

Greenstone and Ironwood

Book One

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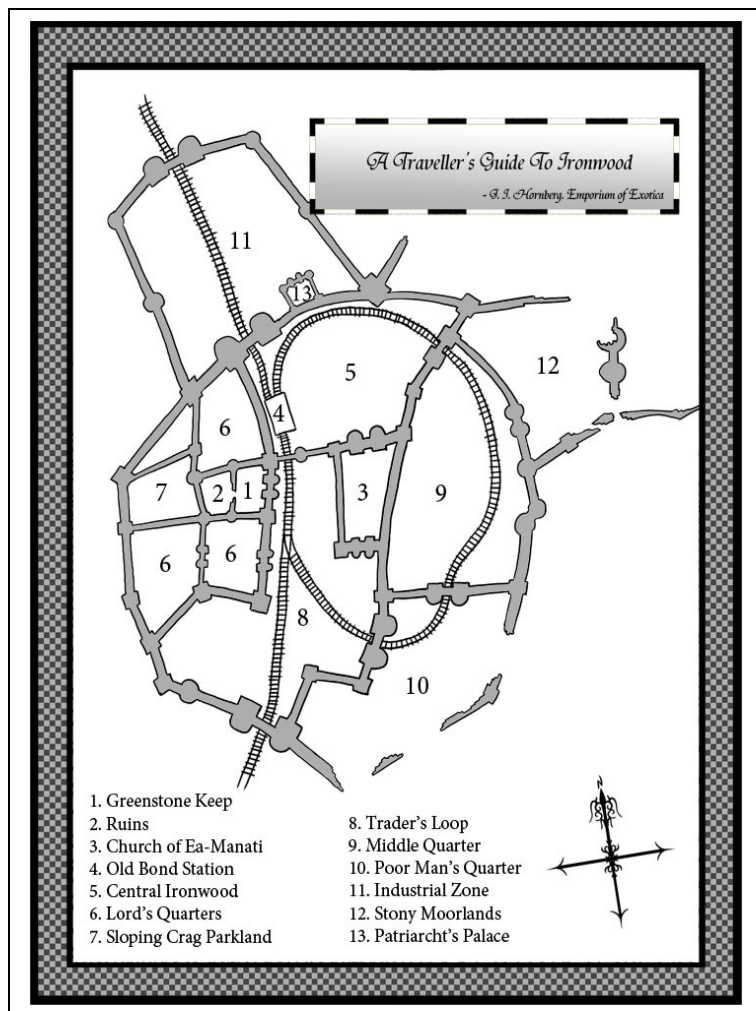
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Dedicated to Damita, Bill and Jack.

Special thanks to BMB, Zok, Praetor and Badminton.



Prologue

Ash crossed the timber-framed hall in a lazy descent. The grey residue symbolized the last thirty years of Ironwood's history, a by-product of the industrial boom that transformed the city, both through its skyline of belching chimneys and foundries, and the political makeup of a rising middle class of wealthy peasants.

Gervius Poltim, the Patriarcht of Ironwood Proper, founder of the twelve hundred year old city, watched the ash settle on his right hand. The intolerable stink of nearby factories wafted through the draughty hall. Incessant hammering tolled forth from close by refineries and added to Poltim's mixed mood of anger and exhaustion. Ancient hands twisted around the hand rests of the iron throne like an oak root. If he had the strength he would have reached out and brushed the ash away, as if it were the city itself that he could reach and erase. But such actions evaded his ancient limbs. He watched with a still face, seething inside, as a carer wiped away the stain.

Once worshipped as a god, Poltim was now considered by most in Ironwood to be nothing more than an archaic symbol of the city's past.

The Patriarcht's sole source of financial outlay now came from the small group of wealthy followers tied to the Cult of the Patriacht, a secretive sect that the Church of Ea-Manati had tried to weed out

The church and nobles tolerated his presence in the absence of an alternative method of removing him. Prophets had long seen visions of the city's destruction with his death. Such as he was the founder of Ironwood, so would he be responsible for its end. Poltim had done much to spread such premonitions early in his reign.

A blade slashed out. Poltim's features portrayed no emotion as he watched the flow and ebb of the girl's life dry up, her blood splashing at the hem of his robes.

Poltim only knew one thing – Loathing, a disgust at his own inability to feel anything else. Twelve hundred years of existence had desensitized him to human expression so much that he could not even feign remorse or excitement at a child's death. And he loathed it.

Poltim looked to the man holding the dagger, sporting a blue vest over a mail shirt. The expectations of his highest agents were harsh. In order to reach the highest rank in the Patriarcht's house one had to sever all ties with immediate family for good. So it was that the Patriarcht looked to his newest right hand man, Killan Vehgrant, standing over the body of his wife and child, a solemn look in his eye.

The man had joined Poltim's service twelve years prior, proving to be both dedicated and ruthless in his ascent to the Patriarcht's side. Poltim had long stopped wondering at the lines man would cross for power.

"Come," he whispered through taut lips, hard as fossilized stone.

Killan stepped over the body of his daughter and knelt in her pooled blood, kissing the bloody robe of the Patriarcht.

"Here marks a man of the Order," rattled the Patriarcht. "Under the mantle of the gods, old and new alike, I raise him to the rank of right-hand." A final pronounced rattle ordered Killan to stand.

Killan rose and moved to the right side of his lord. Slaves dragged away the corpses.

The Patriarcht watched two boys appear carrying buckets and a mop. The sight of the cleaning boys filled him with more disgust at the city he had founded. Cleaning in the temple was a full time job. Ash from the smokestacks and factories blew night and day, serving to choke the entire city with a poisonous layer of soot.

The doors at the far end of the hall opened, stirring the Patriarcht from his dozing mood. His eyes cracked open as he realised the face of the approaching man. Kaiser Tell, haggard from years of mining profitless stone in the Notorious Clefts, strode towards him with a triumphant gaze.

The Patriarcht shuddered, a rare sense of excitement causing the clots in his veins to stir. In two hands Kaiser carried a small oak chest, held out towards Poltim's greedy eyes in offering.

At reaching the throne, Kaiser knelt before his lord, placing the chest on the sticky stones.

"Rise," Poltim ordered.

"My lord, I bring you that which you have longed for." Kaiser's voice was rough, croaky from a straining journey through the mountains.

"The Plague of Jer Gakt." The mention of it brought lost memories to the ancient's mind.

"It is as you said. Within the Cleft I found a cavern, buried deep below the Earth."

"Tell me what you saw," Poltim demanded.

"From foot to ceiling there were eggs, protected in resin, humming even at my entry. Some had been disturbed where we had blasted through the walls, I am sure I breathed in the spores upon entering."

“Yes,” the Patriarcht agreed. “Even now I can feel my body responding to you, as if I am waking from a coma. What of the workers?”

“I had the miners poisoned,” Kaiser remarked. “My servant has stayed behind to dispose of the bodies and wait for our return.”

“Thus you have done well, Kaiser.”

“I found this in the cavern too,” Kaiser continued, opening the chest.

Inside sat a large opaque egg, shimmering under the surface of a resin coat. Poltim drew in a tight breathe. Below the protective coat he could just make out the fibrous tendrils connected in the centre by a round head, the size of a fingernail. The creature inside pulsed, growing excited in the light of the hall.

“A queen,” Poltim marveled.

For the first time in centuries the Patriarcht felt alive.

1

The corpse rose, a slow movement that sent a throb of pressure through diluted eyes and down its spine. Perched up on one elbow it looked around, noting the pallid bodies on rusted iron tables and heaped remains thrown into corners. Cold, square tiles ran to the ceiling, grey under a flickering light and framed by mould. A square grate sat in the centre of the room, stained from years of use.

The flesh of the creature was pale, as if the blood inside had not flowed for sometime. Bunched muscles ran its length, slow to regain life, turning as hard as stone once flexed. Along the throat and side of the corpse’s neck ran a criss-crossing of scars, as if half the head had been removed before being re sewn to the neck. This was not the cause of death however, these scars had long since healed.

Its muscles struggled to react as it dragged naked legs across the table and sat up, struggling with balance. It tried to conjure a name, a handle to relate with, but the only word that existed in its consciousness was ‘Dead’. It would make do for now.

“You don’t look so good,” came a voice, deep and clear from behind the table.

‘Who are you?’ Dead tried to ask, a thick glut of blood clotting the mouth. Dead used fingers to scoop out the putrid mess. He retched.

“Who... are... you?” Dead gasped. His stomach contracted but the gut was empty.

“I don’t know,” answered the voice. “Like you I woke in this room.” The figure stepped round to face Dead. “I can’t touch anything.” The man stood tall, lean and strong, his tailored suit immaculate, a stylized haircut cut fresh. He was transparent, his presence never quite in focus, his image causing the eyes to wander.

“You’re a ghost.” Dead passed his hands along the table. There was a side tray with varied surgical instruments. He picked up a scalpel, it was tarnished but otherwise clean.

“I see you’re not,” the ghost sighed. “What’s your name?”

“I can’t remember. I think it might be Dead.”

“I doubt it.”

“Well, what’s yours?”

“Uh, I couldn’t say either.”

“I’ll call you Ghost then.”

“Ghost?” he wrinkled his nose.

“I’ll remember that. How long have I been here for?”

“I couldn’t say,” Ghost answered, his face still screwed. “You were here when I woke up and that was a while ago. I tried to leave but can’t get through the door.”

“You’re a ghost that can’t go through walls?”

There were footsteps. Ghost fidgeted in anxiety while Dead laid down on the palette trying to look inconspicuous. The door creaked open and a man dressed in a soiled apron over shirt entered. He surveyed the room, noting what corpses lay where. The doctor ignored the spirit fidgeting in the center of the morgue, walking to Dead’s corpse and examining the congealed blood that framed the scene.

“Odd....” the doctor murmured, removing the mess with a rag, “we’d better see what brought you here.” Dead lay in silence, alarmed. He felt something tug in his chest, an unexplained dullness. He opened diluted eyes to see the tarnished scalpel bloodied. The doctor saw the reaction and gasped, pulling back. Dead reached out and caught the scalpel wielding hand.

“Let go,” the doctor shrieked, grasping for a cutting tool on the tray with his free hand. Dead held tight, dragging the doctor closer and tearing the scalpel away. Dead hammered the scalpel into the doctor’s

eye. The screaming increased. Again Dead forced it in, juice bubbling from the wound. The rending blade sliced through, opening parts of the doctor's cheekbone and ears and chipping teeth. The scream raised an octave. In the torrential rage of Dead's mind a faint whisper embodied Ghost's rants to let go. Dead was nothing more than a mindless, thrashing killer, with no grace or purpose except the desire to obliterate life. The scalpel split, its blade lodged in the top of the doctor's skull. With the blade shattered Dead returned from psychosis. He let go and watched the doctor fall, a bloody, destroyed mess, whimpering out the last dregs of life.

"What have you done?" Ghost cried. "You murderer." The spirit's eyes were filled with ethereal tears.

Dead was numb, no emotion stirring... Nothing.

"I think," he stated in a calm voice, "I was defending myself." From shoulder to shoulder Dead was open, fatty tissue and meat puckering out from his chest, a result of the interrupted autopsy.

"But there was no reason," bewailed Ghost, heaving in nauseam, "he could have helped you. He didn't know that you were alive.... Or not dead."

Dead did not respond.

Silence reigned. The killer focused on the blood weaving a trail from the doctor's still body, leading to the central drain.

Dead tried to think... to understand why he had woken in a morgue. He had a deep wound across his chest that didn't hurt, was seeing ghosts and had killed. Attempts at recollection failed. When a thought came he tried to hold onto it, to lock it into memory, but they were sucked into a deep, far-reaching void in his mind. As soon as a new thought came along the previous one was fleeting. The act of remembering became an insurmountable challenge.

"I'm leaving," he proclaimed, frustrated. Ghost looked up, speechless. "Are you going to stay here?"

"You think I want to go anywhere with you?" Ghost spat.

"Then stay here," Dead answered, challenging the spirit to find company with anyone else. For a moment the pair stared at one another before the ghost seemed to shrink in acceptance.

"You can't go around like that," Ghost huffed, pointing at Dead's naked, mutilated body. While the deep wound across his chest did not bother the corpse, it wept down to his clotting pubic hair. "You should do something about the cut."

“Like?”

“Patch it,” Ghost stated, pointing to a needle and thread scattered among the doctor’s tools.

Dead complied and with clumsy fingers set to stitching himself. His lack of grace, coupled with the strain of seeing the incision, made the job a poor one at best. With his left hand he pinned the two flaps of skin together, with the right he pushed the needle through the meat. It was tougher than expected, the skin hard, as though he had been deceased for some time.

Dead stood in the cold room, a messy patchwork of stitches congealed with blood spanning his chest.

“You need clothes.” Ghost told him.

Dead nodded in response. The longer he stayed awake the more he could form thoughts and connections, as if his brain were trying to wake up, giving him some form of control over his actions. He walked over to the body of the doctor and started undressing him. The clothes were bloody but sufficient, the apron absorbing much of the blood, protecting the undergarments. As Dead turned the doctor over to take his shirt he heard a low groan. Dead looked at Ghost whose mouth hung agape in horror.

“He’s alive,” monotoned Dead.

“Just leave him,” stuttered Ghost.

Dead looked sideways into the doctor’s mutilated face. Several wounds hadn’t bled, leaving exposed bone. Dead felt a curiosity tick in his mind, as if reminded of something long forgotten.

“What’s he doing here?” asked Dead, confused. “Did I do this?”

Ghost snorted, unaware that Dead could not remember the actions of a moment past.

“Should I kill him?” Dead wondered.

“What? No... no.” Ghost answered.

Dead’s calmness was at odds with the psychotic rage he had exhibited before. The monster obeyed, proceeding to remove the doctor’s clothes with little regard to comfort. As the doctor’s shirt came away his head fell back to the tile floor with a wet thud. Dead ignored a quiet whimper, unbuckling the doctor’s belt and removing a greasy set of pants.

Dead stood dressed. His dark hair was a clotted mess and the white shirt more a kaleidoscope of human fluid. Unlike the primitive spectre

of nightmare he resembled upon waking however, his figure could now pass among the worst echelons of society. Rocking on meaty legs, Dead steadied and stepped over the freshest body in the morgue, an uncommitted ghost in tow.

2

Damian Steward locked swords with his enemy. The woody crack echoed down split halls and half crumbling walls. The regent's son gritted his teeth, holding tight to his blade through numb fingers. Pushing hard, his foe tumbled back for the briefest of moments, expertly regaining his balance before Damian could swoop in with a fatal blow.

The pair circled one another, stepping over rubble, aware of the danger of slipping in the frosty morning. Steeling himself, Damian lunged, the tip of his sword aimed at belly height. The blow missed and Damian, slow to reel in his blade, was punished with a crack across the fingers. Swearing aloud, Damian's sword fell as its owner grasped at the ringing hand, already numb from the chilled morning.

"Don't drop your sword, it is your shield," smiled Fredrick, quoting his own sword master's admonishments. As the son of an Imperial senator Fredrick was in the Steward's care, his father sent into the Northane Kingdom three years before as an ambassador of the Empire.

"That hurt," Damian replied, still clutching his fingers. Fredrick was a better swordsman than the heir, and more still than some twice his age. Swore fingers were a common ailment for Damian when he dueled with Fredrick yet he always came back for another round. The remains of the old citadel was their favourite testing grounds, secluded from the crowded training yard of Greenstone and packed with hidden tunnels and secret rooms.

Defeated for the moment, Damian retrieved his blade and sheathed it, leading the way up a spiral stairwell. The boys picked their way past a skeleton on the steps, left to decay where the soldier had died. A bullet hole marked the centre of its chest, the heavy ball bearing had sheared through the plate mail, only stopping when it touched the back

plate. Braving stern faces, the boys continued up, neither willing to break the silence with their fear of the close proximity of the remains.

When debris prevented any further ascent the boys chose to explore the surrounding rooms. Fredrick gave an excited yelp, finding an unexplored rift in the brickwork. The two boys mapped out the new tunnel, unaware that the secret passage had once been a service tunnel for servants carrying faecal buckets. Internal sewerage systems were a modern development among the city's architectural elite.

"This must have been one of King Asis' secret tunnels," Damian noted, trying to sound educated to his foreign friend.

"He would have used it to smuggle in prisoners," Fredrick replied. Having resided in the city long enough to know much of its history. "I bet there is a torture chamber close by."

"I don't think so," Damian considered. "I bet this was an escape tunnel. You know they say that Asis was never caught by the nobles and that he escaped to the Empire."

"Who says that?" Fredrick wondered, having never heard the story.

"Some of my cousins were discussing it."

"Oh," Fredrick sighed. Few among the nobles had been as open to the foreigner as the Steward family. In the eyes of most Ironwood residents the Empire was a point of trade and nothing more. Most saw the culture and languages of the Imperials as something to be shunned.

"If Asis escaped to my homeland then I think I would have heard it."

"He's meant to be hiding in secret," Damian continued. "Preparing to regain the city only when the time is right."

"Wouldn't that spell trouble for the Stewards?" Fredrick asked, noting that their role of regency was meant to warm the seat of power until a new king was found for Ironwood.

Damian shrugged. "The nobles say that Asis was never a true king. That he was of bastard blood."

"Convenient," Fredrick noted, picking his way to the end of the tunnel. It opened up into a small alcove, once the bottom of a latrine pit. Light filtered through from above. A cannonball hung half-buried into one shattered wall as evidence of the destruction. The boys struggled in vain to extract the spent bullet, hoping to drag it away. After the siege the nobles had removed much of the rubble for the foundation of the new citadel – Greenstone.

Having mapped out the tunnel, the boys returned to the main hall. Damian unsheathed his wooden sword and pointed it at his friend.

“This time I will kill you,” he declared, waiting for Fredrick to take out his own blade.

The cracks echoed through rubble littered passages, lit by gaping holes patched in the brickwork as Fredrick once again dominated the duel. Swordplay was considered more important in the Imperial Capital, a way to show one’s respect and knowledge of the histories and as the son of an Imperial senator it was Fredrick’s duty to master the art. His family was part of a traditionalist flow in high society, giving preference to ancient arts rather than the mass-produced accomplishments of the expanded world. Swordplay was not an option for Fredrick Themmond, rather an instilled part of his heritage practiced every day since he could remember.

Damian’s skill was less grand. His father saw it as nothing more than a social dialect practiced among the noble elite of modern society. As a result, Damian found short time spent honing the ancient skill, he was clumsy and lacked speed. Few children dared challenge a regent’s son and he found enjoyment in his battles with the foreigner.

“My hands are bleeding,” Damian complained.

“Your throat will bleed if you cannot keep your weapon up, Sir. Perhaps if we made specially quilted gloves for your tender hands?”

The jibe hurt more than his hands. In a second of anger Damian’s sword swung in an uncontrolled overhead arc. Fredrick pivoted, diverting the force of the strike to his right side, toppling Damian across the ruined slate floor.

The heir’s face raked through settled ash as he sprawled out. Tears rolled over bloody blisters rising to the surface of his cheeks. He looked up through hazy eyes, Fredrick’s terrified face challenged into focus.

“I’m... sorry,” Fredrick peeped. Damian dragged himself upright, lip bloody, cheeks and palms raw.

“That’s alright,” he spluttered between red teeth, “I overcompensated.” His expensive tunic was ruined, the family crest torn. “You would have killed me in a real battle.”

“You sure you’re okay?” he asked, offering a trembling hand. “You’re father won’t be happy.”

“I’ll tell him I fell while climbing,” Damian said, allaying the boy’s fear. “We’d better get back.”

Fredrick was hesitant but conceded to the heir’s wish.

A watchman's trumpet, stationed on the courtyard parapets, signaled the end of the hour. The two girls shuffled their books and loose papers into their leather satchels, hanging them on the hook at the side wall next to a third, untouched bag. They bid a good day to their teacher, Master Goldstring, and half skipped down the winding stairs of Greenstone's east tower. After a long morning of boring lectures on the political makeup of Ironwood they wanted some excitement and fresh air.

Haylee, a girl of thirteen with blonde hair that touched the nape of her back, contorted her innocent face into shock when she saw Damian strutting towards them. A huge welt smeared his face and he was covered in filthy ash. A grin hung from his weary face. He approached the girls alone. His partner in crime had refused to return to Greenstone's courtyard whilst Damian carried such a fresh wound.

"Damian, what happened to you?" Haylee cried. Being a year older she saw him as the baby of the group, even though he received privileges that the girls did not.

"Just exploring," he brushed off.

"Father will be angry," Ammba mumbled, looking elsewhere.

"I doubt father will notice," Damian replied. Ammba was not listening, a boy training across the yard distracted her. At fifteen she cared little that her brother might be injured. Most of her spare time was spent socializing with her cousins and others of high social rank. The last year in particular she had focused a lot of energy towards attracting male attention.

"The Crone should check it out, she can fix something to stop the swelling." Ammba stated in a fixated tone.

"It'll be fine. It doesn't hurt and I can feel it going down already," Damian lied. His face looked like it would puff up to twice its size but he wasn't going to let some old woman smear him in stinking herbs and dirt. He felt proud of the scratches on his face, despite what the girls might think.

"Whatever... If father decides to spread your body parts across Greenstone don't pretend like I didn't want to help." Ammba stormed off.

"I'll be alright," he told Haylee, ignoring his moody big sister. "I'll stay out of father's way for a few days so he doesn't know."

Haylee smiled at her brother, it sounded like an adventure.

"Where will you hide?"

“In the citadel. There are hundreds of dark corners that I can get into. Besides I doubt father will come looking for me anyway.”

“He is busy,” admitted Haylee.

“So he won’t find me. I’ll spend a few nights in the high tower.”

“That’s dangerous Damian, you could get hurt again.”

“It’s the best place to hide. No one goes up there besides Freddy and myself. I’ll show you how if you want. It’s not hard and you can bring me some food.”

“Why don’t you just say you fell over?” She asked. “I’m sure he won’t be that angry.”

“And risk Freddy’s life?” Damian cried in over exaggerated mockery. The excuse was a mere pretense for the chance to experience some excitement. Despite Fredrick’s real fear of the ruler, the Steward children knew that the ruler of Greenstone would never hurt a child, especially over an accident. Damian loved the idea of camping in the old citadel though, mixing danger with adventure and the excuse gave him cause to see through his fantasies and spend the night there.

Haylee smiled. Although she set out to be the good daughter, the hint of adventure stirred her blood. The idea of exploring the high tower and abandoned rooms was too much to resist. Together they set out on their mission to hide Damian from their father and his agents.

3

The cold hallway lay in a state of disrepair. A mouldy render covered once proud brickwork, the original furnishings visible in areas underneath where the render had rotted completely and come away. An unclean dampness clung to the air mixed with the smell of long dead bodies filled with a basic variation of formaldehyde. If the two inhabitants had not already been deceased one might worry to the state of their health having spent time in that room. A bulb hummed from an overhead recess, sputtering out a dim light.

An occasional trolley rested unorganised against the walls, grey sheets silhouetting the decaying bodies beneath, feet protruding from the end. On each right foot was scribed the name and death date of the

corpse, written in an ordered and consistent fashion out of touch with the general sense that the hallway of horror provided.

“Hold up,” Ghost called, noticing the information. “Your name should be on your foot.”

Dead’s eyes surprised Ghost, a splash of colour momentarily caught in their otherwise grey stare. Hopping on his left foot, Dead removed the stolen right shoe. Ghost squatted, squinting at the foot’s base, struggling to make out the scribble caked by filth.

“I need more light,” Ghost complained, pointing out the single dying bulb recessed into the ceiling.

The colour died from Dead’s eyes as he struggled to fit the shoe back onto his swollen foot. “Come on then,” he grunted, staggering left then right. Ghost overtook him with ease.

Many rooms were locked or long abandoned. One door had black chains crisscrossed across it with the words, ‘DANGER, KEEP OUT’ scrawled loudly on its metal base. Other rooms acted as waste storage. There were broken pieces of furniture and medical equipment scattered in random spots and a large coal depository stationed near a crematorium. All throughout the wet air was consistent, a constant dampness clinging to every wall and item and invading the lungs of the living, if there were any.

The pair found one room in better shape than the others. Light filtered from a sputtering coal lamp set above a desk while a bulb blinked on and off in a random beat. A rusty coil element heater sat in one corner, its glow drawing Dead’s gaze. Various medical books hinted at a study. Ghost scanned the desk.

“Open these drawers for me, please.” Ghost felt vulnerable without touch, a grievous disability.

Dead dragged his eyes away from the glow, breaking his trance to obey the order. They found a personal journal in the lowest drawer, leather-bound and scraggy eared. Dead flipped the pages on prompt while Ghost read.

“It seems our doctor’s a prisoner,” murmured Ghost.

“Why?” a monotone reply.

“I don’t know. Apparently he performed autopsies for the city. Why have a criminal do it though? It says something about the city not appreciating his art....” Ghost gave a derisive snort. Dead flipped through more pages on command, his eyes half shut. The entries became shorter and more absurd as the dates pressed on. Some entries

detailed parties with the corpses, of conversations that the doctor would hold with them and how the different corpses related to one another.

“The man’s insane,” Ghost summarized. “He was supposed to burn the corpses after final examination but it sounds like he chose to horde them, keeping them around for his own entertainment.”

“So there are others like us around here?” asked Dead, reverting to a semi-conscious state. Ghost stared at him, about to admonish him for the ridiculous statement, then he remembered their predicament and began to doubt himself.

“No. I don’t think so,” he decided. “If so we would have seen them by now.”

The duo continued their search, always Ghost in front, calling out for Dead to follow. The zombie’s trundling pace frustrated the spirit, eager to find a way out of the decrepit morgue.

“Hurry up,” Ghost finally called, anxious that they had searched each room without finding an exit.

“I’m trying,” Dead growled back. “You’re too fast, I can’t keep up.”

“I noticed that. It would help if you walked in a straight line for once.”

“I can’t help it,” the zombie’s voice rose. “My legs are stiff. My whole body feels numb.”

Ghost led the way back to the chained room, staring at the grim warning.

“I think we should look in here,” he declared, turning to his companion. He waited a moment, expecting a reply. “I haven’t seen a key anywhere though.”

