing by buildings. It wasn't her first time in the souther docks or the streets leading to it. There were shops she recognized, tavern signs that nudged a memory. The smells coming from the bakeries and other establishments made her stomach growl despite the breakfast she had enjoyed. In her mind she thanked the horses and the sound of their hooves. The noise they made was enough to cover the sound even from the man sitting behind her.

She had almost forgotten how magical the city was. Where she had been the past years magic was rarely displayed. In Ramyn it was everywhere and you could not help but notice it; be it the discs soaring up into the sky and disappearing in a black hole, or, indeed, the fake sky itself.

The group made good time and soon the transport point came to view. The walls surrounding it were tall and thick, though the gate leading to the inner yard was wide open and the guards made only cursory checks on those wanting to enter.

Once Orend and Loren showed the guards their passes they did not even bother the rest of the group.

They had to wait in the inner yard as there were people that had come before them who'd take the ride first. Eleria watched as the disc climbed up into the sky with a group of merchants and servants on it. Those were the kind of people who

had business in the layer of the nobles. What she noted the most was the lack of slaves and the boastful palanquins that were so popular in the south. What she saw were ordinary people going about their business. Even if they served a lord they were paid for their services and were likely free to go back home to their families at the end of the day. It was a decent life that lacked the abuse slaves in the south endured.

Still, she knew there were slaves, locked in the many houses of the nobility and wealthy merchants. Not everyone agreed with it, that she knew. Ramyn was much more strict on such things, compared to the south. Eleria vowed she'd make things even more strict if she could. After what she had gone through her father might even be receptive to outright banning slavery.

She was ripped from her thoughts and observations as the disc floated down from the sky and came to a halt. Their small group dismounted before boarding it and soon they were whisking upwards through the air, towards the dark hole in the sky. Eleria found herself standing in the middle of the disc with Orend, who looked slightly pale and was gripping the harness of his horse so hard the knuckles on his hand were starting to turn white. He made a very conscious effort to look at his feet.

She looked away to hide a small smile.

The man was afraid of riding the discs!

Looking at him it was hard to believe anything would shock him or have him feeling afraid. Having heard him talk and tell the things he and his brother had done to rescue her made it seem even more implausible. Yet there the proof was. Somehow it made him a bit more likeable in Eleria's mind.

The disc shot into the black hole in the sky. She could feel a wave of pressure wash over the disc as it went from the open air around it into a confined chute. Some people found that moment the most frightening of the journey, but as Eleria glanced at Orend in the gloom she noted he looked noticeably relieved to have ground around him.

Then they were back in the full sunlight and the disc came to a halt. The group was quick to mount and be on their way to the transport point that would take them to the imperial palace. Eleria looked around, feeling nostalgic at the

sight of the noble mansions and the gardens that peeked over the walls surrounding them. The further they got and the more familiar the various houses and street names got, the more she felt like she was home.

The familiar outline of the transport station walls soon appeared in front of them and the guards at the gate readied themselves to inspect the relatively large group headed their way. They were used to dealing with solitary nobles and bureaucrats, not what looked to be a group of misfits trying to ride into the heart of the empire.

Orend showed them his pass, but they insisted on inspecting everyone in the group despite it. Those that did not have a pass were ordered to stay behind.

“You have no idea what you're doing,” protested Orend at the guards.

“We are following orders,” came the monotonic reply from the captain overseeing everything.

“The emperor is expecting me. All of us!” said Loren, hoping it would be enough to convince the guards. Eleria still sat in front of him in the saddle. She observed the situation calmly.

“Summon Theoden. He'll sort this out,” demanded Orend as he stood face to face with the captain.

“We will do so, sir, but you and your group will not go further until then,” replied the captain. He maintained a remarkably cool head despite Orend being mere inches away from his face, glaring at him with the sort of murderous intent that would have had a lesser man soiling himself.

The two brothers exchanged looks. Loren made a meaningful gesture towards all the guards around them and on the walls. Some were already readying their bows just in case.

“If you would be so kind as to step to the side, your lordship. There are others who need to get through,” said the captain. He seemed to be comfortable with his position and trusted he was doing the right thing. Hence why he had no problem ordering Orend around, even if he was doing so politely.

“Fine,” said Orend with a resigned voice and the group guided their horses off to the side. The guards kept a close eye on them as they waited. It was a long wait, but finally the disc came down from above, bringing with it the familiar

palanquin of Theoden.

“Finally,” muttered Loren as the servants carried the palanquin through the gates and set it down in front of the group. Orend went ahead to greet the old man. The years had not changed him much, but then again, he had been old to begin with and there were only so many wrinkles ones face could carry.

Eleria watched as the men exchanged a few words before the old man started to hobble towards Loren and his horse. She remembered well the old man. Often times he had been the only interesting person to talk to at court functions. She pulled back the hood of her cape as the two men stopped by the horse. Theoden peered up at her with a smile.

“Welcome home, your highness,” he said.

“Thank you,” replied Eleria.

The look of shock on the nearby guards would have you believe they'd seen a dragon land in front of them. As word spread, the guards offered no more trouble with letting the group through to the imperial palace.