Dead shuffled past the ghost and looked at the door. While it wasn’t locked it was held tight by two chains running across its width, anchored to both the door and its surrounding wall and preventing the door from opening inwards. Although the chains were a heavy cast, the constant exposure to moisture had made them rust. Dead gripped hold of one chain with two fists and braced himself against the door.

“I don’t think that will work,” Ghost admonished.

“It will work,” spat Dead through a clenched jaw. The muscles in his neck stood tight, showing off the patchwork of scars running across his neck and throat.

“Are you that stupid?” Ghost bit back. “Those are heavy chains. There’s no way you can break them.”

“Shut up,” Dead barked, his voice ringing along the hallway.

Ghost opened his mouth to respond, the sound of twisting metal interrupting him. While the chain had not snapped, the anchor points on the door had torn off, causing the chain to sag and lay limp on the floor.

They opened the door and let the weak light of the hallway filter through. A rancid odor peeled through, making Ghost retch. Even Dead seemed sensitive to this, hesitant to take a step into the room.

“I don’t like this,” Ghost whispered to him.

“Why not?” Dead challenged. “You’re a ghost. You can’t get hurt. Step inside and have a look.”

“What?” Ghost balked at the order. “You’re meant to be the brave one. You do it.”

Dead turned and smirked at his cowardly companion. The spirit’s reluctance steeled him and he faced the room, striding into its shadow.

Before he could react, Dead was struck from the front, thrusting him back into the hallway. On top of him clawed a savage creature, human in shape only. The attacking beast sought to bite and tear at Dead’s face. Dead fought back and the two rolled across the hallway, bodies locked in the combat of two undead creatures.

“He’s strong,” Dead gasped out. “Stronger than me.”

“He’s a zombie,” Ghost shouted, realizing at once his mistake in opening the door.

Dead’s leather like skin stopped the creature from tearing him apart and in some savage reasoning of the beast’s instinct it stood in order to find a new avenue of attack. It wailed down with fists as Dead tried to stand himself, catching the blows across his face and chest. The strikes ignited a spark and within Dead grew the same rage that had seen him attack the doctor. His vision clouded over as he charged into his enemy, throwing it backwards.

As the zombie lost its balance and fell, Dead surged ahead and pounced on its chest, his rage now complete. Without understanding of events, the maddened pair struggled together, neither now aware of their actions. Dead’s fists fell hard and fast, a continuous hammering that first cracked the creature’s skull, then pulverized it. Dead continued to thrash long after the other zombie had fallen still, not content even after the skull itself had come away and the brain had been crushed and spread across the tiled floor.

It wasn't until Ghost called him back that Dead regained control over his body, sagging in numb exhaustion.

"You certainly killed him," Ghost reviled.

"What was he?" Dead asked.

"A zombie. Just like you."

Each door that suggested an exit was immovable, the use of force proving futile. Dead ripped one door off its hinges only to be confronted by a mass of rubble.

"Is there no escape from this place?" he growled, blood pounding in his ear.

"Whatever crime the doctor must have committed, it seems they were desperate to keep him locked in here."

"Who's they?"

Ghost was silent for a minute as he considered the question, "I'm not really sure. Maybe some type of town watch or mob."

A bell rang from down the hall, followed by a dull thud. Ghost and Dead followed the sound to a previously explored room. Dead peered inside. The room acted as a depository of unsorted corpses, sprawled into naked piles, some long dead and decayed, others still weeping fresh fluids. All this was how they had found it the first time. What the pair had failed to miss on first inspection was that the far wall opened to a chute large enough for bodies to slide down into a waiting cloth basket. Ghost and Dead looked inside to see a naked body, a young, plump woman with dark hair. Her skin looked tan-warm, as if she had only just died. Ghost noticed markings on her foot:

Anje Reinfield

21/2/90

Exec., arson.

NAR

"'Exec., arson'? I wonder what that means?" he pondered. Dead tipped the basket over and dragged it out of the way, its contents spilling out onto the floor.

"What the hell are you doing?"

"There's a way out," he pointed up the chute with a calloused finger.

Ghost looked at Anje's corpse, spread out on the floor, eyes staring upwards. Her neck was long, raw and limp - a hangman's mark. He wondered if his body had looked quite so pathetic.

"Show some respect," he spat.

Dead smirked. "You're serious?" He managed, noting Ghost's scowl.

"Of course I am. Just because you've crossed over doesn't mean you can treat other people's bodies with no care." Dead felt his mind twitch, as if a spark of humour had caught in there and was looking for a way to break out.

"Calm down, Ghost. It's not like she matters."

"Of course she matters. People matter. Don't you understand that?"

"Maybe if you're alive. I don't think I am."

"You need to understand though, you once were. You weren't always Dead. You were something more, a person, with dreams and memories."

Dead shrugged. "She's dead, she won't mind... I wouldn't."

He didn't wait for a response, looking inside the chute. No light at the end hinted that it was closed off. Placing a hand on each side Dead was able to trundle up the steep gradient, working his body up in a slow process. Without any sensation in his limbs Dead failed to recognise the usual signs of muscle fatigue. Half way up his arms buckled. Dead fell the half-length and cracked hard on the tile floor, jarring his skull.

"Are you all right?" Ghost asked.

"Yeah, I think. It doesn't hurt. Nothing hurts."

Dead tried again, and a third time. Each attempt ending in the same result, Dead's arms giving way without warning, resulting in a violent plummet.

"You need to rest at some point," Ghost suggested as Dead stood for a fourth attempt. "Otherwise you'll end up busting your skull. If I tell you to rest then do it."

The final climb took a long time. Ghost periodically ordered Dead to rest, the corpse bracing himself with his legs pressed to the sides of the chute, relaxing his arms. They felt heavy but not tired, as if he might slip if he wasn't careful. After a final exertion he reached the top. Ghost waited behind. The spirit had no problem making it up the chute, his weightlessness an advantage in the climb.

The chute was locked, resisting the force of a push when it came.

“Now what?” he derided. Dead looked down between his legs at Ghost, then up at the iron plate that covered the chute. With a meaty hand he gave three heavy raps on the door.

“What the hell are you doing?” Ghost hissed. “Don’t you think this is going to look a tad suspicious?”

Dead didn’t answer. The trapdoor cracked open, artificial light streaming through, stunning the vision of both escapees.

“Sadler, what do you think you’re doing?” came a gruff voice squinting down into the shaft. Dead’s hands clasped over the chute’s rim. The guard stepped back as the bloody, menacing visage of Dead’s face appeared in the light.

“Doctor Sadler?”

Dead stepped out, standing to his full length, a head over the guard. The man stood frozen in an unwashed grey and red uniform, unsure whether to run or question. He did neither.

Dead betrayed his ponderous speed by snapping out an arm and scruffing the stocky guard. He tried to shake off Dead but found the iron grip pressed him tight.

“What... what do you want?” The guard peeped, panic building.

“The doctor’s gone.” One hand clasped under the guard’s chin, pressure closing off the man’s airway. “You the one that threw me down there?”

Again the blood pounded in Dead’s ears, a raging torrent meeting on the top of his brain, any previous reason swallowed by a titanic madness. A tiny pinprick at the back of his mind was enough to turn his attention. It was Ghost, screaming in his ear, trying in vain to hit Dead, his arms bouncing off without impact. The killer turned, remembering his companion. The bubbling rage subsided, leaving a cool anger that persisted after, like a white-hot steel rod purged by fire.

Dead looked at his grey hands clasped around the guard’s stubbled head. The extreme pressure had morphed the top of his skull, ready to pop under further strain. The guard was a portrait of fear, eyes swollen outwards and both nostrils flared, blood bubbling out as he struggled to breathe.

“Let me repay you,” Dead grinded between teeth, releasing one hand and dragging him to the edge of the chute. With a single monster-like squeeze, Dead crushed the guard’s arm, leaving it to hang lifeless... then the other arm. Ghost screamed at Dead again but it was not a manic rage that fuelled Dead, rather the urge to see a hindrance gone. He pushed the guard backwards, the broken arms useless in

slowing the fall as the victim slipped into the chute. The pair heard a sharp crack as he slammed into the tile floor many feet below, the basket no longer in its place to break the fall. Dead swung the trapdoor shut, Ghost staring on aghast.

“You’re an animal...” he gritted, eyes brimming.

“Were you going to explain why we crawled up the chute?” Dead sneered, traipsing past.

4

Ivan Steward listened to the conversation, weighing the opinions of his council. Four men and two women formed the regent’s aide. As lord it was his responsibility to deal with foreign issues pertaining to Ironwood. This was reflected in his council, half non-indigenous to the city. Ironwood relied on trade and external security to survive, its own army a weakling force in a land squeezed between an empire and a kingdom.

Ironwood was a capital city within itself, serving no greater country than the reaches of its mountainscape. It served as a neutral point between two great empires, one old and shrinking, the other an upstart. The Northane lords were aggressive, attacking Ironwood with diplomacy and spies. The Imperial Core was in counter to this, trying to keep up with the barbaric kingdom hungry for new lands. Ironwood had once been a province of the Imperial Core, shedding its weight over twelve hundred years ago and appointing the Patriarcht lord of the city, an emperor within himself.

“A Northane army destroys an Imperial one at our step, why should it concern us?” Ivan asked, tensing the muscles in his jaw.

“It’s of grave concern,” replied Maria Fervia, a native Imperial, her voice shaking with frustration. “This city was founded by the blood of the Empire, if we turn on her then we become nothing better than the barbarians.”

“I think what our imperial advisor is trying to say is ‘let’s side with the losing team’,” stated Damon Sterling, a long time opponent of Maria and friend of few. Snickers greeted this, most from Gerhig Yemoon, the Northane ex-ambassador and newest councilor.

“I will remind you, Sir Sterling, that the Imperial Moon has survived two thousand years of war and bloodshed. They are no barbarian horde come to power in the space of a hundred years and will surely last the test of these invaders.”

“Must we be drawn into another word of wars over the empires again?” begged Stephen Dervon, the host of foreign treasurer. He was a stocky ex-soldier of the Imperial Army, his military days kept busy with counting coins and running logistics. He had sought the recluse of Ironwood to retire, away from battling hordes and sanctimonious senators. He had no love of the homeland.

“It does not bother you?” asked Gehrig.

“There is no profit in taking sides,” stated the ex-soldier, “this has been Ironwood’s policy since the Patriarcht came to power. Discussing this buys us nothing, the nobles would not allow it either way. We should be asking how to profit from these battles.”

“You’re the soldier, enlighten us,” came a soft female hum. Clarissa Tone was a regent’s spy. She held a knack for retrieving information from tight lips, her seductive dark features notorious for loosening even the tongues of Eld-Manati Priests. Ivan enjoyed her company most of all, enchanted by most everything she did. Her attraction was lost on the old soldier, more concerned with his own agenda.

“Encourage the war,” he stated in a bored voice. “For every suit of armour, shield or firearm that is produced is a dollar in our coffers. The nobles are in a power struggle with the merchants, let us benefit by enforcing a war tax on them, weakening them and strengthening us.”

“A war tax?” questioned Gehrig. “Even though we aren’t technically part of the war?” he laughed.

“Why not? The nobles will pass it through for us if they think it will tighten the noose on the merchants. Once set in law the traders will have no voice on the manner.”

“They will revolt,” stated Damon with a casual tone. “Not that that can’t be suppressed, I suppose.”

“What of you, Master Freeman, what do you say?” Ivan asked. The old man looked up at his regent, quiet. He was grey and wise, wearing the traditional sash of a king’s councilor, separating him from the others at table.

“The soldier is right,” he stated, referring to Stephen. “The merchants have too much wealth. They do not know their place within

it, rather seeking to overcome it with expense and luxury, thieves and spies. Strangle the merchants if you must, the regency needs to be a force again.”

Ivan scanned the faces of his men and women, weighing up their worth. Some he trusted with his life, others he saw as threats. They were a mixed assortment of useful tools, not close friends and liable to betray him for the right cost.

“The nobles may not acquiesce so easily,” Ivan stated. “Wealth is not always power. If they fear the regency then they will stifle us.”

“The nobles spend more time arguing amongst themselves,” stated the barbarian, remembering his time spent in their company.

“Or worrying about the church,” conceded Maria.

“There are too many forces within Ironwood,” Ivan admitted, “but this has been the way of things. Let us tax the merchants then... under a war tax, and reap what we can.”

The council was dismissed, Master Freeman remaining behind to speak with the regent.

“What do you think?” the old man asked.

“It’s a tax,” Ivan shrugged, “the merchants will bitch about it but nothing more.”

“I meant your council... you have a new man.”

“Aye, the barbarian. He is connected, I like to hear news of the world.”

“Then seek a rumour merchant, don’t appoint one to your council,” snapped the frail man. Ivan had known the Master for many years, respectful of his age and wisdom. He would not rise to anger in his presence.

“What bothers you?”

There was a long sigh, a mottled hand running through grey hair. “You beset yourself among strangers and hope to call them councilors. Not one wears the sash of masterhood.”

“They are not traditionalists,” Ivan admitted, “but a good mix of personalities I think.”

“Your brother Felix was trusting too, and he ended up skewered on an assassin’s knife.”

“Yes, and my brother Kalim was paranoid of all around him, where did that end him? He murdered half my siblings and didn’t end up any better than Felix. Need I remind you of his deeds?”

“There needs to be a balance,” Freeman struck back, “neither held that. Don’t think that just because you have a good mix of personalities you have a good council.”

“I don’t,” Ivan rebuked. “I don’t trust them. They are tools for the regency, to be respected and used.”

Freeman sunk into his leather recliner, “I have seen too many kings die in my time,” he admitted.

“We are not kings anymore. That is a dangerous term.”

“Kings in everything but name. Tell me, if you wrest power back from the nobles and merchants will you re-establish the monarchy?”

“Have we not discussed this? A claim would be suicide.”

“Then pact with the church. Declare your intention to rule under the guise of El-Manati.”

“You know me,” stated the regent, referring to his dislike of the priesthood.

“It would be a strategic relationship, nothing more the church needs to know. They wield more power within the city than the nobles or the merchants. Use them and conquer.”

“The El-Manati don’t formulate with casual worshippers. They would not accept me.”

“Then have a reawakening of faith,” the old man demanded.

“Enough,” Ivan did not desire a kingship nor would he lie in the bed of the church to achieve it. He was a man of principles, set by a code of ethics he had learnt abroad studying the ways of the world. As the tenth child of fifteen it had never been expected of him to reach office or hold lands. Instead he had been sent out to train as one of the masters - a scholar and physician. He had spent twelve years travelling through the Empire and learning of unique cultures and ideals. He had returned as a wiser man, serving under his brother and regent, Felix Steward, continuing his studies within the citadel’s libraries.

On his brother’s death the church broached support for another male, Lord Kalim the second born, a decision that saw the Steward family persecuted and murdered. Ivan had ended his mad brother’s reign himself, the flash of a musket still lingering in his memory. Among his death ramblings the king had warned of another assassin within their lineage, their half-brother Hermatt, a crippled man resigned to a wheelchair. During the interrogation process the cripple had admitted to planning the assassination of at least two brothers and a stepsister. It had broken Ivan, despaired to admit that he was part of a

murderous family. He had sent the guilty man to Ashmore Asylum, to spend his last days there.

Of his two surviving sisters, he knew only the whereabouts of the youngest, Geogia. She had married into the Reitlin noble line to an army commander named James Pierce, twenty years her senior. It was an ancient family with strong bonds to the royal line. During the induction of the regency, Ivan had been chosen by the church, taking the stand over her and his other sister Lakia who had disappeared after the vote.

The worries of Ivan were many, the fear of assassination too real. He felt insecure as it was and did not need the pressure of an old man telling him to risk more. While the church might support the reinstatement of a kingship there would not be enough support from the nobles. The monarchy could not be reclaimed without the threat of anarchy or war, two blights that the city had become accustomed to. The church had chosen Ivan over his sisters as he was a scholar and supposed man of peace, the prospect of easing the troubles that blistered the city enough for them to vote over his less trusted yet pious sister Geogia.

Ivan dismissed the Master, spending time staring at the piles of notes and scrolls bundled on the table. The regent's main role within the city was to handle foreign policy and insure a healthy exchange rate for traded goods. Balancing books and running accounts was a small part, diplomacy and forming trade routes another. Grasping for a kingship was a symbolic move, one that would reaffirm the tyrannical politics of the old city. If a regent were to risk such a move then the next step would be to take over the internal policy of the city and to consolidate as ruler. Too many lives were wasted on such grasps, Ivan preferring to stay such a course of action.

With a pounding head he retired for the morning.

5

Ghost fumed, staring at the back of Dead's head with venom. If the ghost had physical substance he would have picked up the nearest object to bash in his skull. Scanning the room they were in, he noted

that the closest thing was a half eaten sandwich lying abandoned on a rough-hewn stone table.

“Where are we?” Dead grumbled. It snapped Ghost back to the issue, a good question. They were in a sparse stone room set with windowless walls and a heavy metal door.

“This place looks like part of a prison,” answered Ghost.

“I don’t see any prisoners.”

On the table next to the sandwich was a ledger. “What’s in it?” Ghost asked, pointing to the table. Dead walked over.

“Ham, I think. I don’t think you’d be able to eat it though. Did you want to try?”

“The book...” ‘you stupid corpse,’ Ghost wanted to finish.

Dead opened the book. The spine’s ribbon set to the last page, the final entry stating:

‘Anje Reinfield, 21/2/90. Executed for arson. No autopsy required.’

“Our little Anje was an arsonist,” declared Ghost. He didn’t think that Dead could read. Scanning through the book he could see many names. Of the seven bodies listed for the current date, none stirred any dormant memories in Ghost that might jaunt his memory.

“Let’s have a look at that foot of yours again.” For a second Dead did not understand, Ghost pointing towards his foot and the markings scrawled underneath. The shoe came off and Dead lifted it as high as he could.

“You won’t believe this,” Ghost sighed.

“What?”

“It reads, ‘Unknown, unknown, unknown, AR.’

“What?” Dead asked again, this time in disbelief.

“I’m serious. They haven’t listed anything about you.” Ghost looked back at the ledger. There was a blank line where a record should have been. “Well, I guess we can rule out execution. If they don’t know your date of death then maybe you were picked up on the street. That doesn’t explain what sort of building we’re in though. It mustn’t be a prison.”

Dead was irritated and angry. Slipping his shoe back on he headed for the door.

“Let’s find out.”

Whatever the building's original purpose, Ghost thought, it had a confused identity now. No natural light came through the barred windows, instead they opened out either onto worn stone walls or were blocked by rubble.

"This place is no better than the morgue," spat Dead. Ghost was inclined to agree. The corridors were littered with waste and dried blood. They heard a moan echoing down the corridor and moved in its direction. Ghost tiptoed behind, peering over his companion's shoulder. Dead looked back and sneered, wondering why a ghost would bother hiding.

After a turn in the corridor they heard the moan again. Creeping forward they found the source emitting from behind a heavy metal slab with groaning hinges. Dead pushed hard and it gave in, grating the concrete floor and sending out a warning shriek.

"Is it time Gary?" came a croak. Across the dark, stone room sat an old man in a steel cage. He was shackled to a bench with a rag thrown over his thin shoulders.

"I'm not Gary," announced Dead, walking towards the cage. The prisoner tried to stand, only to hunch with the shackles bound to his neck.

"Well then, my name's Antony. Master thief and pickpocket."

"You don't look too much like a master thief," Ghost said. Antony didn't hear and for a moment there was silence.

"I'm sorry," continued the prisoner, "and you are?"

Dead looked at Ghost who shrugged.

"I'm not sure," he turned back. "You can call me Dead."

"Dead?" asked Ghost laughing, "I'm glad you didn't leave your originality on the table."

"Well it's better than 'Unknown'... Ghost."

"Let me guess", the prisoner said, looking bemused. "You're ex-asylum."

"He can't see me remember, I'm a ghost."

"Ahh, not exactly," Dead replied. "What is this place?"

Antony's rag heaved in as he stifled a laugh. "It's the corpse depository. Nasty business and all. Used to be an old prison, at least this level did. Now they just use this section as a holding pen for executionees."

"A corpse depository?" Dead and Ghost asked together.

“Yeah. You know, where they get rid off all the bodies that pop up around town. Each quarter has at least half a dozen stations. Can’t be too careful with corpses you know.”

“Why’s that?”

“You aren’t from around here are you?”

“I’m just having a hard time remembering things.”

“Yeah, well, apparently it has something to do with the dead getting up and walking about. Doesn’t happen very often... or so I hear, but when it does those corpses have a tendency to be real aggressive like.”

Ghost stepped up to the cage and waved a hand. Antony stared through it, confirming what the spirit had already thought, that the living could not see him.

“Ask him how to get out of here,” Ghost told Dead. Dead relayed the question, not bothering to explain that he hadn’t thought of it himself.

“Well, that’s an easy thing for a master thief, not so for you. Tell you what, get me out of this cage and I’ll lead you up and out.”

“Up and out?” asked Dead.

“Shit, you really don’t know anything do you. Out of the hole we’re in, you know, underground? Not the nicest place to be in old Ironwood, much rather have the wind and rain in my face.”

“About the keys,” inquired Dead.

“Yeah, there’s only one set I know of, Gary has them. Not a bad sort him, bit of a grump when he’s rushed. Should be here now actually.”

“I think we’ve already ran into him,” Dead considered, struggling to recall a memory.

Antony looked at Dead with a tilt of his head.

“Who’s we? Someone else lurking about out there with you?”

Dead turned to Ghost for help.

“Make something up,” Ghost whispered.

“Just me and my imaginary friend,” Dead declared, facing the prisoner again. Ghost placed one transparent hand over his face and dropped his head. Antony stared at Dead for a moment.

“You really are from the asylum, aren’t you?” he decided, ending the silence.

Dead didn’t respond, shrugging off the question. Ghost was not so calm.

“Your imaginary friend?” Ghost blurted. “Now you’ve convinced him that you are insane. Do you think he’s really going to want to help you now?”

Dead ignored the spirit and looked at the cage. It was heavy set but old, forged in brittle iron. Unprepared to crawl back down the body chute to pick up the keys Dead grasped the door at a wide angle and wrenched back. It shuddered but stayed firm.

“Do you think that’s going to work?” both Antony and Ghost were asking.

Again he heaved, maintaining force until there was a screeching noise as the bolt slowly bent. With one more jerk the whole lock was ripped from the iron frame with a piercing snap.

“I’m impressed,” stated Antony. Dead wasn’t a massive man but he had the strength of one.

“Strong but stupid,” commented Ghost.

“I don’t see you coming up with any bright ideas.”

“Oh, I have, but what’s the point in sharing them with someone who wouldn’t listen,” Ghost replied.

“How about you talk to yourself in a minute mate?” Antony interrupted

“You sure you know the way outta here?”

“Trust me,” he allayed. “Any thief worth his weight in spit knows the ins and outs of old Ironwood. Hell, not more than a few doors down will we find a nice hidden mancover that will lead into the sewers. From there we’ll be able to get into Poor Man’s Quarter. Just get me out of here and I’ll show you.”

“If he’s such a great thief then why’s he locked up?” asked Ghost. Dead didn’t relay the question, striding to the little man and taking the shackles in both hands. The iron ring was a large cuff bolted down with an iron peg. Compared to the door it pulled apart with ease.

“I think I’ll call you Ox,” Antony announced, standing on stiff legs.

“It’s appropriate,” decided Ghost.

“About this imaginary friend of yours. Do you think you can keep him quiet until we’re out of this mess?” the old thief asked.

“Gladly.”

“Are you kidding me,” Ghost nearly shouted. “If it wasn’t for my guidance you’d probably still be trying to work out how to use the door handle in that autopsy room.”

“You heard the man, be quiet,” Dead said, large teeth flashing in his sardonic grin.

Ghost sulked.

Ghost thought they were travelling more down than up. Antony had ripped up a latrine and slipped down the slimy passage, landing in a half-washed out pool of shit. The toilet opened out into a cramped tunnel with a steady flow of water trickling by, tall enough for a person to crawl through. Dead followed the trail, dragging his body behind the old man who kept a brisk pace, at odds with his aging appearance. Ghost came last.

“This is nice,” Ghost choked, his complaint going unnoticed.

“We’ve got to follow the water, it should lead us into one of the old tunnels.” Antony’s voice trembled from the cold water splashing around his hands, knees and shins as he crawled along. The tunnel was rough hewn and at times restricted passage to a belly crawl. Together the trio carried on through pitch darkness. The sound of blasting water grew louder as they progressed, turning into a near deafening crescendo of constant pressure.

Antony shouted over his shoulder, to stop. “We’ve come to a major tunnel,” his voice carried over the din. “It must be pouring rain up top. We need to wait for the water to flush through and hope it stops raining. These tunnels become unusable during storms, anyone caught in them will be smashed to pieces.”

They lay sodden and cold, waiting for silence in the tunnel.

6

Heavy footsteps passed through the mansion hall, passing over polished marble floors. The sound was uneven, as if the feet had forgotten how to walk a straight line. A slight pause ended in a tremendous belch, the watchman returning to his patrol of the upper hallways. From the shadows peered a figure, invisible to most eyes and unthreatened by a drunken guard. Locke remained motionless, waiting for the drunk to pass.

Autumn saw many of the rich denizens of Ironwood leave the city in favour of estates nestled in the warmer climate of the plains. Many home watchmen, forced into rigid conduct for months due to their employer's presence, found themselves free of that stern authority and became lax in their duties. The guard of the merchantman Ingobold Grayson were one such example and presented an easy target for a thief with the right contacts.

However drunk a guard might be, they could still prove dangerous if they knew a thief was present. So it was that Locke waited until the footsteps receded, feeling comfortable enough to continue his job. Stepping out from the darkness he slunk along, minding places to hide if he were caught out. Servants would often move with the rest of the household to continue duties through the autumn and winter months but it was not uncommon that one or two would remain to preserve the house. Even at the late hour a servant returning from a nightly jaunt with a mistress or drinking session could spell the end of a job.

Locke avoided confrontation wherever possible. As one of the eldest and most experienced thieves in Ironwood he had learnt the best craft was to give no impression of an intruder. While some thieves preferred violence to stealth they tended to have short careers and found themselves permanent residents of Ritcave Prison or swinging on a rope. It had been many years since Locke had injured someone on a job, though he always carried a dagger in case there was no alternative.

No surprises came and Locke found himself at the end of a well-adorned hallway facing a large set of oak doors twice his size. They were gilded with a carved mural depicting the gods decay into Oblivion. The image depicted the three father gods of stone being dragged into the cosmos, pulling down lesser gods with them. It was a story that many preachers of El-Manati would retell in the streets to all that would listen. Despite the religious theme Locke doubted that Grayson was a pious man. Most likely he had bought the giant doors for their grandeur.

Locke had been hired to steal a particular piece of fine art from the merchant's house. From the information he had received, the twin doors were Grayson's grand entrance into his personal museum. Locke listened at the door, noting two guards in a conversation on the other side, discussing interrogation tactics. The men should have been guarding both sides of the door and Locke doubted they would spend all night chatting. He needed an alternative route.

Locke checked a side door that opened to a guest room, positioned close to the museum to show off Grayson's wealth. The room was unlit, though rich adornings twinkled under twilight and thick carpet muffled any footstep. There was a balcony door fastened by a simple key lock. The thief took out a set of lockpicks and slid them into the hole, a gentle hand pressing the tools. With a satisfying 'click' Locke set the tumblers into position and stepped outside.

A rain soaked night had made the slate balcony treacherous. Although there was no adjoining terrace from the museum, Locke had scouted three tall windows at the far end of the museum. He scaled up the outside wall using the wear of the grout from the large stone blocks as finger holds. It was a method of climbing that he had perfected through years of thievery and as a result his fingers were hardened claws. Even with experience it was not a feat he enjoyed in the wet and with a sigh he pulled himself onto the roof tiling. At close to a hundred feet from the hard cobblestones below, Locke made the precarious journey across the mansion's slanted roof, keeping close to the gutter in order to minimize any silhouette he might give.

From his vantage point Locke could see much of the Trader's Loop. Lights speckled in the windows of rich homes, many of which he had seen the inside of. For all his success as a thief, Locke was a victim of his own excess. Ironwood's winters were long with little work to occupy a man. Locke had developed a taste for gambling. Through the course of his career he had earned enough to settle down three times over in comfort. Yet the demon always raised its head, the urge to gamble a living being for him. He tore his eyes away from the far off lights with a sigh of regret. With a deep breath Locke refocused his attention to the job.

The guttering curved around in a slow arc as it met the end of the mansion. At the centre Locke leaned over and checked his position. He was correct in judgement, three windows marked the centre of the mansion. With measured grace, Locke lowered himself over the iron guttering and hung by one hand, the other searching for a finger hold in the stonework below. When he felt comfortable that his hand would not slip he reached out with the other and steadied himself. There was a sill set below the windows to stand on. The glass was divided into two sections, each designed to slide up and down. It was held by a simple lock that the thief disabled by sliding a thin blade between the panes.

The museum was laid out in a circular fashion, two large stone partitions acting as an inner circle. Various art hung from the walls, worth a coin in the right hands, but Locke would not bother with them tonight. On a pedestal was a fine jeweled tiara... his bounty. Rumour decreed the piece was a lost heirloom of the Faen dynasty, given to one princess or another as a bridal gift and passed down through generations. The Faens had been destroyed by the Reid's line and all markings of their dynasty were either destroyed or stolen. This particular piece was not so much valued for its political worth as for its pristine condition, surviving over four centuries.

At the far end of the museum Locke could hear an occasional grumble from a lone guard, his companion having left to watch the other side of the same door. The floor was polished marble and made sneaking a simple affair. Locke was dripping water though and if the guard walked a patrol he would notice the damp trail. The museum itself was unlit, expensive light settings too costly to run without an audience, creating dark space to hide in.

The tiara was locked via a chain to the podium. Using his picks, Locke tried to work out the setting of the tumblers on the complicated lock. It was slow work, each tumbler would reset if its neighbour faltered and the clicking noise was setting Locke on edge. Although he crouched so that a casual glance would not notice him, an alert guard would know where to look if they suspected an intruder. The final tumbler fell into place and the lock opened. With a slow hand Locke removed the tiara and placed it in his side pouch, replacing it with a cheap forgery. Retracing his steps, Locke passed back out the window.

The rain beat heavier, falling at an angle to douse the wall. He shut the window and reset the latch with a strong magnet before weighing up his options. It was a long way down and a hard climb. Although he carried rope he was loathe to rely on it. In his younger days he had made longer climbs and although he still had some vigour, he knew the rain was the true challenge. It was a gamble. If he used rope he would not be able to retrieve it, leaving a sign of his presence. Let less skilled and professional thieves give away their presence, he told himself. The reason he took the lucrative jobs was due to his reputation as the best thief in Ironwood. He lurched over the window rest and set down the treacherous descent, his fingers gritting against the worn wall.

He panted hard, resting in a thick bush for several moments before regaining his composure. The dismal night meant few patrols. The

garden of Ingobold Grayson was a moderate affair. Very little grew in the barren soil of Ironwood. Gardens were an expensive luxury as the heavy dirt had to be rafted up the river Milkweed, before passing through the mountains. Gardens were the property of the rich.

With a heave Locke dragged his tired, wet body from the bushes and left the estate. It was illegal to be on the streets in Trader's Loop after dark without permit. Rather than risking the watch's attention Locke chose safer passages running under the sector. The lowest levels of the city were the sewers, large tunnels that ran through the city, sending their waste out into the Milkweed. It was also the most dangerous level, susceptible to flooding in autumn. Higher levels offered several convenient tunnels for those who knew the paths and Locke was able to traverse the district through a series of rough passages and open areas that had resisted the crush of the city.

With less than an hour before dawn Locke reached Poor Man's Quarter, treading on home soil. He trotted a winding route, one last cautionary step lest he should be followed, before reaching the slim alleyway that his front door opened onto. Checking one final time that he was alone, Locke entered his apartment, ready to spend a few hours of day napping before an appointment with his fence.

7

The regent kissed his daughter, the slender child forming a smile as they met in the dining room. Two fires at either end served to thaw out the morning chill, a sweet smell of cooking deer fat wafting in from the kitchens. The morning table of Greenstone Keep was a place of meeting for many, filled not only with the regent's direct family and cousins, but also some nobles and wealthy merchants.

"I didn't think you would be joining us today," Haylee confided. "A quick morning in council?" Her father smiled with the eyes of a man who does not wish to burden his brood with the ills of the world.

"A quick morning," he admitted, scanning the dining faces. "Where's Damian and Ammba?"

Haylee turned, as if only realizing their absence.

"Ammba's off chasing boys, I think," she huffed.

“And Damian?”

“Ahh... I don’t know,” she stuttered, a terrible liar. Her father gave the look, an unsaid accusation drilling her down.

“Really?”

She gulped, hoping not to look obvious. “He might be up in the ruins again,” she admitted. “Don’t tell him I told you.”

Her father was not happy. Damian was adventurous but disobedient, too often seeking out troubles. “How were your lessons?” Ivan asked, changing subjects in the vain hope that his temper could be saved this morning. He spoke as he seated himself at the head of the table, his daughter on the left.

“Good... we’re still learning about trade partners.”

“An important subject... but what does Master Goldstring think about these recent battles in the north?”

“He hasn’t mentioned them... maybe he doesn’t think they are important.”

Ivan’s eyebrows shot up in surprise, he expected that the Master would have capitalized on the situation to explain the economics of Ironwood’s trade route, using an up-down model of step suppliers and how they could be disrupted by war. The routes were sorted into a type of chain, each link a ferrying point ruled by a different noble house, susceptible to disturbance. It was inefficient but established, created to handle shifts in terrain and provide wealth to the aristocracy through a burdensome tax system. If one point was destroyed the whole system broke down.

“Interesting,” he added, considering the option of having the teacher replaced.

Ammba strolled into the hall as they talked over their meal of smoked deer, creamed mushroom soup and root vegetables.

“I didn’t think you would make it,” Ivan said, indicating for her to sit to his right.

“I wasn’t hungry before,” she shrugged. “I am now.”

“We were discussing your brother, have you seen him?”

“Him? Not for a while. He’s hiding from you,” she was blunt and honest. Haylee passed a scowl across the table at her sister, the eldest sister too tied up in her own issues to care about her siblings’ games.

“Me? Why?” Ivan asked with wide palms.

“Why else? He was playing in the tower again with that urchin boy.”

“What urchin boy?” her father asked with a bemused face.

“She’s talking about Freddy,” Haylee interrupted, keeping her eyes pinned to Ammba.

Her father nodded.

“Let us not derogate our foreign peers in public, Ammba,” Ivan admonished.

“Dero-what?”

“He means, don’t put down others of a similar standing,” interrupted Goldstring. He had entered unannounced and approached with his standard leering grin.

“Master Goldstring,” Ivan announced, rising to shake hands. “We were not long discussing your lessons.”

“Hence why I am here.”

“Is there a problem?”

“It’s Damian I’m afraid. I am in your employ to educate the young boy, a task I will fail at if he does not show up to his lessons.”

The regent’s eyes narrowed. “I was not aware that he had been absent.”

“Alas, for some time now he has been shirking his books. I would have seen you sooner had I realised his persistence.”

There was a long silence as the regent bore his gaze down on the smaller man. “You did not think this important,” Ivan spoke through his teeth.

“I... Of course, but you are a busy man... and I...” the phrase was cut short with the cross of a backhand, slapping the aged man to the floor. Daughters, cousins, guards and servants watched as the stumpy man quivered before the regent, a pleading hand begging for clemency.

“Goldstring, I have no more use of your service. Remove yourself,” Ivan spat the words. A whimper peeped through the hall as the ex-educator considered a plea. The dark stare that pinned him down forfeited the idea. Eyes watched as the disgraced teacher was marched from the hall, a bowed head symbolic of his fall from hierarchy.

“Father,” Haylee moaned. “Master Goldstring was lovely.”

Ivan did not reply, sinking into his hide bound oak chair and nursing a cup of wine. He would have to find a new teacher, one more efficient than the last. Scanning the faces in the hall Ivan noted the stares. It was good, he thought, that he made his expectations known to them. Some faces were surprised, others amused. At the far end he noted Master Freeman still wearing his councilor’s sash along with a

smile of approval. It might be convenient, Ivan thought, to have the old man's nagging tone rid of his council for a time.

8

They lay for hours, waiting for the rushing torrent to slow. When it did Antony struggled to drag himself out. The tunnel opened into a larger channel. Curious blue stones littered the roof of the tunnel shedding a faint light, a respite from the pitch-dark passage they had left. The water turned waist high and ran strong, its source coming from many small tunnels such as the one they had left, all funnelling into one.

"I know where we are now," Antony managed to spit out between convulsions.

"You mean he didn't before?" Ghost wondered.

"You okay?" asked Dead.

"Sure. Not far now." It was a struggle for Antony to speak, each word coming slow and slurred. They continued wading through the stream until it broke out into a large aqueduct, flanked by a smooth stone walkway.

"Go upstream from here," Antony panted through white lips. His pace had slowed and Ghost saw that the old man would not make it through without help.

"Dead, carry him." Dead complied, scooping the old man in his arms. Antony spat out directions as needed.

They came to a well-hidden inlet carved into the wall, concealed by shadow in such a way that one could walk by without noticing it. It turned into a rough, hand carved tunnel, so narrow that Dead had to turn sideways to fit himself and Antony through at the same time. The tunnel itself ran in darkness, Antony held out his hands to the wall, feeling the way for Dead who, even if he had not been holding the old man, would not have been able to feel the rough edges of the walls with his nerveless fingers.

A faint light ahead greeted them as they turned a corner, a dim oil lamp almost as bright as a summer sun after spending so many hours

under the Earth. Ahead of them rose an iron ladder, half rusted and looking dangerous under the flickering light.

"One at a time," Antony wheezed. Dead tried to send him up first but the weak thief couldn't stand on the first rung.

"Looks like we go together," Dead stated. Antony was too exhausted to argue. Dead flung him over one shoulder and climbed the ladder, straining under the weight of the men, groaning in a loud complaint as if the pair had woken it from a long sleep.

The ladder did not speak when Ghost took his turn.

At the top another tunnel led to a series of intersections each lit by another lamp. Antony whispered the way and they came to an old steel door with a red horse, its paint flaking from age. Dead sat Antony on the uneven stones and knocked. No reply. Again he tried, his hand booming and shaking the door. He stood back as if readying to break it down when Antony stopped him.

"Booby trapped. Keep knocking."

The hammering continued and it took many minutes before Dead heard someone approach from the other side. An eye peered through a hole above the horse.

"Who'd you think you are?" came a threatening voice.

"Tell them we need help," Ghost said.

"We've got a sick man."

"So, what's that to me?"

"My name," Antony whispered.

Dead paused for a moment, he had forgotten the old man's name. Rather than asking him again he stooped over and picked up the old thief, holding him up to the door..

"God damn, Old Tony."

Several clicks announced the disarmament of whatever fearful contraption awaited anyone foolish enough to try and break in. The door swung open to show a tall gaunt-faced man in a serving apron.

"Bring him in," he ushered, shutting the door behind them.

Antony lay unconscious in one of four beds, his breathing shallow and weak, an iron coil element expelling warmth next to him. Its red coils looked ready to burst as they heated the room. Dead was entranced, he stared at the glowing metal as it seemed to grow ever more vibrant. Every now and then the heater would let off a sounding crack, as if the crude wiring inside was liable to burst into flames.

“So, you met in the cells?” The man had introduced himself as Jim, the proprietor of The Ilky Den, a quiet bar in an old part of the Poor Man’s Quarter. It was below ground level but well lit. “How did you get out?”

Dead’s face tugged at the question, struggling for an answer. His own memories of the prison and morgue were so clouded that he couldn’t even be sure they existed. There were no specifics in his memory, only flashes that whizzed through too fast to latch onto.

“A morgue,” he stuttered.

“What the hell are you telling him,” interrupted Ghost.

“I can’t remember,” Dead confessed, looking at Ghost. Jim watched Dead, growing anxious in the larger man’s presence.

“Tell him you were hit on the head,” Ghost ordered.

“I’m not feeling good. I got knocked around bad before.”

“Maybe you’d better sit down,” Jim said, nodding in the direction of a bed, his tone stern.

“I should be right,”

“You misunderstood,” Jim lashed out a single-chambered pistol and pointed it at Dead’s chest. “Sit down.”

“Just do it,” Ghost called. “You’re making him nervous.” Dead was reluctant, inching to the bed.

“I’m sorry to do this, but until I can get a clearer idea of your mess of a story then I’m not trusting you.” Dead glared, thinking he could take a bullet without worry, leaving him free to tear the skinny man apart. The muscles in Dead’s neck tightened as his primal urge to kill came back and threatened to eat up the slim helping of rationality that the zombie possessed..

“Hey,” yelled Ghost with all the authority a spirit could muster, enough to catch Dead’s attention. “What do you think you’re doing. Jim can help us.” Hearing the name out loud triggered a hint of a feeling in Dead’s mind and he fought to control his temper.

“I don’t like being threatened,” he said to all in the room.

“I’m not threatening you,” replied Jim with a cool voice. “But so far you’ve told me nothing that makes sense.”

Dead sighed, his shoulders sagged as the last of the anger faded away.

“I have no memory,” he confessed. “I don’t remember meeting Antony or escaping.” He looked at his clothes, wet and covered in dirt and human filth. “I don’t even know why I’m so dirty.” He spoke with an emotionless tone, betraying his insensitivity.

“Sounds like you’re in a spot of trouble then,” remarked Jim.

Ghost snorted. “What a master of perception he is.”

“It’s worse,” Dead continued. “I’ve got an annoying voice that keeps following me around.”

“Annoying? I’m the only thing that’s keeping your brain from leaking out your ears.”

Jim raised an eyebrow. “And what does this voice say.”

“He gives advice sometimes.”

“I can also remember things for you. Tell him that I’ll relay your story.”

Using Ghost, Dead retold their story. They missed certain details, such as the bungled autopsy. Jim relaxed a little but still frowned.

“You need some food and clothes,” he said.

“Just clothes,” Dead corrected.

“Then I’ll lend you some, it’s the least I can do. After all, you saved my father.”

The pistol was hidden away under Jim’s shirt, the slender weapon undetectable beneath the apron. Jim left to fetch clothes, leaving the dead men with the dying one.

9

The old plastered wall dripped with cracks, stained a sick yellow through years of smoke. The Ilky Den was a quiet pub secluded from the main street of Poor Man’s Quarter, a haven for those not wishing to be found. Locke sat at one table sipping ale and noting those in the pub, all thieves or other undesirable social class. Jim Caulfield owned the joint, a thin man profiting from the illegal goods ferried through his section of a series of smuggler tunnels. In one corner three men were playing cards with a healthy purse sitting on the table.

Heads turned for a moment as the door cracked. Ronny stepped in, a thick pelt cloak keeping the harsh autumn night at bay. For a moment he stood, searching faces through the acrid smoke. He moved to Locke’s table, taking a seat without word until the barmaid brought a drink.

“So... How’d it go?” Ronny asked in a soft voice not quite a whisper.

“As usual.” Locke pressed the cup to his lips taking less than a sip of the bitter drink. He disliked the Ilky Den, feeling it was a poor thieves hideout littered with the lower stations of his craft. Ronny insisted on the meeting place however. A successful fence who had made a good business by his perceived lack of association with Ironwood’s criminal element, Ronny worked in the house of Gerard Jacobmann, a wealthy merchantman whose dealings with the underworld were many and historied. The Ilky Den turned a blind eye to any transaction that might go on under its black stained tables, providing the pair a convenient place to meet.

“Got what you wanted,” Locke moved one hand under the table. There was a trade performed in a fluent motion that only the most discerning eye would notice. Even in The Den prudence always paid.

“What’re you going to do now?” asked Ronny.

“Take it easy, no more jobs for the year if I can help it.” Locke tasted his lips, a tick in the back his mind whispered to him.

“I’ve got something if you change your mind.”

Locke weighed his answer. He wanted a quiet winter, to relax, but the promise of reward was hard to deny and there was always that tugging want calling. “I might need it,” he admitted.

Ronny nodded, he knew Locke’s demon. With a pat on the shoulder he stood. Locke sank back into his chair, one hand on the heavy pouch. If he was smart it could last through winter and into spring. Locke stood, mourning the exit. With shoulders slumped he turned, walking to the far corner.

“I’m in,” he declared, tossing a coin into the pot.

They played the cards for hours. Locke’s pouch grew light. He had been winning, playing the table well and filling his bank. Greed overcame him though as he sought to take the full prize. His luck soon soured, as it so often did, and he felt the remorse of one who spends more than he can bear to lose. Across from him sat a face of scars wearing a nondescript jacket, cut from leather and buckled tight. He was grinning, a mound of coin dragged into his chest.

“One more boys?” he sneered.

Locke’s pouch held a couple of weeks’ wages left, enough to cover his rent but no more. It was all or nothing, he realised, cursing himself for the blunder. Locke was a great thief and shameful gambler. He

steadied for one more game when the back room opened. Jim entered, a concerned look scrawled on his face. Locke stayed his hand, watching as the proprietor whispered words into a few patrons' ears and strode to Locke.

"The Old Man's just been pulled in," he said in a sullen voice. "He's not looking good." Locke dragged at vague memories of his past. That name was a distant memory.

Jim straightened and addressed the bar, announcing it was closed for the night. "There's been an accident... I'd ask if you are not acquainted with the person that you leave and come back tomorrow."

Locke thought it a rare thing for paying customers to be turned out, questioning the sincerity in Jim's announcement. As many left, some unwilling, Locke sat and stared into his warm ale. He tried to drink, lips peeling at the bitterness, and pondered. It was going to be an interesting night he realised.

10

Damian squirmed on the rough floor, the thick blanket inadequate both as a mattress and to stop the stinging autumn night. His face was swollen and aching, the discomfort hindering sleep even without the hard floor and rain blowing in from outside. His plan to spend several days lost in the ruins was falling apart, the thought of a fire and warmed elk skin too tempting. He had spent the day away from Greenstone keep and his father, using his knowledge of the ruins to seek out the secret pockets that littered the wreck. No hunting party had come looking for him.

With one last failed bid to find comfort Damian stood, blood throbbing through his face and threatening tears. He had lost, he knew, and would have to face the wrath of his father. Feeling the full shame of his act Damian gathered his skin blanket and wound his way through the ruins. It was a half moon, the twilight enough to illuminate the way even through the downpour. Damian stepped softly as he descended split steps and leaning towers, careful not to slip on the hard slate.

He reached a level floor, not far from his point of entry, when he froze. He was standing in an old guest room, the east wall having collapsed in one of Ironwood's violent storms. A figure was supplanted against the night sky, looking out to Greenstone castle. He was not far from Damian, a shadowed man with his back turned. Looking into the ruins from outside would net no evidence of the figure, hidden in shadow and rain. It was only from Damian's view that he was silhouetted against the night, the moon peering down across his back.

Damian froze, unaware of the man's intentions. The mysterious figure stood like a statute, patient and disciplined, watching the patrols of the shadowy citadel guards below. With a shaking hand Damian braced himself against hard stone as he slunk backwards, careful not to scrap his feet or touch loose rubble.

The man was too raptured to notice the quiet figure slip around a corner. Damian knew he had to reach the castle fast, the memory of his uncle's murder still retained. With his exit blocked Damian sought a second. He found a latrine tunnel, the one played in earlier, and snuck through the walls, passing the sentry. He made it into another broken room, its wall missing too. He calculated that the spy was in the room to his right and moved to the edge with stealth, crawling over the lip on his belly. He swung around and hung by his hands, slipping on the wet slate. The scabs on his palms tore and he sought in desperation for a foothold. Finding a rickety piece of masonry he swung round and pushed off with his feet, landing hard. The loose brick came away from the disruption, falling into the courtyard below and striking stone. The echoed crack rose over the pound of rain and Damian rushed to a shadow, lying still.

If the figure was perturbed then Damian never knew. No further disturbance came and as Damian's heart slowed he braved another move. Pushing up, he snuck into a corridor, the tiles jagged and threatening. Damian kept low and sought the old stairwell, a spiral set that caved in half way up. It was the only means of reaching the ground floor, the broken stones a risk in the dark.

This was the moment, Damian thought. If the stranger were to wait for him then the stairwell was the perfect bottleneck. Fearing a blade, Damian pressed close to the walls, listening for any signs that someone waited below. Damian's pulse beat so hard in his ears that he struggled to hear anything else. Damian inched out, eyes wide like a

rabbit searching desperately for a predator in the shadows, expecting to die on the steps.

No fatal blow came and Damian assumed that the figure must still be waiting at his post overhead. Sneaking now with more pace than caution, Damian reached the front gate that led into the abandoned courtyard. Without any other route to Greenstone, Damian was sure the stranger would see him crossing the open space. The frightened boy snuck around the edges, hoping that he could blend in among the sprawled stonework and twisted metal ruins. As he crawled on his belly, face bleeding, Damian expected to feel a shot in the back. A grey slurry of ash and rain smeared the regent's son as he pushed on.

Damian stared across the yard at the gate which led to Greenstone's courtyard. From here Damian knew it was simple, the low wall an easy challenge for the daring climber. With one last surge of fear he stood and ran to the point, bounding off a wet granite block and slipping over the brickwork. On the other side he rushed to the main gate, encountering a passing watchman before he could get there.

"Hold," came the disheveled cry, a steel barrel pointing his direction. The firearm was sodden and useless.

"Don't, it's me... Damian Steward." The barrel lowered an inch.

"What do you think you're doing?" came an angry voice.

"There's a man... in the ruins." The guard looked at the boy, unsure whether to believe him. As he stepped closer, a shuttered coal lamp lighting Damian's face, he saw fear through the blood and filth.

"Get to the keep... Tell the Guard Master that I'm having a look."

"He was up in the third floor, south and east side, looking out at the castle," Damian added, scurrying away. The guard turned and hurried to the gate, fumbling with a set of keys, his off hand wrapped tight around his musket.

"Well we didn't find anyone up there," stated Guard Master Bryce Hommel. "Not that that's to say someone wasn't lurking about," he added looking at the scared boy resting a head on his father's arm, a dark green paste applied fresh to his cuts and thick towel around his shoulders.

"If what Damian tells is true, this fellow may have taken off at the first sign of trouble. It is still a death penalty to be on royal property without warrant," Ivan said.

“Unfortunately we can’t take any chances my lord,” Bryce warned, pressing white hands against a coal burner. “I would not like to see a third regent pass in so many years.”

“Then do what’s necessary so you don’t,” Freeman spoke. He had risen at the sounds of alarm and sought out the problem.

“Of course. I will run more patrol guards and vary their routes.”

“What else can be done?” asked the old man, looking concerned.

“It depends on how much you can spend,” answered Bryce. “Setting up lights around the perimeter would make it difficult for anyone to approach without detection... or better still, a moat. That’s what they’ve put up over in the Grand Temple and it works.”

“Except the church has money and we don’t,” Ivan mused. “I will have to consort with the nobles on the issue. If they see the value in it then they will be happy to pay for a security increase. Either way, I can’t make amendments to the citadel myself under their decree, my station is purely foreign.”

“A crime in itself,” stated Freeman.

Bryce raised an eyebrow at the comment. “These are not my concerns,” he admitted. “But if you cannot afford to spend what’s required then I cannot guarantee your security. There are things about this castle that should have been fixed years ago. A light perimeter might have saved at least one of your brothers’ deaths. I suggest you insist that your security budget be expanded my lord. It would be for the best.” The Guard Master left.

“He has a point,” noted Freeman. “The nobles should have raised the security budget after the death of Felix.”

“Well, they didn’t and there is little we can do about it tonight,” Ivan fumed. He looked at his son face puffed and congealed. “As for you, you’re lucky to be alive.” Damian raised his head and tried to apologise, his mouth opening and shutting without a word. “I thought I forbid you from entering that place. If I cannot appeal to your common sense then I will appeal to other ideals. You are not to leave the grounds with Fredrick until I am certain you can behave and start going to classes.” There was no complaint. “I have selected Master Freeman to be your new tutor, he will replace Goldstring.”

Freeman was surprised. “My lord,” he began.

“No need to thank me Master,” Interrupted Ivan. “I feel that you will do a better task in teaching my son than the previous man.”

“But lord, the councillorship.”

“You will still be a councilor, do not fret. I will continue to use you, if in a more personal manner.” The old man was not happy, teaching the children meant exclusion from council meetings.

“How am I supposed to argue against my peers?” he begged.

“Read the notes,” Ivan shrugged. The master was silent, unwilling to create a scene before the child.

“As you wish my lord,” he conceded. “It will be an honour to mentor Damian, Ammba and Haylee.” A smile was forced. Ivan noted it and dismissed him, standing his son up and examining the mess on his face.

“So, you fell?” Damian nodded, too frightened to speak lest he betray the lie. “You’re lucky. My father would have had Fredrick hung and quartered for that stunt.”

“But Dad, Fredrick had nothing to do with it,” Damian pleaded. Ivan tilted his head sideways to say he knew.

“Tomorrow you will restart your lessons. Master Freeman will be reporting to me weekly with your progress. If I am unhappy then I will mark Ammba my heir and send Fredrick home, is that understood?” Damian nodded. Ivan kissed Damian’s forehead, tasting the rancid poultice applied to it, sending him to bed. It would be a long day he decided, little comfort in returning to a cold bed for an hour of sleep. He wound himself in a thick greatcoat and sought the ramparts, watching a new dawn over Ironwood.

11

A solemn mood hung in the air at The Ilky Den. Many regulars had been turfed out for the night, sent to crawl through the rain soaked streets for another place to drown themselves. Those who remained were considered close friends of the old man and family. Some approached Dead to express their thanks while others were silent, going out back to pay respects then you in the share a quiet drink. News of Antony’s health had spread through the rumour network that existed to provide valuable information for the working criminals.

Ghost wandered through the crowd trying to eavesdrop on the milling throng. The constant din of the bar found its way into Ghost’s

head. Despite how hard he might concentrate the ghost found that he could not concentrate on a single conversation in the bar. Occasionally he would pick up the odd word or two jumping out from the unintelligible raucous but they came so disjointed and garbled that he felt overwhelmed by his own auditory senses.

Dead spent the time nestled in a corner, nursing the same tankard of beer he had two hours before. As promised, Jim had supplied new clothes. They were plain pants and a shirt, the craftsmanship poor. Dead had washed himself from a makeshift shower in a back room that collected rainwater. He looked more presentable with the knots in his hair straightened and the stains removed but his skin still had a leather-like texture that hinted at his deceasment. Either people did not notice this or they were too polite to mention it to his face.

“That fellow’s been staring at you for a while,” Ghost muttered, tired and frazzled, returning to his companion’s corner. He pointed across the bar, through a weaving heave of moving bodies, to a solitary figure with short, dyed black hair. Dead rose, weary of sitting still, the fibres in his legs twitching.

“What are you doing?” Ghost hissed.

Dead didn’t reply, he walked over to the man and looked down at him. “What do you want?” Dead demanded.

The man peered up, slight bemusement on his face.

“I have been studying you,” he admitted with a strong wooden voice. “I was unaware you were doing the same to me. Tell me your name.”

“I don’t have one.” Dead stood with arms crossed.

“Nor do I. People call me Locke so that will suffice. Sit.”

Dead was unsure why he followed the command but the man held sway over him, as if there was an unforeseen connection between the two.

“Do I look familiar?” Dead asked. Locke stared deep into his face, studying the hard skin and diluted eyes, the grey tone of his flesh betraying no warmth.

“You don’t,” he conceded. “You have a remarkable face that I would not easily forget, though I wonder why you ask.”

“Trying to put together a puzzle is all.”

“Which puzzle is this?” Locke asked in that deep voice, a sincere interest in his voice.

“Memory,” Dead gave after some consideration. “That is, my memory. I don’t have one.”

“Memory? That’s in your head. You would need a brain surgeon for that I’d suggest. Not many of those around the quarter. I hear the church have a couple, though I doubt they operate on the living.”

Dead considered a response to this. Wondering what Locke’s reaction would be if he brought him into the confidence that Dead himself was not part of the living.

“Don’t do it,” Ghost spoke deep into Dead’s ear, hanging just behind his right shoulder and anticipating his companion’s response. Dead swatted out a hand as if an imaginary fly had flown too close. Ghost gave out a disheveled cry that was ignored by everyone as he fell back, unable to retaliate.

“Why were you watching me?” Dead asked Locke, changing the subject.

“You brought my father here,” Locked admitted with a terse sadness in his voice. His face had hardened.

“Someone else was his son too,” Dead remembered, trying to recall a name over the scattered remains of his memory.

“It was Jim,” Ghost noted, returning to Dead with a scowl, this time hanging back a little.

“I’d have a lot of brothers... and sisters, if half the stories were true about that old man.” Locke told him. “Truth is I didn’t care much for him. He was a half decent thief ready to show his children the ropes but that didn’t make him a good man. In the end I guess you should say goodbye if the chance is there.” Locke trailed away with the thoughts of a man who was reminded of some deeper tragedy. Dead looked at him for a moment, thinking that the conversation was over. The noise in the bar increased, a steady stream of patrons arriving to show respects.

Locke came back to the present and pressed Dead once more.

“There’s a woman who lives in this quarter,” he said. “Oria Blumstone, an old woman who’s pretty good with herbs and whatnot. Rumours say that she worked in the Patriarcht’s household once, before you or I were born. Anyway, she’s good at fixing the sick, maybe with luck she’d know something that could help your predicament.”

“Where would I find this woman?” Dead asked without hope. It was slim, considering the severity of his loss, that any herbal remedy

would help but Dead felt it a better option than watching the living mourn. Locke gave directions. The woman lived across the quarter.

“She’ll be working now, or preparing some concoction. I doubt she ever sleeps,” Locke finished, holding out a hand as Dead stood. The zombie took the thief’s hand, looking like a child’s in comparison, and gave a couple of rough shakes before letting go.

Dead and Ghost made their way to the exit, weaving through the swelling crowd of men, women and children. Some were crying, some laughing while others reminisced. Dead felt no connection with them, as if he were an emotionless rock. To him they were nothing more than casks, pulsating bundles of warm meat. Inside him there was a constant urge to snap and attack the nearest person, indiscriminate and violent. It was a feeling that pervaded each meeting he had had since waking in the morgue. Although subtle, Dead thought of this urge like a seed. The more he would feed it the more that urge would grow, until he became nothing more than the mindless thrashing monster that had attacked him in the morgue. Ghost was his anchor, though he would not admit it, and it was through this point of strength that he knew feeding the urge would only lead to his ultimate demise. They stepped outside.

The rain was bitter cold against mortal skin. To a dead man’s flesh the weather was no discomfort, just a steady beat tapping on broad shoulders. Ghost didn’t appreciate the rain, it passed through him without pause, making him feel queasy.

“Hurry up,” Ghost yelled over the violent din, the tin roofs that lined many of the poor houses making it near impossible to be heard. Occasional street lamps marked the walkways of Ironwood though few emitted light. Although it was late night and pouring rain the streets were not empty. Most people they passed wore heavy cloaks concealing their identity. Some sized up Dead though it was apparent that he carried nothing of wealth. Dead ignored them back.

“God damn I hate this city,” bewailed Ghost. “It’s near pitch out here and we can’t see a thing.”

“Did you say something?” Dead yelled, turning around.

“Yeah. We should go back to the Den. Wait till day.” Dead turned back, looking into the vast blackness. The quarter was huge, made up of a myriad of slum blocks packed together. Ghost saw potential to get lost where Dead did not.

“Stop whining,” called Dead. “Nothing bad will happen.”

Ghost pouted, following Dead's trudging husk. At times Dead would turn to get directions from Ghost who had memorized the route, though both wondered just how accurate they were.

The long march continued. Ghost noted that within Poor Man's Quarter there was an even poorer section. Whereas there were street lamps and tarred streets when they set out, they found themselves now walking on a sludged up slurry of oil, ash and gravel roads, the slippery mess making it difficult to walk upright..

"This can't be right." Ghost shouted. Dead didn't reply. "I think we should go this way," once again ignored. "Dead... DEAD." Ghost stepped out in front, waving his arms. He gasped. Dead's eyes had rolled back and his mouth was hanging open. He looked like a true zombie. With no way of seeing, Dead was walking through the city unguided.

"DEAD," yelled Ghost again. It was no good, whatever force that was driving him would not be interrupted by a phantom. Dead was a zombie, without apparent aim or desire, stumbling through the rain. Ghost followed with the slow pace, trying to work out the cause of Dead's mood.

They trundled for a long time. The first touch of morning light peered through the steady rain. The bogged pathway turned back into tarred streets. Makeshift slum tin huts were replaced by stonewall slum houses. There was the occasional street lamp that tried to work, sputtering light out into a thick blanket of night. Dead still tranced.

They came to a walled section with wrought iron gates hanging loose by the front. Thousands of bricks lined the walls and ground beyond. Some bricks were old and covered in moss, others new and clean. Each one held a name. Some mentioned loved ones, treasured moments or circumstances of death. Some were finely crafted and decorated, others plain.

With sudden clarity Ghost understood that each brick symbolized someone's death and that they stood in a cemetery. Corpses could not be buried in Ironwood due to the threat of reanimation, yet there was still a need for people to remember their loved ones. How Dead could know where his brick was didn't enter Ghost's mind, he just saw a single-minded determination to find it. Ghost looked around his feet at the wealth of stones. Maybe his was there too, though without a guiding instinct he knew he wouldn't find it. There were tens of thousands and Ghost was unsure how long he had been deceased for.

Dead didn't survey the bricks, his eyes were still rolled to the back of his skull. Pure instinct and a faint scent of memory were guiding him with no trace of thought. As they wound through the maze of masonry Ghost noted that the bricks aged, more moss covered them and many were worn away to reveal blank stones.

They came to a step, a new layer of bricks built over the top of old bricks. No wear or plant touched them. Dead lunged, a force tugging at him. He trod over the names of the deceased until he reached his target, crashing down on his knees.

*Cynthia Bernhart,
Mother of Phelicity and Victoria
Sleep in sanctuary*

Within his mind Dead felt a rush of memories flooding him. He saw the face of a woman, beautiful yet plain. He could see the details of her face, slight lines and fine hair. It was perfect for a moment, but the image faded fast. Dead couldn't hold onto it and it slipped through the gaps in his memory.

Dead's eyes rolled forward and he looked at the brick. A desperate howl was bounding in his head. It was a cry for familiarity, to seek out his history. Cynthia Bernhart was part of a puzzle, a single piece that itched his mind. Within the slow confines of his brain Dead knew that he must discover his own identity if he were to find peace.

With a violent thrust Dead rammed his fingers down, pushing into the mortar that framed the stone. Tearing fingers worked hard around the brick until they took hold. With a strong, sustained heave the brick came out. Dead knelt with it in his lap, the rain bouncing off his bowed back.

"Who was she?" Ghost asked, fascinated by the discovery.

"I don't know," Dead replied with almost a hint of sadness, turning the brick over. "But I know she's important to me."

Dead turned the brick over in his hands as if there might be some secret hidden on the underside of it. Aside from the etched names there was nothing remarkable about the brown thing. Dead returned to the name. Who was Cynthia Bernhart? A mother? Lover? A child?

"How old am I?" Dead asked, turning up.

"I don't know," Ghost answered, a confused smirk on his face. "I don't even know your name."

“How old do I look then?” Dead repeated.

“You’re not old.”

“Do I look old enough to have grandchildren?”

“I’d say so. Your face isn’t exactly in top condition but I would say you are at least thirty. Was this your daughter?” Ghost indicated to the brick.

“I don’t know,” Dead admitted. “If my head wasn’t so full of clouds I might be able to remember. I can only guess who she was.”

“You going to carry that brick around with us?” Ghost asked.

“We’re going back to the bar... I remember tattoos.”

Ghost nodded, he did too.

12

Ammba sat under a twisted apple tree, its fruit too bitter for most. In one hand she held a romance novel, enraptured by its story. The quiet walkway ran off the courtyard, sounds of training soldiers the only thing to mar the tranquility in the small garden. Ammba did not see Thomas Longshore approach until he was upon her.

“Another day spent training?” Ammba asked, placing her novel on her lap.

Thomas nodded, sweat dripping down off his chin.

“Everyday,” he admitted, sitting next to her.

“What are you doing?”

“Just thought I’d better acquaint myself.” His tone was weighed with arrogance.

“You’re well enough acquainted,” she stabbed. “Plus you stink.”

“Hard work brings that,” he smiled. “If you’d prefer I can go bathe then sit with you.”

“That won’t be needed.”

“I didn’t think it would bother you.”

“It does, but I’m not interested in talking with you.”

Thomas looked hurt.

“Is there something wrong?” he probed with open palms.

She stared him down, her delicate features furled up.

"I've seen you Thomas Longshore, gallivanting around with those flower girls. You're no gentleman."

"Hey... they're no flower girls... they're noble ladies, important... and stuff."

Ammba's face lit up with venomous sarcasm.

"And stuff? I see your tongue is decidedly slower than your sword arm. You do realise that swords are obsolete."

"They will never be obsolete," Thomas stated, half-offended.

"What can a sword do against gunpowder?" she asked, seeing a raw nerve.

"Not much," he admitted. "But firearms are illegal."

"Only for peasants. And I hear the crime fathers think otherwise."

"But there's less chance of coming across one than all that. Commoners are still allowed to carry blades, if you were attacked I would have a much better chance at defending you." He reached over and took an apple lying in the tough grass, biting into the acidic fruit.

"I think I'll rely on my musket thank you," she said, producing a fine-crafted weapon from her purse.

"One shot," he declared. "That's all you get... one shot."

Ammba did not reply, she was growing bored of the talk, her gaze trailing off while Thomas tried to continue the discussion.

"Can I ask you something?" he said, noting her lapse. He received a nod, her blonde hair streaming over a narrow shoulder. "Why do you ignore me?"

"Excuse me?" she felt confronted.

"You ignore me... like at the festival dance a while back, you wouldn't look my way that night. And the other day when I waved at you."

Ammba struggled to answer. In her mind she knew why, she had wanted to test him, to see how he would react to a cold shoulder. Most men were too weak-spined to approach her. Cautious suitors, afraid of fooling themselves, had always sent messengers to accost her. Thomas was different to the casual rank of suitors that besieged her, he was not an ordinary noble or ugly cousin. He was her ideal, handsome enough by far and as a close cousin also a candidate for marriage.

"Let's just say that I don't like being forward," she told him.

"Then you must hate this right now," he smiled. He wasn't a great speaker she noted, his tone bordering on the naïve. Ammba wondered at his upbringing. He was of elite stock, part of a traditionalist family who sought to maintain old ways. For one of them he did not carry

their dialect, preferring to talk in the fashion of the guard's tongue, a rough and blunt way of wording.

Ammba placed her book aside. With a flick of hair she began asking Thomas questions, drilling him about his upbringing and family name. She knew most of the answers but tried to look interested as he droned on, assessing the way he spoke and held himself. He was confident enough, though bordering on cocky, and possessed little wit to back up that confidence.

"Where do you see yourself in five years time?" she asked.

He looked her over and smiled.

"Wed with children, continuing my family's name and serving the state."

"You have no interest in seeing the world?" Ammba asked, stifling a groan.

"My place is here," he shrugged. "Carrying on the family lineage, not seeking adventure in border towns or getting lost in the capital cities."

"Most men your age talk endlessly about those things, I expected you to be the same."

He puffed his chest up, thinking it a compliment.

"I have been told that I am wise past my years." She laughed, a gentle tickle that confused the man. "What?"

"It's nothing, I just think young men shouldn't be worrying about wisdom. To be honest, you sound a little like my father."

Thomas was lost, unsure whether he was being praised or insulted.

"Well, what about you... where will you be in five years time?"

"Not here," she smiled. "I may be the regent's eldest but I am not simple enough to think I'm the heir. My father shows favour to Damian, not that I envy him. I'd prefer to seek out adventure before I turn into one of those old crones nursing babes in the citadel and washing laundry."

"I hardly think you'd end up like that," Thomas told her, surprised at Ammba's desire to leave the city. "Don't you feel compelled to stay within your father's service?"

"Hardly. There's an entire world to explore. Tell me Thomas, how far out of the city walls have you travelled?"

"To the Highlands," he shrugged. "My family has a manor there."

"Well the regent and his family don't leave the city during winter. We stay here, in the frozen waste. I was born in the Imperial Capital

and spent my first years growing up there. I wish to return to that place, to be free of Ironwood for a time.”

A thought occurred to Thomas, excited to have one.

“Why don’t you travel with us this winter? My family would love to have your presence and I’m sure your father wouldn’t mind.” He showed genuine hope at the idea.

“No thanks,” she let him down. The idea of spending three months or more with the Longshores did not interest her.

“But you’d get out of the city,” he insisted with an almost child-like voice, reminding her of a spoilt adolescent used to getting its own way. She shook her head. “But it would be great,” he continued. “I could take you hunting. Have you tried fresh buffalo before?” She was coming to the realization that not only was he slow he was also annoying.

“I wouldn’t want to spend the time with you. I’m sorry.”

He looked hurt, unsure why she had said such things.

“Why?”

“Because Longshore, you have just proven to me that you lack wit and grace. I’m finding your presence tiresome as it is. If you will excuse me.”

She grabbed her novel and stood, leaving him alone in the garden.

“Fickle bitch,” Thomas muttered to himself, throwing his apple into the gutter.

13

“You’re not much of a bleeder are you,” stated Craig Greytongue, a tattooist by trade. He ran a sharpened blade across Dead’s inner forearm, marking out the lines for the tattoo. Once the lines were dug he would then smear black ink into the wound. It was a primitive method of tattooing, fast and cheap, often practised in the poorer areas of the city.

Dead watched as the blade cut his skin. It nerved him, prodding that urge he had suppressed. Sitting still while Craig continued to slice him was setting Dead on edge, as if each new cut was pushing him to

retaliate and cut Craig back. A thin strand of reasoning, backed up by Ghost's presence, restrained him from doing so.

They were in a small apartment, knives, ink jars and assorted instruments hung from a nearby wall. There were no windows and the room was lit by a hanging light that buzzed and flickered. There were two doors attached to the room, one leading to the streets, the other leading back into Craig's home.

"Most people bleed a fair bit. Unusual to see someone not," Craig continued. Aside from some clear fluid that seeped from the cuts Dead's body did not react.

"Bit hard to bleed when your blood has stopped running," said Ghost.

There had been odd stares when Dead had returned to The Ilky Den with the brick the previous night but no one recognised the name. Dead had sought through the throng of bodies for the man with the tattoos. Craig was a local flesh artist and close friend of Antony, offering his services to Dead free of charge. Dead and Ghost had spent the rest of the night at the bar, sleepless till morning.

"So, you know this woman?" Craig asked.

"I do," replied Dead. "I just can't remember her."

"But she's important to you?"

"Yes." Dead was certain.

"You know, if you had enough money you could always get a name search done over at the census building."

"Where's that?" Dead asked, his ears pricking up.

"Central Ironwood, a fair hike from here. All the administration stuff goes on over there. Anyway, take enough money and they'll tell you about anyone."

"Ask for directions," Ghost instructed. Until he was able to discover something about himself Ghost was resigned to following Dead.

"Well, the best way would be to take the old steamer that runs along the south wall and snakes its way through the main of Ironwood. Runs twice a day. Of course, you'd need to pay for that too. I hear they're none too nice to freeloaders."

"A train?" Dead asked. It stirred some memory within him. He knew what one was.

"Yeah, you know, those big ugly things that run around tracks. They dig out so much coal from the mines that they might as well use it. Jump on one and you'll eventually get to where you're after."

Craig finished the cutting, a mimic of Dead's brick. With a thick-haired brush dipped into a jar of black ink Craig set to working the dye into the freshly cut skin.

"You know, Jim said you're an escapee of some sort. Can't say it bothers me but if you're going to survive then you might want to think about money."

"How's that?" asked Dead.

"You know, get some cash together. You won't get too many freebies around here."

"Where can I get some money?"

Craig stopped to think for a moment.

"There's usually work going in the mines or the watch. They're always looking for new people to come in. They pay well though it's risky work. If you want something safer then try factory work. Of course the pay isn't as good." Craig smeared more ink into Dead's fresh cut, the dye dripping down the forearm. "Of course, you could just do what everyone else around here does and steal."

Dead looked at him, half interested. "Anyone in particular I should be stealing from?"

"Not really mate. You won't find too much wealth in this quarter. Your best bet would be Trader's Loop, or if you're really good, up in the Lord's Quarters. Of course, you'd be dodging watchmen left and right. Don't know if I'd be going that route myself."

"I really don't think you have the grace to be a thief," Ghost noted. "You have enough trouble walking in a straight line, let alone jumping across rooftops."

"You got any better ideas?" Dead asked the spirit, patience short.

Craig thought the question was directed at him, raising an eyebrow at the change in Dead's tone.

"Odd jobs I guess. Always someone who wants something done in this city." The tattooist applied a clear ointment to the work, designed to help the healing process and stop leakage.

"What about tattooing? Much money in that?"

Craig seemed taken back.

"There's some I guess, though it takes a long time before anyone will trust you to cut them up."

"Don't worry," Dead smiled. "I wasn't planning on earning their trust."

An open palm flashed across Craig's face with force, sending him to the ground, ink jars following. Dead towered over the smaller man, sprawled out and stunned.

"You bastard. I helped you."

"Maybe," Dead reached down, twisting a thick hand around Craig's shirt front and drawing him up. With his free hand he slammed a fist into Craig's stomach. The artist retched, last night's drinks gushing up over Dead's arm and onto the rough floor. Somewhere deep in the back of his mind Dead could hear Ghost crying for reason. Now was not the time to listen to that voice.

"I don't like it when people hurt me," Dead spat, pointing to the fresh cuts across his arm.

"What?" choked Craig. "You asked." He was helpless in the larger man's grip.

Dead didn't hear, he threw the man to the ground like a child throwing a toy in tantrum. Dead pressed one knee hard into Craig's chest stifling a scream. The cutting knife was in Dead's hand, the blade slicing in behind Craig's windpipe. Dead pulled it back to sever the airway. In his death throes Craig clawed at Dead's face, running nails down leather skin. Blood filled the room, painting the walls as it pumped from an open artery. Ghost screamed a single syllable.

"You're not much of a bleeder," stated Dead, pausing himself in confusion the moment he said it. The sentence was an enigma to him. Was it something he had once heard?

Ghost ended his wail and sat with head in hands, waiting for Craig's final convulsions to end.

"You know no reason," he sobbed, looking up with cold eyes.

"I'm just doing what he suggested," Dead had recovered from his own confusion, speaking to Ghost in that hard voice.

"Which was?" Another sob.

"Take money from other people. We need it, he has it."

"You don't find it disturbing that you've just killed someone who wanted to help?"

"Was he? I don't remember." Dead paused a moment, that urge had grown from a seed, spreading dark roots out through the working parts of his brain. "I don't care either. What was he to me? Nothing. Just another bit of meat in my way."

"What are you talking about?" Ghost yelled. "He was helping us. He had friends, a family. You've murdered him for no reason. You piece of shit."

“Piss off,” Dead growled back. “You can’t stop me. You’re nothing but a spirit. Maybe you don’t even exist. What are you going to do? I’m the one making the choices. I’m the one that takes action. If you don’t like it then fuck off.”

Ghost bowed his head.

“If you continue to act like this then you will have the watch after you. You will never find out who you are. Is that what you want?”

Dead stood quiet for a long time.

“No,” he admitted, his voice lower.

Dead prevented more conversation by moving into the back rooms to search for coin.

14

“Poor Master Goldstring lost his job because of Damian,” complained Haylee. Her mother lay propped up in bed. She was frail, a light gown showing off the gaunt ribs and thin limbs underneath. Haylee combed her mother’s hair, grey and oily, removing knots and flattening it out against the woman’s clammy skull.

“When was this?” croaked Kayla, the words difficult.

“Last night. Didn’t father tell you?”

Kayla smiled, betrayed by sad eyes. Ivan had not come to her in a week, too busy with council and politics. Each visit was harder for the regent to bear. He was distancing himself, ready for the time that she must die. A horde of doctors, herbalists and surgeons had swept through her chamber over the years, each providing different opinions and medications. No formula worked to cure her illness and over time her despair had given away to acceptance.

“He didn’t mention it,” she replied, breathing heavy.

“Well he should have. Master Goldstring was an excellent teacher. It’s not his fault that Damian skips class.”

Kayla turned a weak head. “What has your brother been doing?”

Damian visited his mother every few days, their time together somber and uncomfortable, her questions returned in one-word answers.

“Being a fool, like usual,” Haylee’s reply made Kayla smile. “Playing in the ruins and thinking he’s some great warrior. Ammba thinks that father will make him heir.”

Kayla looked up at her youngest daughter with those sad eyes.

“What do you think?” she wheezed.

“I don’t care... If Ammba becomes regent she’ll fill the court with boys.” Her mother convulsed with a tiny fit of laughter, black spittle rising to her mouth. Haylee held a cloth, catching the filthy bile.

“What would you do as regent?” came an exhausted breath as the convulsion settled.

“Promote Master Goldstring for one. Make the nobles have fairness of passage like the regency is supposed to,” she was referring to the point that nobles still passed their estates through the eldest male heir. “Re-instate the Patriarcht’s Day Parade.”

“Why would you do that?” Kayla asked, suddenly perplexed.

“Because I think he deserves it. He is our founding father, I think it a shame that we have forgotten him.”

“No one has forgotten him. He is not a man that should be celebrated.”

“But he’s over a thousand years old. He founded Ironwood.”

“Is this what you have been taught?”

“Yes, Master Goldstring told me about the history of the Patriarcht’s office... why?”

“The Patriarcht is not the noble figurehead that history books tell us... He is twisted and dangerous, reviled among the church and nobles alike... He is only kept in station because of the twisted words of a prophet.”

“The prophecies?” Haylee asked, unaware that there was a different story to the one Goldstring had retold. Kayla was too exhausted to continue, struggling to keep her eyes open.

“Your father knows,” she whispered, falling back exhausted. Haylee watched, a tear rolling across her tender cheek. Her mother meant more to her than anyone else, the last haven of security for the middle-born child. No doctor could predict how much time Kayla had left. Some would say a week, others a year. With fingers running along a clammy hand, Haylee closed her eyes and wished for a year.

Callis Ipsum ran a calloused finger across the carved oak armrest, a faint layer of ash streaking clean. Even in the most holy places of the city, he thought, one could not escape the polluting smokes that swirled in the autumn winds. His bitterness for the city had grown strong, forming in tandem with his rise through the knighthood of El-Manate. Two years past he had been sworn in as Ihn-Manati, highest select knight to Ea-Manati, the official god of Ironwood. The church was divided into six factions, stemming from the twisted and confusing lore that the god, 'Ea-Manati,' was formed.

Callis was a member of the Aea-Baeni, a minor faction within the church. Since his inception into the church he had maintained a fascination with the god's primordial creation tale. They worshipped the earliest incarnation of the god, the raging destroyer, fighting other gods and rending the earth. Within the church they were the least popular of the factions, receiving a tenth of the members that the major parties held. Even the other minor factions, the Ea-Eaedit, 'The Artists of Manati' and Ide-Eldeni, 'Chosen Singers of Manati,' held more members. It concerned the knight that he had inherited such a weak faction.

Callis drummed dull fingers to the beat of an armrest, watching the empty throne that stood astride his. Gustus was often tardy, the old man slow and rigid, spending more time chatting on the rounded steps of the Grand Tower that plying his command within it. It infuriated Callis that he shared power with the inefficient old man, lacking his own ambition.

As the god was dual natured, so was each factional head. Churchmen were divided into knights and priests, the choice made as acolytes. At the highest levels of hierarchy the positions had to hold both members, a dual leadership that caused conflict in itself. Callis did not relate well with his priestly counterpart, Gustus Esum, the man many years his senior and following a differing interpretation of their faction's roots.

Gustus came in late, scowling at the younger man in wait, a returned expression. He was a hefty man, requiring a cane to stay upright.

“You’re late, brother,” Callis chided, tapping the armrest. His personal servant, Nielle, stood behind Callis’ throne. There was a look of concern evident on his face, fearful when the two men met in council. He was a young boy, the fourth son of a small noble family sent away like so many late born sons were. As a Golden Fledgling he was at the pinnacle of servanthood in the complex, his external social rank recognised by the church. His overbearing masters held physical command over him, too ready to strike when things went amiss. When arguments grew heated in the chamber it was Nielle and his counterpart Dervon, that bore the violence.

“A man must take time in his prayers, my child. It is the truest path to the Manati.”

The arm creaked as a tense hand squeezed it. The word ‘child’ infuriated Callis. At thirty eight he was the youngest council member in the church, only possible in the weakling faction. Callis saw a literal interpretation of the Bestial god, seeking to imitate its own ethical nullity in his own career. He sought power for himself, desire for it over all else. During the inauguration he had sided with the Bestial faction more as a means of promotion than idolatry worship. Members of the Triumphantes were entrenched. Acolytes sought the sect for security in numbers but promotion was slow. Few rose higher than the rank of Copi, a standard priest or warrior. Those who chose a minor faction could expect to rise faster with more room to move. Yet if the church followed set trends then Aea-Baeni would never contend with the power of the Triumphantes. The Triingrates held half the voting power in the council, weakened to a point where two majors could control the outset of power with the help of a single minor. The Wrathmen and the Builders had held an alliance, the Singers backing them. The coalition had lasted for nine years, controlling the sway of the church despite the frustration of excluded sects. Callis was determined to change the system.

“The Beast does not pray,” Callis spat back.

“That is blasphemy,” Gustus sneered, taking his own throne with an air of gesticulation. “It is scripture that we pray to the Manati,” he noted, facing Callis. “Are you speaking heresy?”

“Of course not, mere sarcasm. I drip with it these days.” Callis detested the pudgling bald man, his skin scarred by years of self-flagellation. He followed the Scripts to the letter, his sense of routine and ritual at odds with Callis’ interpretation of the god.

“Well I am here now. What did you want of me?”

“Are you unaware? There is a council vote tonight and we have not discussed the issue.”

“What’s there to discuss?” Gustus glanced, running fingers through his servant’s hair. Dervon was used to the affection, eyes pinned on Callis lest he sought to attack.

“The decision to adopt Danick wine into church ceremony should not be lightly considered. There will be a major shift in commerce and trade if we start using barbarian imports. We must have a say.”

“The major three will decide that,” Gustus brushed off, keeping his attention locked to the boy. “There is little opinion that we can sway.”

The armrest creaked.

“The council needs to hear our opinion still,” Callis vented through taut lips.

“We don’t have one as far as I’m concerned.”

“You don’t have one. I do. Would you hand over all our affairs without struggle?”

“The Three handles foreign affairs, let them bicker over trade and wine. Our true purpose is to instill faith and convergence with Ea-Manati, not to play in this pathetic game of politics.”

“Are you so blind old man?” Callis rose, his body leaning forward. “The church has always been a player in politics. You would seek not to vote on this issue just to spite me.”

“You’re right,” Gustus spat back, his speckled cheeks growing flushed. “I will challenge your decision with abstinence tonight. Aea-Baeni does not exist for the ignorant scheming of a spitting child.”

Callis snapped at the insult, standing tall and lavishing a kick into Dervon, sprawling the boy back across marble steps. He stood to run, taking a hard slap across the top of his head in the process.

“You fool,” Gustus ranted. “You are no leader. You’re not fit to empty the latrines.” He slashed his cane, rasping Nielle in the face. The boy buckled back, a bloody mouth cradled in tender hands. Under church law it was not permitted for members of a same hierarchy to come to blows. Doing so would bring the matter before the council, something that neither man was want to do. All outbursts of rage had to be directed to the innocent boys that waited on them.

Gustus left, calling after Dervon in a cooing tone. Callis sneered as he retook the throne, stepping over Nielle. The knight’s veins bulged in frustration, angered by his counterpart’s ignorance of the church histories. For all his battle-hardened history, Callis was a devout learner, spending many hours entrenched in history books and

religious script. The church had always sought to interfere with the political landscape of the city, testing its power among the nobles and kings. El-Manate spent more time concerned with the manipulation of state figures than it had ever spent caring for the wayward souls of the poor. Callis Ipsum was not prepared to let a fat cripple hold back Aea-Baeni any longer.

16

Freeman lectured the children on the volatility of church and state and how the regency sat amongst them.

“There will always be a struggle for power in the city, it is part of its lifeblood and heritage. History is written through this game, a division that is both worrying and fascinating. As you are no doubt aware, the past kings were part of this struggle too, eventually falling prey to a united church and noble sect. That partnership did not last long but its aftermath bears with us today. The wealth in unity is to make sure you are one of the unified.”

“What of the commoners?” Asked Haylee.

The old man nodded, taking the question.

“That is more of a recent issue,” he admitted. “With the advent of steam and technology we have seen a burgeoning middle class with enough wealth to challenge their established role. Ironwood is a city that is built on the foundation of trade after all. With money comes a degree of power but without the right to vote or affect council it is an empty source.”

“Could they not use money to influence council?” Haylee continued, intrigued.

Master Freeman was impressed with the child’s curiosity and understanding, paying keen interest while his two other students pretended to be awake.

“You are referring to corruption,” he smiled. “To which there is some degree within the chamber of council at any one point. It used to be a requirement for councilors to be voted in on merit and establishment, passing a rigorous examination before they could achieve status. Unfortunately that was abolished along with the

kingship. The councilors that beset the regent now need not have qualifications and therefore must be chosen with deeper care... and yes, there is nothing to say that they could not be influenced by a healthy dose of coin."

"So the merchants have informal power," Haylee concluded.

"You are insightful," Freeman declared, delighted that the young child showed promise.

"And what of the church?" she probed, eager to learn. Her question was met by a disgruntled sigh from Damian, a series of scabs collecting on his desk as he tugged at the dead skin on his face.

"You would do well to show such interest in the makeup of the city, young sir."

Damian looked up, aware of the old man, staring down at him.

"Sorry Master," he offered without authenticity. The grey haired man scowled, he knew of Ivan's plan to anoint the child heir, a mistake in his eyes. The boy showed no promise, his mind unfocused and rude. Freeman saw an upside to his demotion to educator, allowing him a chance to assess the future heirs of Ironwood. Within one lesson he had decided that Haylee would make a more suitable regent than either of her two siblings. It was an opinion that he wished to share with the regent.

"Going on, I want to discuss the break up of the kingship and the role of the regent."

"Master Goldstring already drilled that into us," stated Ammba, annoyed at Freeman who was rude and unresponsive to her charms. Goldstring had always favoured her with a smile, regardless of her responses to his questions.

"Master Goldstring was removed from service for incompetency. You will learn it again and I will test you on it. Understanding your station is vital if you ever hope to run this city."

"But the regent only needs to worry about trading partners and ensuring a healthy exchange rate," Ammba continued, remembering part of her lessons.

"If that is what your last educator told you then I know why he was expelled."

"Actually, it was because of me," Damian shrugged.

"Enough," Freeman barked, his face turning red. The three children recoiled. "I will not tolerate insolence in this classroom. I am extending class to the end of lunch due to your back chatting. The room settled and Freeman's face returned to its original hue.

“I will continue... the regent’s role is more than just trading and entertaining ambassadors. It is the highest station within the city, a figurehead to deal with problems concerning the nobles and issues of churchship. The regent has a duty to the city, one that cannot be denied by squabbling nobles. His role is to drive the city, to be the ultimate factor in steering the ship.” Freeman continued, discussing the role of past and future regents and how they related to the power plays of the city. Only Haylee listened.

17

Maria Bridestone lay in the dull lit alley. The drunken miner left her, used and paid, the last of the day’s wage spent on the whore. With a free hand she worked out his seed, splashing fingers in the pooling rain to clean away the last of his scent. She hitched up and buckled her pants, two coins pressed tight in a hidden pocket, and laid still. She savoured the rain tapping her features. It felt good, the brisk touch keeping her alert.

Maria was ‘Ironborne’, one of the hardiest denizens of Ironwood. She felt most comfortable in the cold alleys and sodden streets, working her craft deep into the winter when most prostitutes were inside by coal-lit fires.

She straightened her leather coat, loose tunics soaked beneath. It was time to retire for the night, the streets emptying of hard drinking men, leaving the poor and broken, neither of whom would offer coin for her services.

Maria stepped into a main channel of Poor Man’s Quarter, a simple tarred street blurred by poor light and slanting rain. The quarter was a maze of sorts, poor slums packed together to afford cheap housing for the short-lived miners and factory workers. She navigated the streets, knowing them well. Muggers lurked in droves throughout, a paid up whore an easy target.

Peering eyes knew Maria though, her proud stride and firm body renowned amongst the underbelly of the city. They knew her connections and violent temper, her ability to kill when necessary. She had lived as though a fire existed in her, striking down her enemies.

Menacing eyes watched from cover as she strode with defiance, facing the harsh beat of Ironwood's autumn.

She paced for a time, feeling in tune with the city. Her mouth tasted of minerals, carried by the rain, residual aftermath from churning mines that pocked the surrounding mountains. Summer was over, the pollutants that had clogged the city for months were washing away, emptying into the Milkweed river and out to sea. She saw autumn as her cleansing time too, embracing the harsh winter that follows with a fanatic's intent.

* * *

Maria's home stood as a featureless stone and iron structure, a clone of every other apartment that ran along the small side street, a two story apartment set in a better area of Poor Man's Quarter. While wealthy enough to afford finer lodgings Maria craved the rough stones of her birthquarter. Simple furnishings lined the entryway, several glass ornaments and mirrors, nothing extravagant. She pressed a switch near the heavy iron front door. A click resounded and lights flickered then powered on.

Ironwood was new to electricity. Massive coal deposits found throughout the region provided a cheap fuel that city scholars had learnt to harness. Coal plants littered the north end of the city, puking out constant fumes of heady ash. It was not a reliable source of power, blackouts common in the city as harsh weather, flash flooding and tremors loomed ever present. Maria kept a bank of coal in her basement in the event of power failure.

Her coat made a wet thud as it dropped to the floor, Maria stepping over it and checking herself in the entryway mirror. Her shoulder length hair was plastered in chaos, white lips pressed hard from the cold. She was ageing, lines forming that would in time dominate her features. She knew that men would not always find her desirable, that her looks would wither and she would have to survive on her savings or find another profession. She was not a thief, too brash without the grace of a cat burglar.

She unwound the clinging tunics, dripping onto the rough tiles. The clothes dropped in a sodden heap and she stood naked, her muscular body trembling.

Carpet lined the upstairs floor, the coarse hairs soaking in the wet as she strode to the bedroom. Maria did not recoil or show surprise at

the intruder who confronted her. A gentle snore greeted her from the bed.

“A hard night?” she asked, standing hands on hips, stark naked in the doorway. The man startled, waking from a dream. He looked up and gave the faintest grin, propping up on one elbow.

“You need a softer bed.”

“And risk you coming around more often?” she asked in a half threatening voice, swaying towards him. Locke took in the view, noting the strong thighs and flat belly, excited by the dangerous woman’s presence.

“Your door was practically open,” he told her with a slight slur in his voice.

Maria interrogated him with her eyes, an accusative stare. “Did you get paid today?”

“You know you are a beautiful woman, don’t you?”

“Don’t change the subject.”

Locke slunk back into the tough mattress, staring out.

“What do you think?”

“I think you are a fool,” she admitted.

“A fool that you love?”

“No,” she saddled the bed, looking down, “I could never love a fool.”

“Well, at least comfort one for awhile.”

“You’re pathetic,” she insulted, taking his hand and placing it to her breast.

“I know.”

Locke’s fingers encircled the hard nipple, still wet from the night.

“You know you can’t stay here,” she warned. “You need to sort out your landlord.”

Locke breathed deep as her hand slid under his shirt, wet hands feeling the warmth of his body.

“You’re freezing,” he gasped.

“You’re soft,” she chided, stretching out a well toned leg and mounting him, tearing back his linen shirt. She pulled his head into her breast, his flushed face at odds with her still trembling figure. He tasted the water clinging to her body, savouring the taste.

“You going to forgive me?” he managed, taking his lips away from a nipple.

“No,” she whispered, “but tonight I’ll let you fuck me.”

With a free hand she pulled out his swollen figure and pressed herself onto it, making him groan and forget his loss.

18

Harmond Goldshore loitered in Greenstone courtyard with his cousins, the Longshores. The young men were boasting, telling tales of ladies they had bed. Harmond was younger than the other boys and at fourteen he had no tales to speak of, his composure amongst women shy and clumsy.

“Don’t tell me Little Harm likes the boys,” laughed Thomas to a chorus when Harmond was pestered to share a story.

“Piss off,” Harmond growled, intimidated by the older boy’s presence.

“Why, haven’t you felt a woman’s touch yet?” asked Helmut Longshore, a tall boy with shoulder-length dark hair and a podgy face, stepbrother to Thomas.

Harmond shrugged. “I haven’t tried.”

“Now that’s bullshit if I can’t spot it,” laughed his brother Ramond Goldshore. “I’ve seen this little soldier pressing all the chamber maids, trying to get his end wet. All the girls laugh at our Little Harm.”

Another chorus of laughter.

“They do not,” Harmond lied. It was a legendary story among the ladies of Goldshore manor that Harmond was short hung.

“Yeah right. All the girls talk about your tiny stump,” continued Ramond, slapping Harmond on the back.

“If you can’t give it, maybe you should start taking it like our Lord Damian over there,” Thomas said, pointing a gloved hand across the courtyard. Damian was practicing swordplay with Fredrick, their wood-crafted blades cracking against each other. “Lord Damian loves the boys,” taunted Thomas, looping an arm around Harmond’s shoulder. “Maybe he would let you join in on a little three-way action.”

Harmond tried to push the older boy away, only to find himself in a chokehold.

“Who is he fighting with?” asked Ramond, pointing out Fredrick. As distant cousins the Goldshores stayed little within the citadel, spending more time in their Highland villas.

“Just some foreign whelp,” shrugged Helmut. “Likes it up the arse more than Little Harm.”

The boys watched the duel across the way, the two boys oblivious to their audience. Fredrick was a much better sword hand, knocking away Damian’s blade with ease and tapping him across the arms, shoulders and body several times.

“A foreign dog shouldn’t treat our ruler like that,” declared another Goldshore boy noting the one-sided fight. “It’s an insult.”

“That’s always happening,” shrugged Helmut. “The lord can’t hold a sword any better than his dick.”

“Pathetic,” agreed Thomas. He watched as the blade tip pressed Damian’s chest, a fatal blow. “I think our Little Harm should redeem his honour by challenging the swine to a duel.”

“What?” asked young Harmond with wide eyes.

“Why not,” continued Thomas. “After all, you want to prove that you have the balls of a man?”

All the boys grinned, gathering around the younger child and pressuring him.

“Go on Harmond,” encouraged his brother, excited by the idea. “It would only be first blood.”

“You’re at least two years older than him anyway,” an undistinguishable voice called from the pack.

“No match for you,” another stated.

Harmond wanted to protest over the rising sea of excitement, to speak out against the idea, but he could not. He heard the choruses of ‘Little Harm’ in his mind, taunting and spurring him on. He knew that winning a duel was a first step towards burying the name. A step towards building up the courage to speak to the chambermaid he had eyed for many months.

The boys crowded round, patting him on the back and building him up with words of encouragement. They called him ‘brave’ and ‘hard’, words that Harmond had not been referred to before.

“First blood,” he declared, steeling himself. They wrapped him up, escorting him across the courtyard while lazy guards and servants watched with disinterest. Fredrick and Damian stopped their game, already puffed, and watched the mob advance. They exchanged

glances but remained silent as the leering teenagers surrounded them. Harmond was pushed forward, looking uncomfortable and unsure.

“Fredrick Themmond,” Thomas announced. “You are being challenged to a fair and honourable duel by the worthy Sir Harmond Goldshore.”

“On what grounds?” Fredrick asked, dubious.

“By striking Lord Damian you have insulted all who draw his blood.”

“I’m no lord,” Damian protested.

“You are commanded to take part in a duel to ‘first blood’. If you decline you will forever be shamed under the noble’s code of honour.” Thomas crossed his arms, leering down at the children. He enjoyed playing the authoritarian.

“I will not allow this,” Damian spat.

“What’s this? The little bum-boy needs his master to protect him?” taunted Helmut.

“Excuse me?” Fredrick asked, confused and annoyed.

“Everyone knows you let our most gracious and noble lord defile you,” laughed Helmut. “You’re only following duty though.”

“Enough,” Damian yelled, blood pumping to the scars on his face. “This is fool’s play.”

“No,” countered Fredrick, upset by the insult. “They are insulting you, not me. I accept the challenge.” Harmond looked pale, having voiced no opinion. Damian tried to object but Fredrick was resound. “It’s only first blood,” Fredrick reminded him.

“Just take a cut and end it,” Damian suggested. Duels of the manner were supposed to end in a single drop of blood, each opponent expected to refrain from a lethal blow. History was pocked with tragic tales of men killed in the first strike, a victim of an over zealous assailant.

“The duel will occur in the Old Courtyard as a private affair,” stated Thomas in his commander’s voice. Damian tried to interject but was swept aside by the mob, bundling up both Harmond and Fredrick and pushing them onwards. The crowd rounded the western gardens and jumped the wall, two swords ferried over with them. Damian followed.

Both boys were stripped down to their leggings, bare chests open to the cold bite that swept through the old citadel. Fredrick was lean, his body not showing the girth of the older boys. Harmond was less

impressive, a pouching stomach the beginning of the standard Goldshore build, a family with a history of succumbing to excess and consumption.

Both boys held real swords. Harmond owned his own, a fine blade that had been forged as a coming of age present. The hilt was gold inlaid with a snake inset. Fredrick owned no sword, Thomas more than happy to lend him a blade. It was thick and heavy, peculiar compared to the wooden swords that Fredrick had trained with. He had to grip it in both hands to keep the blade steady. Damian stood beside his friend, offering advice to the better swordsman. After the crowd laid their bets Thomas took centrepiece.

“Let’s have a fair fight here,” he echoed with a smile. “No kicking or biting. You’re here under noble rules and must therefore fight as such. First man to drop blood will be the loser, the winner absolved from any crime he is accused of.”

“What of the loser?” one onlooker cried.

“They will forever be known as the ‘Arse-Riddler of Ironwood’,” grinned Thomas.

There was a mighty roar, both boys reddening at the prospect. Neither would accede defeat.

Thomas ordered the fight to begin, acting as referee. The swordboys circled, watching each other, fearful of the first move. Harmond stood a foot taller than Fredrick, his reach longer and blade lighter. Fredrick circled with sword point low, ready in defence. Fredrick had never fought with steel before, he was exhilarated and scared at the same time. He stared up at the fat opponent, keeping his eyes locked. Harmond’s vision skipped between Fredrick’s feet, blade and face.

The younger boy saw the lack of discipline, feigning a lunge and assessing his opponent’s reaction. Harmond was slow, scrambling to block an attack that didn’t exist. He heard taunts from behind, as those who bet against him cheered on Fredrick. The foreigner wore a faint smile.

Fredrick feigned a second lunge, noting a similar response. Harmond held a stilted stance and nervous defence. Fredrick’s main worry was Harmond’s longer reach and the weight of the borrowed sword taking its toll. He did not want to be nicked while dropping in to lunge.

With further circling Fredrick saw his moment. Harmond’s eyes were down, transfixed on Fredrick’s feet. Fredrick lunged again,

feigning a stab for a third time. As Harmond raised his blade Fredrick dropped into a sweep, dragging his sword backhand and across his opponent's body. Harmond parried in time to save a chest wound, Fredrick's blade sliding up over Harmond's and bouncing off the top of his shoulder.

There was a mighty roar when fresh specklets rose across his shoulder, shouts declaring Fredrick the victor. The boys booed down Harmond, calling him 'the Arse-Riddler' and 'Little Harm'. His head turned crimson and he let out a cry, raising his sword and charging the younger opponent.

Fredrick saw and with a side step he dodged the arc of incoming steel, lancing his own blade out and causing a second welt to appear in Harmond's flank. The crowd fell quiet.

Damian tried to rush in but Thomas Longshore held him back.

"Don't get between two men in battle," Thomas warned, all mirth lost in his voice.

Harmond rose again, a contorted look of pain sprayed across his face.

"Are you alright?" Fredrick panted, concerned that he had cut too deep. Harmond didn't answer, instead swinging his blade up from behind, slashing out. Fredrick ducked back in time to miss having his skull caved in, the blade slicing his bottom lip down to the chin. Blood dotted the arena.

A second sweep came from Harmond, enraged at a lifetime of taunting and bullying. Fredrick charged him, too exhausted to raise his arms to block the attack. He snuck in under the hilt, bowling Harmond over the hard stone.

They laid still. The crowd scattered. Fredrick looked into Harmond's shocked eyes, a sketch of fear on his face. At first Fredrick thought the older boy was trying to push him off with a hand on his leg. The push was a pulse, hitting Fredrick with force. The borrowed blade had skewered Harmond, pushed in just below the groin and severing the artery, the blood pumping up against the younger boy and splashing into the courtyard.

Two onlookers remained, Ramond and Damian. Ramond rushed to his brother's side, pushing away the foreigner on top, and sat with him as he bled to death.

Fredrick watched in horror.

A grieving brother's sobs echoed in the courtyard. Fleeing gamblers had left coins scattered, dropped in the haste of escape. Distant voices came, their tone urgent. Steel boots resounded on the stone as guard master Bryce Hommel arrived, escorted by Thomas Longshore. Two guards followed along with a surgeon.

"Master Damian, what is the manner of this?" came Bryce's call.

"Sir Hommel..." Damian croaked, still in shock. "They were dueling."

"Dueling?" came an unsatisfied reply from the surgeon. "Duels can only occur under courtly moderation. This is nothing more than a streetfight."

"And Fredrick was the assailant? Am I correct?" Bryce asked.

"It was a duel," Damian insisted.

"A court will have to decide that," Bryce stated, walking to the accused. "Fredrick son, I'm going to have to place you in custody. Do you understand?" Fredrick gave a slow, agonized nod, blood dripping out his chin. Bryce ordered one of his guards to escort the boy away.

"Have him cleaned and stitched...and be gentle with him," Bryce stated.

Damian tried to follow.

"I need you to stay here and give witness," Bryce told the regent's son, leaving the heir to examine the corpse, giving cold comfort to a bereft brother.

19

Locke left early, leaving Maria to sleep. He felt ill after a night of moderate drinking, an uncommon vice for him. He picked the front door to leave, preferring it to his means of entry. There was a heavy mist outside, morning fog common in the mountainous valley. Locke did not mind, he knew the streets well.

The light pouch at his side was enough to pay off his landlord, the bull-faced man's temperament sure to be quelled. Locke was a month in arrears and his landlord had threatened injury on lack of payment. Locke cursed himself for the fool. He could have paid an entire winter's accommodation with his last payout.

As Locke pressed on to his apartment, set in the Middle Quarter, he considered his current predicament. Looking back he decided that the sudden illness of his father had turned into a saving grace for the gambler, a thing to be thankful for from a man who gave little to his children's lives. The old man had met his end like most thieves, Locke realised, work-related. Tony had grown old, unable to make a job pan out and paid the price. Locke wondered when his time would come. It was inevitable that fate would turn its hand, Locke had seen it throughout his career. Careful professionalism could only carry a thief so far, there were always unseeable events.

Locke did venture home. He made his way to a rail system that connected to the main line. He passed the checkpoint without paying, sneaking in on the other side of the track through a hidden point. He knew the way well, having learnt many of the city's secrets while still a child. A flogging would be handed out to anyone caught sneaking into the system, a small risk that Locke considered acceptable in his current state. Since the trains had started running there had been those willing to steal a ride.

Once Locke touched home base he paid off his debt, sating Harry, the angry bull, enough to prevent a wild charge.

"You're due again in two weeks," the landlord noted in a gruff voice, wheezing first then coughing black phlegm into his hand. The croaking cough was a common ailment in the city of coal fires. Locke watched with mild repulsion as Harry wiped the tarry mess on his shirt front before handing back a half coin in change.

"Then you'll see it at that time," Locke replied coolly.

"Make sure I do," Harry barked. He shut the door hard, aiming for Locke. The thief was too nimble, stepping back before he could have his nose crushed on the front of the landlord's door. Locke stood for a moment, noting with a sly grin the faded blood stains on that door.

Locke stepped down the sparse hall, passing his own door. Aside from his tools and a bed there was little inside. He had no need to step past that threshold for the moment, instead stepping back into the street. The fog had faded but not yet vanished.

With three coins left to his name Locke sought out one place he hoped they could turn into many.

“You’re not going to believe what’s happened,” Locke heard a voice call to him as he entered the Ilky Den. Jim looked nervous, dark rings hanging under red eyes.

“What?” Locke asked, stepping up to the bar.

“Craig Greytongue’s been murdered.”

Locke stared at him, dazed. Craig had been in the business a long time, serving many of the regulars at the Ilky Den, he was known to Locke.

“They know who did it?” Locke asked, referring to the city watch.

“They? They haven’t got a clue... wouldn’t even come into the quarter to investigate. Had to send the bodies out just so they’d check on it.”

“Three in two nights,” mused Locke, reflecting on his father’s death.

“Yeah, and that fellow who dragged Tony up last night is connected with all of them.”

“The man with no memory?” Locke noted, the stranger’s face entering his mind.

“That’s the one. Sought out Craig that night, was going to meet up today for some ink work.”

Another regular stepped from a back room, the dim lights playing shadows across his scarred face. O’ryan Budline, a notorious criminal renowned for a sadistic streak, was also Locke and Jim’s half-brother. He nodded once to Locke before turning to Jim.

“It’s been organised,” he said in his calm, rasping voice.

“What has?” inquired Locke.

“O’ryan’s going to hunt down the Memory Man,” Jim noted.

“He’s responsible for Tony’s death you know,” O’ryan said with arms crossed.

“You don’t know that yet,” Jim corrected. “Bring him here for interrogation.”

“Fine.”

O’ryan returned to the back room.

“I’m sending a tracker with him, just in case.”

“Do you think he’ll need it?” Locke asked.

“No, but I want this man returned alive. If he’s responsible for the murders then he might be working for someone. O’ryan’s not a good interrogator, he strikes too hard, too fast and kills before he can get his information accurate.”

“Who’s the tracker?”

“Manderley Serravia, works with the watch a lot, gets good leads.”

Locke had heard enough. The victim’s deaths had surprised him but he was not going to mourn. Jim was going to waste money searching for a man that may not be the killer and likely have him disappear, something that Locke thought excessive. Jim wasn’t attached to either of the main crime families, asserting some independence from that politic. As a result Jim was overly paranoid, jumping at shadows. Locke doubted there was any major conspiracy linking the deaths and did not see his father’s as a murder. He took his leave, ordering a water, and sat in his regular spot in the gambler’s corner.

20

The black behemoth hammered along the track, its iron wheels cutting swathes through the ash that fell on Ironwood. Inside a bleak carriage Dead sat with downcast eyes. His shoulders rocked back and forth in motion with the bucketing locomotive as he stared at the fresh tattoo scribed on his forearm. Ghost stood beside him, ignoring his stooped companion, instead focused on a filthy window plate and the ugly city that rocked by. They were on a voyage to discover the identity of Cynthia Bernhart, heading into the heart of Ironwood.

The steam engine thundered ever onwards to the south wall of Central Ironwood. Ghost looked out over the Middle Quarter. Cramped houses packed the streets, rising two and three stories high. Houses were sporadically interrupted by storefronts, typified by vendors standing out front ready to peddle their goods to anyone in earshot.

On the horizon stood hundreds of tall chimneys, standing above the walls, each one bellowing out thick smoke. Ironwood was a dirty city, fuelled by constant coal fires that swept ash through the streets. With each downpour the rain would wash away the residue, but little rain fell today. Was it something that should concern him? Ghost wondered. His current situation dictated that it didn’t. He was stuck travelling with a madman.

Passengers were oblivious to the spirit standing among them. Absent faces stared through Ghost. Dead was the only person Ghost could relate with, his only companion and associate. Without him he would be lost. In his thoughts, Ghost hoped that he could find another person to communicate with. If he could, Ghost decided, then he would abandon Dead and his violent mannerisms. Until that time he was an accomplice.

The quality of housing saw a marked improvement. The tight, unmarked apartments that they had escaped turned into well-plotted architecture. The streets grew wide and cobbled pathways replaced the unkempt tar stretches of Poor Man's Quarter and the Middle Quarter.

The behemoth groaned. A passing sign noted that they were entering Old Bond Station. Ghost woke Dead from a state of absentmindedness, notifying his companion of their departure.

The pair stepped off onto a wide platform. It was a meeting place for three main rails. One that swept around the city, another that came directly from the mines, and a third that drew passengers from far off, pulling them though the Highlands and around the rocky slopes that flanked the city.

The platform swarmed with people, some carrying goods, others unburdened. Some dressed in fine clothes with servants, others covered in filth waiting for a train to connect them from the mines to whatever hovel they claimed home.

Faces blurred past the pair as they stumbled through the mess. Dead was swept aside in the flood of bodies while Ghost looked on in horror, unable to physically push past the throng. Dead did not notice the danger, he followed the flow without resistance, too dense to consider that he might not be going the right way.

Ghost shouted out but his voice was lost in the din. Panic gripped the spirit as his form was pushed further away by the physical presence of shuffling bodies. Ghost lost sight of Dead in the sea of people and opened his mouth to scream.

A sudden spasm interrupted the cry. Ghost heaved and was yanked against the push of bodies, a force dragging him in the direction of Dead. It was an invisible rope, or so he considered, as his body squished and morphed around bodies. He passed through the throng with a heaving, uncontrollable shudder, following at Dead's pace. He was perplexed and nauseated.

Whatever force dragged him along meant that he was inseparable to Dead. He couldn't move in any other direction even if desired. He was tied to Dead through a spiritual link that held physical dominance over Ghost. And it worried him.

The throng thinned as the pair shifted away from the main platform giving Ghost room to move by free-will. He caught up with Dead, leading him down a flight of stairs and out onto the main street. Ghost stuck close to Dead as they passed through the busy crowd not wishing to become separated again.

"We've got to follow the main road to the end," Ghost called over the noise of the streets. Stores lined the way and people hustled along trading and arguing. To Ghost it appeared that there were no houses along the main stretch, the wide lane overtaken by busy shops. Closest to the platform laid the food stores, large shops filled with fish and assorted meats, others specializing in root vegetables. Past these ran stores selling everything that the city produced or imported.

At one point Ghost saw a failed pickpocket running for his life, a small child dressed well considering his circumstances. He wore lacquered shoes, black and shining, and a silk vest over a fine cotton shirt. Two members of the town watch were in pursuit, their chase hampered by heavy ring-mail armour and steel boots. A small crowd cheered on the chase, shouting words of encouragement to the scamp as he slunk through the crowd and out of sight.

People bumped shoulders with Dead, the walking corpse failing to budge, sending several shoppers spinning. Ghost held a mixture of loathing and intrigue for his bizarre friend. If he acted like this in life, thought Ghost, then it was obvious to him why Dead had reached an early end. Yet there was also great power in the man, Ghost could see, enough to rise from the grave. Ghost felt that the longer he stayed in Dead's presence, the further his own sensitivity and morals were eroding.

Shops gave way to offices and buildings of administration. Tall structures impressed on the street, signed with the names of mining corporations, law firms and banks. As these buildings grew in grandiose they showed less of the building blocks of stone and metal that characterized the city, decked instead in polished woods of every hue.

Every block maintained its own town guard, their presence heavy in Central Ironwood. They wore green vests emblazoned with a shield. Some carried clubs attached to a large battery, designed to release an electrical current into anyone unfortunate enough to be struck with the weapon. Whereas the poorest areas of the city were relegated to policing themselves through established criminal networks, the wealthier suburbs of the city were dictated through strict law.

As they continued their journey Ghost noted a man stationed at a statue in the centre of the road. Unlike the typical town guard he wore a navy blue vest over armour with a symbol of a setting sun over an eye emblazoned on his chest.

“Ask someone what that symbol means,” ordered Ghost.

“It’s the sign of the Patriarcht,” replied Dead.

Ghost halted, yelling out for Dead to do the same.

“How did you know that?”

Dead shrugged, thought for a second and understood the importance of the question.

“It just came to me,” he admitted.

“Nothing just comes to you,” Ghost announced, gesticulating with wild hands. “You couldn’t even tell me why we’re standing on this street.”

Dead looked back at the symbol. He knew it well, but for unknown reasons. He felt a scratching at the back of his mind, too dull to comprehend. It was part of the puzzle, but what piece?

“We need a tattooist,” Dead blurted.

“You’ve got plenty of money though,” Ghost half snarled the snide remark.

“What?” Dead asked, confused.

“Look, if we find a tattooist, promise you won’t murder them.” Ghost ordered.

“Why would I do that?” Dead asked with innocence.

“If I told you, you’d forget. Just promise.”

“I guess,” Dead committed.

“Fine. Don’t ask me where to find one though. Look for a local, I’m sure they’d know a place.”

With a little questioning Dead was able to find a tattooist in the quarter. The equipment and skill of the artist more professional than that found in Poor Man’s Quarter. With higher levels of precision came higher rates and Dead, maintaining a forgotten promise, walked

unbloodied from the shop with a lighter pouch. Ghost smiled in victory, pleased to control the beast.

21

“He’s my ward and as such will remain within the citadel under my watch.” Ivan’s voice was stern, facing a consort of nobles. The regent’s hall was packed with them this morning.

With the death of the Goldshore boy there had been an uproar within the court, calls ringing out for hard justice. Ivan had spent the previous evening negotiating a court hearing for the boy. With the morning came a flock of agitators to his throne.

There were three courts in the Ironwood legal system. The regent’s court handled foreign affairs. The noble courts handled matters pertaining to the upper echelons of society, including corporate business matters. The noble courts were notorious for favouring the side of influential families. For a foreigner to be accused in one would be a farce in all eyes except the accusers. The citizens court, the busiest of the three, handled the bulk of legal course in the city, dealing with crimes and issues relating to small business.

“He has murdered a noble child... he should face the full wrath of the proper courts,” lamented a regular court entity.

“He is the son of an important Imperial family,” Ivan repeated for the fourth time. “He will be tried in the regent’s court under international law.”

There were more shouts, drowning out a few murmurs of agreement.

“A noble child was involved,” roared Geoffrey Goldshore, the father of Harmond. “This is no business of the regent.”

The hall was full and bustling, news spreading fast through the channels. Ivan felt besieged, few supporters aiding their voice. He pointed out that foreigners fell under his jurisdiction and could therefore be tried under regent court. The regent’s court differed from the noble’s as jurors were expected to be impartial and could be a citizen of the Imperial Empire. The nobles judged only themselves, a

closed dispensment of justice that served personal goals rather than fair justice.

"I will not risk bearing down Imperial wrath by trying Sir Themmond unjustly."

"You dare call our system corrupt? In the eyes of all the court?" cried Geoffrey. "Here is proof that this regent cares less of his own people and prefers the company of foreigners."

"It is true that he has them in his council," shouted an uninfluential noble with a poor estate. "Would he serve to hand over all of Ironwood to these Imperials for the sake of appeasing them." Murmurs crept throughout the tall stone chamber as the suggestion was passed.

"Enough," bellowed Ivan, his bodyguards standing close with arms ready. Bryce, the master of the guard, stood on his right. "I will not sit here and suffer the talk of treachery and corruption placed down on my head. The boy will be tried under the regent's law. If I hear another word lined against me or my desires for the city then that person will be tried for royal defamation."

Grumblings greeted the threat. There had not been a case of royal defamation since the end of the monarchs, the charge considered obsolete in the absence of kings. The hall filled with questioning eyebrows.

"This is ruinous," broke out Geoffrey again. "Not only does he betray his own kin, he plans to stand for kingship." There was a general agreement within the court, the nobles nodding their heads. "Is it time we stripped the regency of its rank?" He called out.

Ivan cut short the uprising, ordering his bodyguard to arms and issuing an arrest order. The hall erupted into chaos as troops stormed in, dressed in heavyset armour, shields tied to backs and swords hanging low. Cries and roars greeted the arrest of Geoffrey Goldshore, demanding his release. Ivan ordered the courts clear, his troops pushing out the discontent rabble, while he escaped through a rear entrance with his councilors and bodyguard.

"Lock down the citadel," he ordered Bryce who was issuing messages through the running boys. The guard master gave the order. "Make sure my family are under guard at all times. I want the watch running double shifts and kept on high alert until I say so." He gestured to the councilors present. "Summon the rest of your colleagues and meet me in the council chamber in ten minutes."

Ivan bit his lip when left alone with his personal guard, four of the finest warriors in the compound. He had not wanted to rile the nobles,

sensitive about their own role in the city. Years of power struggles meant the regency held a weak position. He summoned a messenger boy, a senior runner with a clear head.

“I want you to make your way to the Grand Temple,” he said, scribbling out a pass and rushing to attach his seal. “Tell them that Ivan Steward seeks council as soon as possible.” He handed the papyrus to the boy, the wax hot to touch. “Take a horse... a fast one.” The boy nodded, scrambling to make good his mission. Ivan collected his guard and climbed the stairs leading to the council chambers.

Master Freeman stood crisp among a sea of disgruntled faces. His sash hung immaculate and he wore the clothes of council. Upon seeing this Ivan had a moment to consider how the old man might have dressed in so quick a time. Had the Master predicted the urgent meeting? Such thoughts were wasted by the pressing need of the council and Ivan, breathing deep, cleared them from his mind.

“I assume you have been brought up to speed,” Ivan greeted them, taking his seat. There was consensus. “The question is how we move from here. I have taken the liberty to seek the church on this matter. They will find out either way and I would prefer to be first to let them know.”

“Will they send an ambassador?” asked Freeman.

Ivan raised his hands in a sign of ignorance.

“It is hard to tell how the church will act. They might send one or they might send six, one for each faction.”

“Or none,” countered Damon Sterling, a scowl permanently set in his features. Ivan surmised that he must have woken him from a late sleep, Damon’s face unwashed and clothes crooked.

“Or that,” agreed the regent. “If they choose to support us then we can hope to challenge the nobles on this matter. If not then we will be hard pressed. As regent I do not have the power to deal with the nobles alone.”

“An external force?” suggested Gehrig. “I could have a stationed force in the city within two weeks if you request.”

“And have the city overrun by barbarians?” asked Maria. “If Lord Steward wishes support externally then common sense dictates that the Imperials be consulted. Fredrick Themmond is of our stock, need I remind.”

“There won’t be one of either,” Ivan stated in a cool voice. “I will not see war over this.”

“If this boy is executed without a fair hearing then you need to expect one,” concluded Maria.

“Let the nobles fight it out with them then.” Damon countered.

“Perhaps consulting our Imperial friends would be a healthy move in such circumstances,” offered Master Freeman. Ivan turned to pass a scowl, unhappy with the lack of support.

“The Imperial and Northane contingents already based in the city will suffice. I will not rely on external factors to survive unless there is no other course. If the church does not support us then I will consider the matter further.”

“We need to draw up a list of those nobles that would support us on this issue and those that will challenge,” suggested Damon.

“What do you suggest?” Ivan asked.

“Consolidate with those that will lend themselves to us. There will always be families prepared to play off each other for the thought of profit. I doubt it, but if there were enough then we might have the support to challenge outright.”

“That would not be likely,” stated Freeman. “There is always another option.”

Ivan ignored the old man.

“Stephen, I need you to organise a law fund. If this becomes too drawn out then lawyer’s fees could drown us. Gehrig and Maria, I need you to go to your respective houses and ask the city contingents to be brought into the citadel.”

“What? Both of them under one roof. Do you wish the castle to be torn apart inside out?” stated Gehrig.

“Inform your houses that you will be stationed with the enemy. I will place them at separate ends of the castle but if they refuse then report back to me.” Maria nodded, Gehrig did not. “Damon, seek out any nobles that will lend us support. Make it clear to them that we want this matter cleared up fast if possible.” Ivan turned to Clarissa, quiet until now. “See if you can find out the leading families setting the charge against us. The Goldshores are not known for their subtleties, I suspect they will relinquish the responsibility to one of the great families.” There was an almost imperceptible nod.

“What of me?” Freeman asked.

“Continue teaching,” Ivan brushed off. “My children’s education is still a most important task.” There was silence as the Master turned burning crimson.

The council cleared, each going to their task. Freeman hung back a moment as if he were going to lend advice or challenge a matter but chose to remove himself without an utterance. The old man stormed from the chamber.

Left alone with his bodyguard Ivan poured himself a healthy draught of wine. Despite all his worries he found himself still thinking of Freeman. The old man was acting like a child in his eyes, pathetic and weak, an ancient figurehead in a world that had surpassed him. Ivan took the wine without water, savouring the strong taste in a moment of respite and draining the cup. With his mind wandering Ivan sought his family.

22

“You do not look at ease brother,” stated Gaius Ipsum, highest knight of Aea-Manit. “Does not all stand well in the kennel of the beast?”

“Not tonight,” Callis sighed. “As all in council saw.” He gestured a hand, swirling it around the empty chamber.

“Brother Gustus’ absence was noted. I take it he does not care for politics?”

“He does not care for voice,” Callis spat the words. “He would rather abstain through absence than allow me a choice on the matter.”

Under council regulations both members of a faction had to be present for a vote to count. Without a sealed letter of approval from the absentee a faction’s vote was considered ‘abstained’.

“It would have been polite for him to be here,” Gaius frowned. The Aea-Manit were a Tri-ingrate faction, a non-coalition member, suppressed under the combined voting power of the coalition. “Unity in the face of the enemy I say.”

“As do I. The old fool has no sense of politics. He is too entrenched in his own games of ‘one-man-down’.”

“Perhaps I could have a word with him,” Gaius offered. Like Callis, he was frustrated by the alliance held in the council. He saw a way forward through a new alliance, shifting the central power of the church.

“Forget it,” Callis huffed. “I’ll do it myself. It is time for reconciliation.”

“Indeed, for all sorts... Have you considered my proposal?”

Callis stretched out, taking a goblet from the table. The council table was a hexagon, six wedge pieces crafted of differing woods. Each piece representative of a faction’s standing. Callis sat at Puervian Oak, the wood of the lowest faction. It was a rich material in the city, considered poor only in factional standings. The highest faction, Aea-Manit, symbolized their position with Gumnut Pine, the rarest wood imported to the city. From there it fell to Charred Willow Bleachwood; Quilted Fellow Oak, Hardnut Pine, Golden Breech and then Puervian Oak. All were expensive in the city, but Callis saw value only in one.

“An alliance amongst the outland sects may work,” he nodded, tasting the black wine. “But I don’t see the Singers switching hands so easily.”

“They will come around when they see the benefit. I believe they would prefer an alliance between three minors and a single major over their current position.”

“You don’t think it serves them well?” Callis asked.

“Only to a point. They are kept in with the expectation that they have no say. They perform in council but are otherwise ignored. A new coalition would give them more say.”

“Or more to argue with,” Callis smiled. “Let it be though, I will pact with the group.”

“And Gustus?”

“I will have it sorted.” Gaius looked hard at the younger man. They were both knights of the Order and had ascended the bloody ladder of El-Manati. They also understood the church’s reaction to factional assassination. “Do not worry of the manner,” he stated, reading Gaius’ body.

“Just don’t get caught.” Gaius left the chamber, leaving Callis to sip and ponder.

“They’re not cheap,” Ghost smiled. “But at least we get good time for our money.”

“Huh?” Dead asked. He had spent several hours staring at the marks on his arms, sitting in the cool marble chamber of The Census Division of Ironwood Proper.

“You don’t realise that we’ve been waiting here for hours do you?”

Dead looked around, unaware of their location or purpose. Ghost spat them out. He knew that if he ever wanted to hold a conversation with Dead then he must reiterate their story over again. Ghost was now good at skimming through their tale at speed.

“There’s nothing else we could do while we wait?” asked Dead.

“I don’t know Dead, you tell me what there is for a zombie and a spirit to do in good old Ironwood?”

Dead ignored him, frustrating Ghost further, and returned to staring at his tattoos.

Another hour passed when a well-dressed woman with short blonde hair and a kind face approached Dead.

“I’m sorry sir, but it’s closing time and we haven’t found your entry yet. If you’d like to come back tomorrow we should have something for you by then.” It was a well-versed line practiced many times.

“Come on then,” Ghost ordered his partner.

Dead was agitated, not at the thought of the lost time, but at the fear of his answer slipping away. He didn’t want to leave and it took some goading from Ghost before he would move. The blonde had taken several steps back, concerned by the big man’s body language, only relaxing when he shifted his weight to the exit.

“Well, what now?” Ghost cried.

“You got nothing?”

“No, I’m following you.”

Dead looked at him.

“Why?”

“I’m Ghost remember? I’ve been following you around since you awoke. I thought you at least remembered that”

“I do.”

Although he could not explain why, Dead did not forget Ghost. He couldn’t remember their conversations or deeds, only that they were supposed to be together.

“I meant, why aren’t you trying to find out your identity?”

“I have no dormant memories like you seem to have,” Ghost sighed. “It’s like the only reason I exist at all is to help you.”

Dead had no answer, nor could he give comfort.

“We’d better find an alley or something to sit in,” Dead decided.

“What, till tomorrow morning?” Ghost asked. “That’s hours away.”

“It’s alright, I don’t mind. Remember?” Dead bellowed, a thunderous laugh that served to bury Ghost deeper into his depressed state.

After walking for some time Ghost redirected his forgetful companion to a nearby pub, The Drunken Smithy. There was no argument from Dead as he was led into the fine establishment. The furniture was wrought iron but the quality of the build surpassed what they had seen in the Ilky Den.

A piano tinkered near the front of the pub, a quiet tune held together by the swaying fingers of an aging gentleman. The melody sought out the ears of street wanderers. Occasionally the song would falter as the player heaved a coughing fit into one hand, trying without much luck to maintain the tune with the other.

The long room was split in the middle by three steps, so that the far end of the inn was a full foot lower than the street entrance. A decent crowd had gathered for the night, their chorus rising over the pianoman’s chords.

There were less people at the back of the bar, attracting Dead towards it. He choose an empty booth and sat, ordering an ale when pressed by the plain serving maid. He nursed it for hours while Ghost spent much of the night wandering aimlessly and trying to catch some snippet of information. There was not much of interest but it served to wear down the time and gave him something to do other than chatting with his dense friend.

Ghost returned after several hours of skimming around the bar. Dead had found it difficult to sit still, squirming in his seat.

“What’s the matter?” Ghost asked

“I don’t know... I feel odd.”

“Odd? Aside from typical zombie feelings here?”

“No, I just feel weird. Like there’s something moving inside me or something.”

“Does it hurt,” Ghost asked, eyes hopeful.

“No,” Dead shifted his weight onto his other buttock. “Just odd, like I said.”

Ghost examined him closer. There was a slight sheen over Dead’s flesh, only subtle, but enough to replace the leathery tone that he usually had.

“You know, for a dead guy you don’t look so good.”

“Piss off,” Dead growled, swatting a backhand through the phantom. He was in no mood for jibes.

“Watch it,” Ghost yelled. “You know how that makes me feel?”

“Do I care?”

“Well, I hope they’re maggots you can feel squirming around. Nice big black ones eating you inside-out.”

Dead tried to ignore him, and the strange feeling. He focused his attention on his arms.

“Here you go again,” spat Ghost. “Staring at your arms. Great plan you’ve got there.”

“What’s your problem,” yelled Dead, slapping his mug aside. By now most eyes in the bar were focused on the scene. Three large bouncers approached, arms crisscrossed by scars and faded tattoos.

“Time for you to leave,” said the biggest, razor bald and overweight.

“This isn’t your business,” Dead snarled.

Ghost stood back from the confrontation.

“That’s the way Dead, don’t let these arseholes order you around.” Ghost wanted retribution for the backhand.

“Now,” ordered the bald man, reaching a thick hand around Dead’s shirt. Dead didn’t speak, grabbing the hand with his own, using his zombie strength to crush the bones. With an audible crunch the fat man cried out, plopping to one knee in agony. Dead slammed a fist into his face, snapping the head back at speed. Twice more Dead slammed his knuckles into the bloody skull before releasing his own grasp. The man fell back, blood streaming and an eye hanging loose by his crushed cheek.

The other two thugs, looking on in morbid apathy, came to and brandished steel pipes. They flayed into Dead’s head and body, pounding his head back at an unnatural angle and sprawling him out on top of the fallen man. Dead was off balance, the blows making it hard to find equilibrium. He pushed himself forward enough to envelope one assailant’s legs with his arms, using his foe to balance. Dead managed to stand, still holding on, and pulled himself up face to

face. With an open mouth he bit off the man's nose, his teeth forcing through cartilage and flesh. The man reeled, keeping hands pressed against the fresh hole.

Another blow to the back of his skull jarred Dead and he swallowed the nose. Uncaring, he bull-rushed the final man and they tumbled over a blood-soaked table. The pair struggled on the ground before Dead used his strength to push out. Standing, he wrenched the pipe off the larger man and struck out with it.

Dead hammered the pipe in rage. The weapon crushed the bouncer's skull over again, each time tearing away fresh chunks of bone and brain. Fascination mixed with horror for Ghost as he watched the fragments spreading across the bar. Spectators stepped away, unwilling to be a part of the grisly spectacle. Some were screaming. Ghost saw why.

Facing them was an inhuman being, painted in blood and holding a bone-clad weapon. One man was dead, two scarred for life, and the victor wore a twisted grin, eyes aflame with a bloodlust of maniacal proportions. The smile faded when four men entered the bar in haste. They were dressed in the uniform of the watch and carrying shock prods in insulated gloves, a heavy battery attached to the humming weapon.

"Drop the weapon," one ordered in a puffed voice.

"Do it," Ghost hissed.

Dead refused, standing his ground. The watchmen surrounded him, careful not to slip on the floor. As Dead raised his iron pipe in defence the guards flocked in, striking with their weapons. A series of charged bursts shot through Dead's body and he was knocked back through the air, his body contracting on itself. In a stunned state Dead was unable to control the spasms of his limbs, paralyzed while his mind raced. The watchmen shackled his hands.

24

"Haylee's with mum," Ammba told her father as he scanned the living area. It was a spacious carpeted room with two fireplaces set

either side. Only one burnt, fuelled by Tar Pine, the thick scent wafting through the room. A guard stood at each of the three doorways.

“Haylee should be careful what she tells your mother,” Ivan spoke in a soft tone. “She doesn’t need to be stressed.”

“Should we be?” asked Ammba.

Ivan shook his head. “I don’t think so. The noble’s are just blowing their horns. I’d expect them to stand down once the matter has settled.” It was a partial truth, Ivan only half believing his own words. “We’re going to be on tight security for a day or two, better to be safe.”

“Will Freddy be okay?” Damian asked, looking up from the fire.

“I expect. Even though it was not a legal duel, if what you say is true, there should be a case for defence.”

“Master Freeman said that it depends on whether he is tried under regent or noble law,” Damian said.

“That’s correct,” Ivan sighed. “As a foreigner placed under regency supervision, young Fredrick has that right, no matter what the nobles are complaining of.”

“But if the nobles take up arms?”

“They won’t,” Ivan felt like he was in council again. “Do you think anyone would be crazy to dive a nation back into civil war over the death of one silly noble’s son?”

“Master Freeman thinks so.”

“And what do you think?” Ivan countered. Damian bit his lip – the boy had no idea.

“I wanted to visit Victoria tomorrow,” Ammba huffed. Before she could complain further the main door opened.

Haylee entered the living room, a guard escort in tow, hugging her father on sight. He soothed her with promises that there was nothing to fear from the nobles, kissing her forehead and forcing a smile.

Ivan left the children, seeking the company of his sick wife. The halls were quiet, the typical buzz of servants absent. He had sent most non-residential staff home, leaving only a skeleton crew of the most trusted to remain.

The bedchamber was filled with Ashline incense, the heavy burning scent achieving little in cloaking the smell of death. Kayla looked dead, a motionless waif laid out on the bed.

Ivan coughed once in courtesy, a sudden surge of panic waylaid only after a slow response from Kayla. She turned, offering a faint

smile at his approach. It was a rare thing for him to visit anymore. Ivan placed his hand over hers, looking like a giant's in comparison.

"How do you feel?" he asked, regretting it at once, groping for the appropriate words.

"I'm okay," she whispered. Despite the clammy hands and sweat her eyes were still vibrant, shining with the light from the oil lamp.

"You look good," he lied. She did not answer, embracing him with another weak smile. "I told the children not to worry... and I don't think you should either."

"It's hard not to... when I lay here all day."

"You need to rest..."

"I'm numb," Kayla whispered. Ivan looked at the medical paraphernalia that decked the far desk. The doctor's were at a loss to her illness, preparing theories that were not backed up by the medicine administered. "Will Fredrick lose his life?"

"I can't say yet. It's a possibility."

"Damian adores him..." The boys had grown fast friends under the walls of the citadel.

"It would be a shame for anymore children to die," Ivan conceded. "The nobles don't see that in their grasping for power."

"Send him away... back home."

It was unacceptable, Ivan felt, to disregard the law in such fashion.

"I can't. I would stand to lose too much. The boy will receive full support from the citadel... I am determined not to have him fall prey to the noble's vicious court system."

She did not reply, lying still with a slight opening to her lips. She struggled to breathe, the visit draining her. Ivan sat, contemplating his future and the past they had shared, quiet.

25

Damian entered the citadel cells. They were a small part of the castle, designed to handle only a few prisoners of important standing at a time. Thick carpet and heated elements kept the level from freezing. Fredrick's chamber was guarded by a solitary figure, an older guard that knew the family well. He opened the steel slab door and stood

aside on Damian's approach, only blocking access to the bodyguard that accompanied the child.

Fredrick pounced off his bed when he saw Damian, thick blankets dropping to the floor. The boys locked in a hug of friendship and fear.

"What's going to happen?" Fredrick asked first.

"No one knows yet," Damian admitted, producing a large strap of duck jerky and chunk of spotted cheese. Fredrick placed them on his bedside table. There was no lack of food in the prison.

"Will there be a trial?" Fredrick asked.

"Father thinks so. He wants to have you tried here in the citadel where you will get off easily."

"What of that ringleader?"

"Thomas? What of him?"

"He was the instigator. In my country anyone charged with starting a fight illegally is considered just as guilty as the accused."

"I don't think that happens here," Damian guessed.

"Harmond wouldn't have died if it wasn't for the other boys. Do you remember them teasing him?"

Damian nodded, recalling the taunts that were echoed throughout the fight.

"His father was arrested, accused my father of seeking to betray the nation."

Fredrick looked at his feet. He felt sorry for the man, considering how his own father would feel if news returned that he had been killed in an illegal duel.

"He was probably angry," Fredrick suggested.

"So?" Damian did not like the challenge. "He should have shown respect. Nobles cannot accuse the state-head of crimes in public like that."

Fredrick did not respond, returning to his bed to sit at its edge.

"My father has hired lawyers to support your case. They're good, three of them."

"And how long do they think I'll be locked up for?"

"No one knows." Damian sat next to the accused. "If I were regent then I would say 'to hell' with the nobles and free you under my own authority... but my father is not like that."

"He is a wise man," Fredrick admitted. He had spent the past three years under his watch and grown to know the man as a second father. "Lord Steward would not do anything rash."

"Kings should be able to do what they like," Damian huffed.

“He isn’t a king though.”

“That’s not what my teacher says...”

26

“Do you know the true meaning of the Beast?” Callis asked.

Nielle paused in his duty of scrubbing at the ash and dirt caked under the knight’s toenails. The child shook his head, keeping eyes pressed down. Nielle was not a member of the faction, he was a servant to the church, assigned to Callis as a Golden Fledgling. He would not be required to choose a faction until his inauguration from a Meakling Priest or Wandering Knight.

“When the Patriarcht founded Ironwood twelve hundred years past, a mountain tribe lived in this valley. They were a religious people, fearful of a plague that possessed members of their tribe, causing bloody convulsions, extreme rage and power. The tribesman had worshipped a god, named Julkett, who they believed could shield them from this possession.

“The Patriarcht was obsessed with these people: tall, fair and hardy, at odds with the shorter citizens of the Empire. He sought to create a new race of man, divided between the strength of the mountain people and the wisdom of the Imperials. The eventual interbreeding led to the descendants of Ironwood, holding ties to the Empire but differing from them. The two people formed into one and over time their religions blurred. At first Julkett was adopted in its original form, co-existing with those that chose to worship the Imperial gods. Centuries passed and the religions merged into one. After that it was claimed he took on human form, growing into the guise of the creatures he most cherished. Julkett forgot his bestial ties and became Ea-Manati, the god of many faces. It was a new god that found popularity with the kings, enforcing its worship and outlawing the pagan roots of the city. As the centuries folded on, memories of the ancient gods were forgotten to all bar academics and members of the Beast.”

“Aea-Baeni? But I thought that was ‘the Bestial Manati’?” Nielle had stopped scrubbing.

“Its literal translation means ‘worship of the beast’. Ea-Manati is legendary in lore for his battle with the gods, what many say was his triumph over Jultett and the other gods of the savage people. Their interpretation is wrong, the history points to the evolution of Ironwood’s religious keystones. Aea-Baeni represents an age past and forgotten lore. The weakling leaders of our faction’s past have allowed it to become misused, so that most now interpret it akin to the Wrathmen but without the strength of that sect.”

Nielle resumed his work, picking off dead skin from dried calluses. “Will you change this?”

Callis watched the boy, weighing up how much to tell him. As a Golden Fledgling he was sworn to secrecy, the punishment for breaking an oath – a torturous death. Yet Callis was an untrusting man, never sure where to place his secrets.

“Perhaps,” he admitted. “Tell me Nielle, are you a child of the beast?”

“In as much as I am yours... yes.”

“And after that?”

Nielle looked up again, unsure how to answer. It was something that he had not paid a lot of thought to. By tradition many fledglings flocked to the sect they were raised in, many of their links already formed and set. Weaker factions experienced less of this retainership though and saw many migrate to the more powerful during the inauguration. “I guess it depends,” Nielle concluded.

“On?” Callis asked. Nielle did not answer, a tight lip covered by a purple bruise. “Wealth?.. Security?.. Promotion?..”

“Promotion,” Nielle agreed. “I would aspire to higher ranks as you have done.”

“And you will chose your faction based on this?” Callis smiled. “My child, you are more a follower of the Beast than you might believe.”

Callis reached out and snatched away the scrubbing brush.

“Stand up,” he ordered. “I want you to run an errand.”

Dervon and Nielle were friends. They were of similar age and same rank. Whereas Nielle ascended the servanthood through family history, Dervon had aspired through superior intelligence and effectiveness, able to run figures and manage books that many adults struggled with. While their masters had spent many nights fighting, the

two boys had sought community among themselves, spending their study time together in the libraries.

They had spent time speaking on the differences in their masters. Whereas Callis sought power and promotion, Gustus sought to consolidate the remnants of Aea-Baeni and flee from risk. The conflict had interested the boys from the beginning, though as the furor grew and assault reined upon them, they sought to be free of it.

They returned from the evening meal, pressing the many steps that rounded the Grand Tower. It was a spiral set that shot upwards, many rooms and studies branching off the external wall. As servants they could not access the steam powered elevator set in the middle of the tower, running its length.

“Did he say what I was wanted for?” Dervon puffed, trying to keep up with Nielle.

“No. He just wanted you to come. I think he might be interested in a truce with Baeni-Esum.”

“He could have sent you to do that,” Dervon frowned, a faint pain in his ribs memory of their previous encounter.

“I don’t question the lord,” Nielle pointed.

“Nor do I,” Dervon stated with haste, correcting his mistake. “Is he still mad regarding the vote?”

“He hasn’t mentioned it... to me.”

They continued, pressing past guards who nodded them through, the golden wings clasping the boys’ cloaks indication of their station. They reached the study, Nielle knocking once before entering.

Callis looked up from a scroll, staring dark-eyed at the children. He did not speak as the boys stepped forward, standing in the centre of the room. To Callis’ left hung a suit of ornate platemail, the highest casting presented in the church.

“My lord,” Dervon bowed in a nervous arc. “You summoned me?”

“I did,” Callis noted, dipping his head to Nielle. “Thankyou for coming in good time.”

Callis lifted his head again, the nod completed. From within a belt Nielle drew a sliver of a blade, bringing the thin stiletto out across his body and swinging it back. The blade pierced the side of Dervon’s neck, missing the arteries and glancing off the spine’s edge. Dervon dropped in an instant, dragging Nielle down too.

“I told you to prepare for his weight to drop,” Callis stated in a calm voice, walking to the pair and turning. He held a compact

crossbow, used by few since the introduction of firearms. With simple grace he aimed at his suit, firing a single bolt into the chest.

“You’re covered in blood now,” Callis chided. “How do you expect to help me into my armour?” Nielle failed to answer, looking into Dervon’s terrified eyes. Fingernails clawed across the fine slate and legs pumped in a final moment.

“Forget him now. You did well.” Callis soothed, passing Nielle a towel and pointing to the suit.

27

Four days passed under lockdown. The guards of Greenstone castle dragged their feet under the weight of extended shifts, their eyes red and heavy. A stirring of assorted noble voices jabbed with complaints when Geoffrey Goldshore had been tried in the Regent’s Court.

Geoffrey had escaped the charge of Royal Defamation, the crime brought down to plain defamation. It accosted a two thousand-coin fine, to be paid into the Regent’s coffers. He had complained of the charge but acceded, knowing that the punishment could have been worse. The man was still grieved from the loss of his son when he was released from his cell.

Ivan’s councilors had reported back. There was a level of discontent within the nobility concerning the incident though few wanted to drag the issue out. Ivan hoped that time would wash away third party interest from the matter.

On the fourth morning a note arrived bearing the six sided cross of the church pressed into the wax seal. The church had indicated its support for the regent’s right to prosecute Fredrick, sealing the matter in the eyes of most nobles. Few would dare plant their voice against the savage sanctimony of Ea-Manati.

With this Ivan relaxed.

The lockdown was ended, the citadel reopened to representatives of the court and nobility. A crowd buzzed through the open hall as the day’s session started. Ivan stood, waiting for the herald to announce the day’s proceedings. He noted that the hall was full for the first time

since his ordainment, the recent calamity generating a renewed interest in the station.

Ivan stepped to the raised dock, placing him a half body's length above everyone else. He wore the standard dress of the regent, a black robe with gold hems.

"Before we begin, I would like to issue a statement on the recent situation concerning the death of the Themmond child," Ivan struck to the point. "I have been criticised for my stand on the matter and for disallowing the nobles to charge my ward under their laws. I would like it noted that I am a man of my word. I swore an oath to grant my ward protection and assist in his upbringing. This is an oath that reflects on Ironwood's standing as a nation and city. If I were to acquiesce to the nobles baying for blood then I would have betrayed not only my ward, but the city as a whole.

"I would further like it noted that the boy's trial will begin on the eve of the following month. During that time it is expected that a case be compiled against him on the behest of Geoffrey Goldshore. Currently our lawyers have built a strong case in defence of the child. It was an illegal duel, one that was just as much the fault of the Goldshore child as the accused. During this trial it is expected that charges may be brought against other conspirators to the fight."

"What of your son? I heard he was part of it." Ivan looked for the voice, lost in a sea of faces.

"That will be covered by the courts," he stated in a calm voice.

"Bah, the regent's court. Who's to expect them to charge the regent's heir?" Again Ivan could not find the voice, nor could the eyes of his guards, scanning the mob.

"The issue is concluded for the day. If you have no other reason for being here then I suggest you leave so that those who wish to do business with the regent may have the opportunity."

Many of the crowd departed, having heard what was said. Some pointed out that the regent had not apologised. Others left with their idle curiosity satisfied. The audience that remained were mainly merchants and foreigners.

Victoria was of the same age as Ammba, an attractive girl with long chestnut hair, heavier than Ammba's, held up in a knot. She wore a thick woolen vest over a velvet top and leather riding pants. Ammba stepped out of the carriage with a hand from Gerard, her doting guard, looking at odds with the other girl. She wore a laced dress running full length, impractical in the frosty autumn morning.

"Are we not riding today?" Victoria asked, descending the marble steps of Geiland Manor and brushing Ammba's cheek with a kiss.

"We are," Ammba smiled, pointing to a case on the back of the breechpine carriage. "Father has enough worries."

Gerard struggled with the large trunk, untying it from the back rail and lugging it up the front stairs. Geiland Manor was the second largest of its type within the city. More a complex bridled with many unused guest rooms than a home. It also held claim to one of only two parks within the city, a large artificial grassland decked with Tar Pines and hedge mazes. It was the one place that Ammba felt peaceful within the ironclad city. Ash still streaked into the parkland however and a full-time contingent of cleaners shoveled out the foul mess during the dry season.

"That looks heavy," Victoria remarked as Gerard bounced the case up the stairs, his neck standing taught as he struggled with the weight.

"It would not be proper for a princess to travel light," Ammba reflected. Both girls aired out gentle laughs that enticed the male guards standing atop the flight.

"Would you look on while Sir Gerard fulfils Miss Steward's bidding?" Victoria teased her own guard. The man snapped from his trance, rushing to help carry the heavy weight.

"Did you bring your own horse?" Victoria continued with a laugh, suggesting that it hid in the case.

"Of course, he's tied to the carriage though." Ammba looked innocently at the other guard.

"Allow me," he stumbled, hurrying to prepare the gelding.

"Men are easily manipulated," Victoria sighed. "It almost seems too unfair."

* * *

Once Ammba's belongings were taken inside she changed into her riding gear, a leather outfit with a crested family insignia on the breast.

In the case also hid a leather riding saddle, several dresses and a large makeup box.

“I suppose the saddle should go with the horses,” Ammba said, pointing to the front door. Gerard nodded, failing to complain at the nonsense, and pulled out the heavy riding set, lugging it to the rear of the house.

“That was nice of him,” Victoria smiled.

“He’s always helping out. For a lord’s guard he makes a good porter.” Both girls laughed, cutting through the manor to the stables. Their horses were waiting, both geldings, one saddleless.

“A new horse?” Ammba admired, running a hand down its sleek coat.

“He’s a Hyett purebred. I purchased him from a Northane merchant several weeks back. He’s a delight to ride. Larger than the typical mountain horses of the Imperial stock. I’ve called him Herieht, after his barbaric lineage.”

Ammba was impressed, she took an interest in most things that drew from outside the city, often scrambling to witness the wonders brought in from select merchants that dealt in souvenirs.

“At what cost?”

“A lady never tells,” Victoria smiled. “Let’s just say that if my father knew then he would have me thrown out.”

She joked, Lord Geiland was known throughout for spoiling his daughters. He had produced six through his time, his wife never bearing a son. When she died he had not taken a new wife, preferring the company of his daughters and the work of running an expanse of mines to keep him busy. They were one of the few noble families left that did not outsource their property to the corporations, the mass of logistics and accounting enough to keep one lord busy until the end of time.

From around a corner stumbled Gerard, a thick saddle weighing down his left shoulder.

“He’s waddling,” noted Victoria, as Gerard struggled to stop the seat from slipping, his shoulders crooked as his left sagged.

“Waddling like a duck,” Ammba laughed.

They began quaking as the young man blushed, ending his task with a deep pant.

“Thank you Duck,” Ammba told him. “Though it would’ve been faster to cut through the manor rather than going around.”

Gerard was breathless and irate. Ammba had directed him out the front door. His attempt at revolt was cut short when she ordered him to saddle her horse.

The girls rode for part of the morning, their guard in tow, the scent of the thin grass and pines just discernable over the heavy smog. It had stopped raining through the night and already there was a thin layer of ash blanketing the park.

"I wish the wind would change," Victoria sighed. All the ash in the city drugged out from the coal stations in the northernmost part of the city. They were set there as Ironwood took in a southern wind for the majority of the year, pushing the pollution further north into the Highlands and Milkweed river. During the autumn months the wind changed into a swirling one, drawing the choking ash into the city more often.

The park was not so wide as it was long, stretching through the north wall and continuing into the Sloping Crag, an area of the city off-limits to all bar the highest socialites. It was the other park contained within the city, larger than the Geiland one but more trafficked.

The girls ate a light morning tea under the branch of an old oak, struggling to survive in the harsh conditions. It was a twisted creature, shorter than the glorious oaks that Ammba had seen during her stay in the Imperial heartland, inspiring nonetheless. Both girls had spent many years of their younger life playing in the gnarled branches.

As the girls nibbled honey cakes Victoria's two guards watered and fed the horses while Duck poured tea for the girls. The sun came through split clouds, a welcome reprieve from the constant drizzle of the last week. Ammba and Victoria drank it up, knowing that it might be months before they felt its touch again.

A crack sounded off, snapping the girls from their daydreams. It was followed by a second. Herieht galloped past the trio, nostrils flared in terror. Duck stood, dragging a musket from his belt, his sword hanging in its sheathe. He scanned the field, noting two bodies sprawled in the grass not far off. Several pines were scattered across the park providing hidden access. He gestured for the girls to stay near the oak, making his own way towards it. He watched from behind the twisted stump, scanning the spread of wood.

Ammba screamed. The enemy had flanked them. Before Duck could turn a shot was fired from behind, the lead ball-bearing hitting

him in the back, searing through the steel plate and digging deep into chain mail. The force bowled him over.

At first there was one figure, wearing a heavy black cloak, face concealed in a wrap around scarf. Both girls were screaming as more figures appeared from the woodland, two, four then six. Each carried a rifle, a rare commodity within the city. The girls held each other tight, fearing the worst as they were trapped.

One figure pointed and Ammba was wrenched from her companion. With deft skill she was tied and gagged, thrown over a shoulder and carried away. She struggled with her bonds, tied with a professional skill that saw off a young girl's fight.

As the sect carried off their prize Victoria was left alone and untouched, sobbing in trauma. She lay in the grass, face smeared with ash. A moan tore her from her mourning. She looked over to see Duck, his face rendered in pain. Victoria crawled to him, cradling his face.

"They've taken Ammba," she sniveled.

"I can't move my legs," Duck wheezed. The chain mail had stopped the bullet from slicing him apart. It had not prevented the force from hammering his kidney with enough power to crack the spine. "You need to get help."

Victoria stood on weak legs, trembling with horror. She searched for a horse. They had fled leaving her to return on foot.

29

Ivan dismissed his councillors. It had been five days since he had ordered the citadel locked down. Since then there had been little news regarding the nobles' intentions. Whatever plans they had set out were made behind closed doors, their schemes known only to a few. There had been no threat of attack and his spies had not found anything of great consequence.

Ivan sat with a glass of fine Imperial wine, his entourage of four guards standing firm by the chamber door. He sunk into the backed leather chair and took a deep draught, letting the spiced flavour sooth his throat, sore from speech. Master Freeman watched him, a concerned look across his face.

“You still look worried,” Freeman said.

“Aye, and will be till this thing is done and dead.”

“The church has granted you their support, you should relax.”

“They took their time,” Ivan whined, re-filling his cup and pressing it to his lips.

“They are a democracy of sorts. Nothing will ever be done with speed. The church is a slow hulk, once set to a path, near indestructible.”

“Well, I wish they had come sooner,” Ivan lamented, a slur added to his voice.

“You’ve drunk a lot these last few days,” Freeman noted. Ivan gave a furled brow over the rim of his cup.

“It soothes my stomach,” he said, patting his belly to emphasise.

“I’ve seen it before,” Freeman continued, reflecting on the past regents and kings he had served. “It’s stress.”

“So the doctors say... did you come here to admonish me?”

“Of course not,” Freeman confronted. “I wanted to discuss formal arrangements for your declaration of ascendancy.”

“My heir,” Ivan restated.

“I would offer advice if you chose to listen.” Ivan was quiet, enough of an answer for the old man. “Give your support to Haylee.”

Ivan’s eyes betrayed his surprise. “Tradition says that I should off it to the first born”

“And what do you think of that?”

“Ammba would not make a good regent,” Ivan agreed. “But I do not think Haylee has the strength of heart to follow her will either.”

“She is smarter than you give her credit.”

“I do not doubt her intelligence,” Ivan corrected. “But that alone will not rebuild the station of regent.”

“She understands the game better than the other children, I can attest to this.”

“And do you know the game?”

Freeman was insulted, he had been a king’s councilor before Ivan was born, and a regent’s one since their coming.

“What are you implying?” he snapped.

Ivan opened his mouth, his voice slurred to an incomprehension.

“Lord Steward?” Freeman asked.

The cup dropped, spiced wine spilling across expensive carpets. Ivan’s arms were twitching, his hands grasped to the wooden armrests

to prevent them from flailing. Freeman stood and rushed to his aide, shouting for a guard to fetch the surgeon.

The twitch turned into a convulsion, the regent's body thrown from the chair and sprawling out in an uncomfortable position. Ivan was bent over, his legs jerking out and in again. Guards rushed to his side, trying to discern the cause of attack, turning over the regent on Freeman's order. The Master tried to check Ivan's airways while two of his guards pinned down the regent's flailing arms, another lying on his legs. They struggled while Ivan's head cracked back and forth, spitting foam and choking. With fingers scrapping inside the lord's airways Freeman could feel no blockage.

"It's poison," he told one of the guards.

"What do we do?" came the concerned reply.

"We wait."

It took time for the surgeon to arrive, his flabby head panting from the charge up the stairs.

"Get here now," Freeman demanded. "He's been poisoned." the convulsions had slowed to a persistent tenseness.

The doctor wasted no time, pushing past the guards sitting on the regent.

"Get off him," he puffed. As they did Ivan's body contorted slowly, spine bending backwards so that Ivan's feet nearly touched the back of his head.

"That's bad," the doctor grieved.

"A toxin?" Freeman asked.

"Only one does that to a man... Tylon Ferment."

The Master nodded in grim understanding. There was no cure to the poison.

"He has no chance?" the question was rhetoric.

"None. The worst is done... he will die within the hour."

"Take him to his bedchamber. Inform his children... and his wife," Freeman added as an afterthought.

"What would you have me do?" asked the heavyset doctor.

"You said yourself there is nothing to do. Mayhap if you didn't take so long to reach us." The doctor tried to defend against his obesity. The Master would not hear it, dismissing the fat man.

There were tears throughout as Damian entered the chamber to witness Haylee at their father's bedside. Ivan had been tied down to

prevent the convulsions from snapping his back, his muscles in constant spasm. Damian ran to him, pouring out mournings alongside his sister. They embraced, supporting one another.

“Where is Ammba?” Haylee begged. Damian shrugged.

The door opened a further time, the children turning to see their frail mother bundled in the arms of her personal guard. She was weeping, a long dirge of a moan escaping as she lay eyes on her husband. It set off the children more, their own cries building into a crescendo. A servant wiped the sweat and foam from the face of the poisoned lord, a wet facecloth the only application for the ailed.

“Fix him, please,” Kayla croaked to the room. She had no understanding of poisons, or the lethality of the administered dose.

“Who did this?” Damian asked. There came no reply, only despair. He reached out a hand, cupping his father’s, ignoring the high heat that radiated from it. Damian tried to slip his fingers through the tight clenched fist but could not.

A gentle knock came from the door. Master Freeman entered. He graced Kayla’s shoulder with his hand, offering what little support he could. He had already seen the death of two regent’s and a king before that, a spectacle that dogged his career. He turned to the children, hugging them as he crossed the bedside.

“Who did this?” Damian again asked.

“That’s what we’re going to find out,” the old man whispered. “I have issued for a team of detectives. I will consult with them when they arrive. Your father had few enemies... the nobles perhaps... or a rival,” he said, reminding them of the regent’s sister still in hiding.

“Where’s Ammba?” Kayla managed. Freeman returned to her side of the bed.

“She’s spending the day in Victoria’s company. A courier has been sent to fetch her though I fear she may arrive too late.”

Sobs greeted mention of the inevitable. Another knock, this time of a messenger, sent to inform Freeman of the councilors’ assemblage. With quiet words he excused himself, climbing back to the meeting hall.

“You must give exact details,” Gehrig demanded of Freeman as he entered. They were standing in the chamber where Ivan had been poisoned, examining the cup.

“It happened after the council,” the old man retold, visibly upset. “As you all know, I prefer to give our lord personal council. He was drinking spiced wine, for a stomach ache.”

“The poison was in the wine,” Stephen said, sniffing at the cup.

“You should not disturb the evidence,” the Master continued. “A team will be sent to investigate properly.”

“You would be used to this though, Master Freeman,” accused Damon. “Lords have a tendency to die around you.”

The old man was aggrieved by the charge, stopping to recompose himself.

“Leave him,” snapped Maria. “What else occurred?”

“The doctor confirmed it was Tylon Ferment.”

“I know it,” Clarissa told them. “Not preferred, it gives off a slight but distinct odour. You wouldn’t notice it in spiced wine though. They farm it in the deep north.”

A few eyes scrutinized the tight set body of the spy, checking her body language. She was relaxed, unconcerned that they might host fantasies of her killing Ivan.

“Where would you find it in the city?” Stephen asked, trying to build an image of the perpetrator in his head.

“The usual quarters,” she answered. “Any one of the crime syndicates could get hold of it. Merchants might carry it from times. Like I said, they farm it in the north, it’s not rare.”

“Availability is not the issue,” Freeman continued. “My concern is how this substance made it into the regent’s cup under our noses.”

“Ivan pours his own draught,” Gehrig noted.

“From his personal store. Whoever planted the drug must be very close to the regent.”

“Do you think it was one of us?” Maria asked Freeman, her eyes shifting to the barbarian.

“What are you implying?” Gehrig recoiled, noting the look.

“Enough,” Stephen interjected. “It’s possible that any of us could have planted it through a sleight of hand, but much too risky. I would be looking at the servants who wait on our lord.”

“Indeed,” the Master agreed. “I will issue orders for all suspects to be rounded up and interrogated to the full extent.”

“To be helled that this happened the day after they opened the citadel,” stated Gehrig, “I say point the finger to the nobles.”

“It’s possible, but also a convenient scapegoat,” reflected Damon. “If I were to kill the regent then now would be the time.”

“He’s right,” Clarissa backed. “We should keep an open mind.”

“The church will want to be notified,” interrupted Freeman.

“What’s it got to do with them?” Gehrig asked, ignorant to the workings of social hierarchy in the city.

“They induct the regent,” Maria informed, mocking the barbarian.

“More to the point, they support a candidate docked for the position,” Freeman added.

“That would be Ammba,” Stephen said.

“Are we sure?” asked Clarissa. “He hinted that preference could one day go to Damian.”

“No. The reason for our talks was to discuss the ascendancy.” All eyes turned to Freeman.

“And what did you discuss?” Damon asked.

“The lord had wanted to formalize Haylee Steward as heir to the state.”

30

News came of Ammba’s kidnapping by word of urgent messenger. The councillors had been discussing choices for a guardian to replace the role of Ivan Steward, the names Longshore, Geiland, Bartlett and Brook all arose. Each of the high nobles would make suitable guardians to watch over the next regent until their coming of age. There had also been the suggestion of some of the smaller families, a neat trick that might drive a shift in the internal politics of the city, the Goldshores and Reitlins both an option. The councillors cut short their talk when the message came.

“Who would seek to kidnap the girl? It makes little sense.” Gehrig was lost, the recent events building into too much.

“Should we assume that it is directly linked to Ivan’s murder?” Stephen asked.

“We should not assume anything,” Clarissa stated in her soothe voice.

“And what would you suggest?” cracked the Master, visibly upset.

“We must keep ourselves open to possibilities,” Clarissa noted. “Examine the flow and effect of these events.”

“The what?” Gehrig stuttered.

“She’s talking about the consequences. Someone might be trying to swing the politics of the city by eliminating not only the regent but also his first-in-line.”

“But she has not been eliminated,” Stephen noted, his logical mind working on the problem. “I don’t think the two events were timed... personally.”

“Perhaps,” conceded Freeman. “She may have been intended as a bargaining chip.”

“For what?”

“To give up the Themmond boy perhaps. If that were the case we must suspect the nobles.”

“Or it could be a ruse,” Clarissa interjected. “This has a reek of the church.”

“I thought they were on our side?” wondered the barbarian with a dry tongue.

“The church are on no one’s side,” Damon told him. “They work for themselves. I don’t see what gain they could hope to achieve by doing this though.”

“Maybe there was some dissent among the voters?”

“Or maybe we are looking in the wrong place,” stated Maria. “The regent’s most important role is to administer foreign affairs. Who would stand to gain the most by robbing the regent of his first born?”

“Merchants?” Stephen asked with a raised eyebrow.

“Or a kingdom...” Maria replied, an eye on Gehrig.

“Or an empire,” he spat back. “Watch who you accuse here woman.”

“Enough,” Freeman rose. “There is too much at play for us to sit here and argue. We need time to think and rationalize. Break for a meal and return by the hour, I will inform our charges of their sister’s predicament.”

Damian was perched out on the regent’s balcony when the Master came. He had been watching the city from across the walls, mesmerised by the flakes of ash that glided across his face. He did not want to think. If he did then he would start to fear for himself and his family. Black plumes billowed out from distant towers, their clogging soot soaking the city. It was appropriate to his desperate mood. Inside he could hear his sister wailing again, a sound that repeated itself. He did not check, she had been raving for half the morning.

The heavy oak frame opened, the teacher stepping out into the brisk air. The old man was not used to the outdoors, preferring to spend his late days couped inside a heated room. The immediate effect was known, Freeman trying to keep a chatter from his jaw while he informed the boy.

Damian did not respond to news of Ammba's abduction. He continued to watch the black smoke pumping out, contemplating the world. The silence made the Master feel more uncomfortable and he prepared to leave. Damian spoke a word, 'Freeman', holding him back.

"What is it son?"

Damian turned to him, eyes swollen and cheeks blistered red.

"I want to be regent." The words came from a weak voice.

"That is a matter for the council as a whole." The old man spoke with a kind voice, not wanting to distress him further.

"It was what my father wanted."

"It was never formalised, I'm afraid. The ultimate choice lies somewhere between the council and the church." Damian understood that, the council selected a candidate and the church supported them. Without the church's backing a regent could not be inducted.

"Who will get my sister back?"

"There will be an investigation," Freeman told him for the second time that day. Damian stared out as the Master left.

31

"It is a shame that your servant killed the child," Horaius muttered, a weathered parchment in hand. He was scanning through church legislation, noting laws set down centuries past. "Interrogation is always preferable to assumption."

"Indeed brother," Callis agreed, shifting on the uncomfortable Gumnut Pine stool. "It worries me to think that my colleague could have administered such a plot. Not knowing is the worst part."

"Well, despite his declarations, the law does state that a master is responsible for the acts of their Fledgling brood. A crime of this

calibre by the child cannot be overlooked. Gustus Esum must be held accountable, lest we start a dangerous precedent.”

“Is there no way an outsider could have coerced him? Perhaps another faction head?” Callis was playing his part to ability, enjoying the calamity that the farcical assassination attempt had inspired.

“It’s a definite possibility,” Horaius admitted. “But one that still falls onto Gustus. He should have paid more attention to his chattel.”

“A shame,” Callis sighed. Horaius was the Crudent Manot, the Judgement Hand within the church. It fell to him to settle disputes of church law, weighing evidence and ruling sentence. He had spent days with the case, interviewing the associated over and again. Everyone from Callis and Gustus, down to the tower watch guards had spent many hours in his office. He was not a man to weigh lightly on such a serious case.

“Gustus must be purged from his sin,” Horaius continued. “As the highest victim in this incident you have the right to strike the blow if you wish.”

“Gustus would not want it any other way,” Callis said, solemn toned.

“I will announce it tonight then. My ruling has been made. You need to do this and organise for a priest to take his place in the Bestial sect.”

“I will start searching at once.”

Horaius dropped his scroll, a look of exhaustion evident on his wrinkled face. The decision was a conflicting one within him. He disliked the thought of holding a faction head responsible for the act of a servant, yet the law was unbending.

“There is one other thing,” Callis pressed. A bushy eyebrow rose in waiting. “I know it is against tradition but I want the Fledgling Nielle promoted to honorary guard.”

“That *is* out with tradition,” Horaius agreed.

“He saved the life of an Ihn-Manati, it is reasonable.”

The old man removed a set of rimmed glasses, rubbing his red eyes.

“You’re correct. The boy should be recognised. Will he take it though? It would require devotion to the Aea-Baeni for life.”

“I will have a word to him.”

“If he chooses to, it will be granted. I understand how the Beast Men struggle for members.”

“Balance in all things,” Callis quoted versed script.

Aea-Baeni's dungeon was a small part of a giant complex. Black walls hid the mould that infested them, leaving only a faint whiff of a growing sickness. A running furnace at one end of the room took little from the cold recess. Callis stood in the central atrium with Nielle at his side, his golden winged clasp exchanged for a steel chain. At his belt hung an Ihn's sabre, the fine blade suitable for his small hands. The pair watched Islemann work, setting the insulators into place.

"It was my invention," Callis noted with a hint of pride. "Though our friend here built it."

Islemann nodded once in appreciation of his acknowledgment. Nielle had served Callis for over two years yet it was the first time he had met the man. He felt intimidated by the stranger. Islemann had a cruel face, yellow under the light and covered by terrible pock scars. One eye was swollen, red where the eye should stay white and a drooping lip. He wore a beard and cloak, covering most of his body. He was not dressed in the typical church manner, but in colours that would blanket him at night. Yet he was graceful, almost a glide in his step. Nielle watched as Islemann moved back and forth, a natural inclination to stay tread in the darkest shadows working in a subconscious mind.

"He looks dangerous," the honorary guard whispered.

"That's not the right word," Callis smirked. "A swordsman is dangerous. He is more like a plague, critical and deviant – totally devastating. He is a man that even poets would not sing about from fear."

"He serves Aea-Baeni?"

"No. You would be hard pressed to call him a churchman. Even the beast would be too civilised for this man." Nielle did not register the sarcasm, too subtle for the scared boy. "Don't speak to him. Know that he serves myself only and therefore he serves Aea-Baeni."

There was a nod from the child as Islemann returned from a holding room, a squirming sack lurched over one shoulder.

There was a whimper as the bag landed heavy on the wet stone floors, before a torrent of swearing erupted as the binding cord fell loose.

"You scum," Gustus croaked, his purple face screwed up as the light hit touched him.

"Dear brother Gustus," Callis welcomed, a wide smile beaming.

“Go fuck yourself Callis. I know what you’ve done, you and that bastard of yours.”

Callis smirked, enjoying it too much.

“Do not fret brother. They have ordered me to renounce you of your sins. Do you wish to confess before we begin?”

A thick gob of phlegm flushed out, missing them both. Before a second shot could be mustered Islemann wrapped a gag around Gustus’ head.

“Please don’t. I want to hear his screams unfettered.”

The executioner acquiesced, removing the gag. He dragged the crippled man to the centre of the room and tore his clothes away, so that Gustus’ pathetic member clung tight to its shivering host. Islemann locked his limbs into gold shackles, a copper ring coil sliding up over each limb, locking into place. Gustus could not move, spread-eagled and standing, copper coils wrapped around the length of his arms and legs.

“It’s ready,” Islemann barked, his voice croaking like an off-pitch singer.

“Good. Nielle, go invite our guests in please.”

Each faction head was present, eleven witnesses and one victim. There was an atmosphere of excitement as they wandered in, Callis greeting each with a handshake, a forced frown dismissed by their own interested looks.

“This, my brothers,” he started, gesturing to Gustus, “is ‘The Insulator’. It has been a project of mine for many months now. So far it has been tested only on lowborn criminals and those volunteers seeking redemption from their sins. It gives me little pleasure though to work its machinations on my brother Gustus. Yet what is redemption worth, if it is not bought though suffering?”

There was a rumbling of agreement.

Callis strode to the control panel, hoping that his pride and excitement was not evident. Islemann had disappeared before the leader’s arrival, keeping his presence hidden. On the panel was a series of buttons and dials. Callis started the machine with a single press, opening a valve from the burning furnace that was Nielle’s job to stock. It took several minutes for anything to happen, the faction leaders amusing themselves by admonishing Gustus by his downfall, he in turn lashing out with curses. Callis found it amusing, that Gustus would rather abuse the faction heads than claim his innocence one last time. A guiltier man would have tried to convince them, he thought.

As the copper heated, Gustus turned his attention away from them, squirming under the rising heat. Callis and Islemann had spent many nights experimenting with the coil metals, finding the right conductor. They had found that some did not conduct enough warmth and would only heat up at the base of the coils, whereas others heated up too fast and overwhelmed the victim before time. Copper seemed to be a good balance of the two, a slow heating metal that cooked the entire limb.

While many found perverse pleasure in Gustus' discomfort, there were those that found the scene disquieting, taking leave early. Callis noted that both Singers and Artists had left almost immediately, gifting the ceremony with only an official presence. Likewise, the high priest of the Builders also found himself absent, leaving only his knight counterpart to watch. The men who stayed found enjoyment in the scene, as Gustus' squirming turned into thrashing as his fingers and toes blistered from the rising heat. He was screaming still, though this time at no one in particular, just a general shriek for clemency or help.

Adjusting the dials, Callis was able to increase the heat output through the valves, letting the coils heat up further along the line. Red blisters formed along the fat man's calves and forearms, while the tips of his fingers had grown from deep red to a cooked brown. The room was filling with a sweet scent as the flesh cooked, fat bubbling out and dripping from the end of the man's fingers.

Gustus screamed over and again, this time praying to Ea-Manati. The roasting flesh continued as Callis manipulated the dials. Nielle continued to shovel coal into the furnace, keeping the fire running high. It was the best the boy could do to take his mind from the horror.

Even some of the most battle hardened veterans found the scene discomforting, only half still in attendance by the time the blisters were puckering over the priest's thighs. Callis found humour in watching the penis, at one point hanging low from the heat, recoiling back inside itself to escape. The hairs around his groin singed, a pungent smoke burning off and mingling with the flavour of roasting meat.

Gustus' shrieks had turned to moans, a weak attempt at prayer passing in and out of audibility. Up to his knees and elbows the flesh was black, raw blisters and medium cooked meat running the rest. As his penis swelled and split, spitting fat juice from the ruptured genitals, Callis turned down the dial, closing the valve. With a flurry of combinations on the panel, each coil retreated back into its holding pen

at the base. Callis nodded to Nielle, who struggled to carry a bubbling pot of lead with iron tongs.

The mad inventor flourished a smile at his remaining audience before producing a rough spun rope. He tied it tight under Gustus' shoulder, before dragging the knotted strand hard across. The skin peeled back, revealing cooked muscle and bone. Gustus awoke with the new pain, shrieking in horror at the sight. Nielle placed the pot of molten lead above the shoulder and tipped out the contents, letting it bubble down Gustus' naked tissues.

Again they followed the procedure, pulling back the skin and flesh from the other arm and then the legs. Gustus stayed awake for the most part, each rending of flesh dragging him back to his tortured reality. By the end he was a steaming, cooked and shattered figure, limbs sealed tight in set lead.

"He is not dead," Gaius Ipsum joked. "Perhaps he was innocent after all."

Callis smiled at him.

"The ceremony is not finished yet."

There was one pot left. With careful balance Nielle carried it over, while Callis held back the priest's head with a second set of tongs, designed to go over the face and hold open the mouth.

"As a traditionalist," Callis announced, "I believe in merging old with new. Hence forth I wish to end with the Quenching of Flagellation."

Gustus' eyes bulged as the boiling lead dripped, a final scene of agony as the terror liquid filled the mouth and burnt open the gullet, pooling in the stomach.

32

A single flickering bulb lit the holding cells, dark patches recessed in the furthest corners. An unlit fireplace stood adjacent to Dead's cell. No guard bothered to descend into that frozen place to set the coals alight, leaving an icy sheen to develop on the stone walls.

Dead sat in a narrow cage just wide enough for two men to stand astride. Days passed without word of prosecution. No one had come to

see him or to lay charge. Together with Ghost, they had stayed in a tight cell with no bed and only a bucket to defecate in. Dead had not used it, nor would he eat the stale bread passed through the bars twice a day. The original cell had been split by an extra set of bars, dividing the cell into two in order to fit more captives into each block. The iron work was sturdier than the last prison, the door resisting Dead's considerable efforts to force it open.

Dead had ingratiated himself with a fellow inmate who shared the cell across from him, passing his ration through. The captive's name was Hillard, locked up for striking a town watchman during a drunken brawl.

Over the days Hillard came to learn of Dead's story as Ghost reiterated it. Hearing about Dead's memory loss encouraged Hillard to repeat the same stories over again, much to the irritation of Ghost who had followed Dead into the cell unwittingly.

"I should have stayed outside," he bemoaned as Hillard retold the story about the two noble ladies he'd shared in one night.

"How many times is he going to tell us this one?" Ghost cried. Dead ignored him, the tales were of mild interest to him and kept his mind occupied.

Ghost sprawled out on the grime-ridden floor, his eyes shut but still staring up at the damp brickwork ceiling. He was ethereal, shutting his eyes didn't work, instead making everything blurry. Ghost did not handle imprisonment well, able to rant for hours if left unchecked, not that anyone listened.

Dead worried only for himself. Although he could not remember when the squirming sensation started, he was sure it was getting worse. There was a definite pressure inside his bowel that he could not stop thinking about.

"Lady Gemmand was beautiful," stated Hillard. "Thick blonde hair and the most perfect smile."

"She was a redhead last time I heard this story," noted Ghost.

"Nicely plump too," Hillard licked his lips. "But then you'd see Lady Reidbrook and even your heart would miss a beat Charlie."

"I think it'd miss a lot," quipped Ghost.

"Who's Charlie," Dead whispered.

"That's the name I gave you. Had to tell the guards something."

An understanding look swept Dead's face and he nodded, not considering why he had been locked up.

“And these two beauties in the same room with lucky old me,” a faraway glaze came over Hillard.

“More the like ‘these two toothless miner’s daughters’ I’d expect,” sang out Ghost.

“Tell me Charlie,” Hillard asked as he came back to reality. “What would you have done in that situation?”

“Tell him you would have butchered them and gone through their purses,” suggested Ghost.

Dead shrugged, the thought of being with a woman did not excite him. Since being dead he had lost those sexual urges that drive most people.

“A normal man would have had his fill and slept till dawn, leaving two kittens to play alone. Not old Hillard though,” he stood, as if it served to heighten the drama. “I pleased them twice over each, no small task for noble daughter’s. Then, once they slept enwrapped in each other, I took my leave of those ladies.” He clapped once with the excitement. “Imagine their embarrassment to awake the next day abandoned and missing their most precious jewels,” he laughed. “Not something they could run and explain to daddy now.” He smiled, sitting back down on the cold stones. “Oh to have a Lady Gemmand with me now.”

“Please let him be hanged,” Ghost wished. Hillard had a collection of two stories and Ghost had heard each a dozen times at least. “Dead, if you get the chance then I order you to kill that man. Do it like that poor bastard in the bar.”

Dead came back from his clogged thoughts.

“What poor bastard?”

“Hillard was boring a patron with one of his god awful stories,” he smirked. “You thought the most humane thing to do would be to cave the audience’s skull in. Of course the city watch took offence to this and dragged you and Hillard down here. You for murder, Hillard for violation of humanity.”

“Oh,” Dead said in a surprised voice, trying to picture the scene.

“So you’re down here for storytelling?” Dead called out.

“What? Me? No,” Hillard laughed. “But if you’d like I could tell you an interesting tale about the time I broke into Ironwood First Bank... Stop me if you’ve heard it.”

Ghost groaned in torment, Dead was silent, and so the story re-begun.

“Right oh, Hillard Steelten and Charles Longpin, come with me.” Dead looked at the man with an absent glaze.

“Look’s like it’s judgement time Charlie,” commented Hillard.

“Charlie?” Dead asked, confused.

“Don’t bother,” Ghost ordered. “Just do whatever you’re told and act sorry. With any luck you’ll get out of this with a light whipping.”

The two men were ordered to place their hands outside a narrow slit in the door, shackled before leaving their confine.

“No funny business you two.” Their gaoler was a young man with a fresh face. Stocky enough to handle the more aggressive inmates but with little real command in his voice.

“No need to be rough friend,” complained Hillard as they were held tight to the arm and escorted up the narrow stone passage.

“It’s a simple procedure, being judged,” informed the young gaoler. “Stand up when they tell you, shut up unless asked to talk, and take your punishment without fuss.”

The trio marched up a series of damp and decayed stairs while Ghost trailed behind, relieved to be free of the cell and excited at the prospect of returning to the surface. Dead’s fate did not concern him much.

Several times they came to closed iron gates that required another guard to let them through. Ghost noted that even had they escaped from their cell they would not have made it outside. The gaols in Central Ironwood were a lot better manned than those in Poor Man’s Quarter. Ghost suspected the authorities would also show more respect for human life in the wealthier district.

The court room was large enough to sit a crowd, several rows of seats filled by angry families, witnesses and bored locals. The prisoners entered from the front, a tunnel connecting the cells. Ghost noted a few dark stares when Dead entered with Hillard and assumed they were family of the victim. Hillard was moved to the dock while Dead was ordered into a holding cell at the rear of the court. Ghost chose to stand outside the cage. The proceedings did not last long. The court heard a quick commentary of the events leading up to Hillard’s arrest. Ghost laughed when he heard that Hillard, drunk and half-naked in the Chef’s Statue, a reputable pub, had tried to seduce a watchguard on duty.

Hillard stared at his feet, blushing red, while some members of the audience sneered.

"I wonder if that was Lady Gemmand or Reidbrook," Ghost pondered.

When the watchman had tried to apprehend Hillard, they heard, there was resistance and Hillard had to be taken in shackles. There was no mention of Hillard striking the guard as he suggested.

"For a charge of drunk and disorderly I sentence you to ten lashes," stated the judge. "And for the charge of perverting the course of justice, fifty lashes."

Ghost whistled to himself, a harsh punishment and potentially fatal. Hillard's lip quivered, he stood, begging for clemency.

"Please your honour," he pleaded in a well rehearsed tone. "Show mercy on this pathetic excuse for a man. I haven't seen my children since being locked up and I dread to have them care for me wounded," a tear and a sob came out. "Your honour, surely you are a caring man."

The judge was not impressed.

"Hillard Steelten, I sentence you to an extra fifty lashes for contempt of court, bringing the total lashes to one hundred and ten."

A bell tolled signaling the end of the hearing. Hillard was in shock, his mouth agape as a guard dragged him from the dock. Ghost knew that the accused had been handed a virtual death sentence and realised he felt sorry for the man. As he passed Dead's cage Hillard cried out.

"Charlie, do something," he cried. Dead watched him pass before turning to face Ghost.

"Who's Charlie?" he asked in that semi-bored tone that Dead often took when moments of drama were occurring around them.

Ghost did not respond.

Dead was brought to the front of the chamber, several sneers following his wake. A court appointed cleric read out the details of the watch report. It contained witness testimonials and forensic evidence. The court was informed of Dead's demeanour before the fight, that although only having one drink over several hours he was acting strange, talking to himself and knocking things over. The court then heard details of the fight, of how Dead had mutilated two men and murdered a third. All the time the judge remained passive until the report had finished.

"Mr. Longpin, do you have anything you wish to add?" he asked when the report was over.

"Tell him you acted in self defence," Ghost suggested.

Dead followed prompt, arguing that he had not intended to murder anyone. He looked uncomfortable in the dock though, squirming from side to side and occasionally twitching.

“Your case is worrying,” the judge concluded. “While there is some argument of self defence, your behaviour does not speak of a rational man. I think it would be a dangerous choice if I were to allow your release. Therefore for the charge of manslaughter I will set fifty lashes to you. On top of this you will serve a period of no less than ten years in Ashmore Asylum under maximum security.”

Several mouths from the crowd voiced their discontent at the perceived light sentence. One man stood, yelling for a death sentence and a guard was forced to intervene.

“Enough,” bellowed the judge, striking his bell three times to signal the court was dismissed.

Dead was led outside by two guards. The light of day stung the eyes and he tried to shield them.

“Cut it out,” ordered a guard.

“Go easy Dead,” offered Ghost. “Take your lashes and worry about getting out of this mess later.” Ghost knew that a sentence for Dead was also a sentence for him. Dead tried to relax but found it difficult when he was yanked around. The audience had followed the prisoner with the expectation of seeing part of the punishment carried out. They came to a cobbled clearing surrounded by people, the lash of the whip coherent over their chants.

“Sixty one.”

The lash tolled, a low moan following. The guards pushed through the mob with Dead in tow. Ghost risked discomfort as he snuck through the ranks, hoping not to be crushed.

“Sixty two.”

Another moan.

“Use the hooks,” cried out one man. The crowd tired of the current spectacle.

“Useless git ran out of steam after ten lashes,” muttered one dirty haired onlooker to another. The cry for a harsher whip was taken up around the circle as more people bayed for blood. The whip bearer looked over to his superior who gave a firm nod. The softer leather lash was placed aside and swapped for a six-tailed whip with razor steel hooks attached.

“That’ll kill him,” Ghost uttered to Dead. Dead shrugged.

“So what?”

“So what?” Ghost repeated, upset. “That’s Hillard. Damn you Dead, you have no compassion.”

“I don’t need compassion,” Dead growled back, keeping his voice lower than the stir of the crowd. “Compassion won’t get me what I want”

“And what do you want?” Ghost was probing, hoping to find the cause of Dead’s urges.

Dead trembled, jerked and then turned back to watch Hillard, leaving Ghost without answer.

“Sixty three,” came the count.

This time Hillard erupted with a shrill scream as giblets of flesh were raked from his naked back.

“Sixty four,” again a scream, this time unstoppable.

Over again Hillard continued to shriek as the whip opened his back.

“This is more like it,” approved the dirty haired onlooker.

Each time the lash came away more pieces of flesh were removed from Hillard’s back, some splaying across the crowd as they squirmed in excitement, a throbbing mass of dark desires. Other pieces of meat needed manual removal from the hooks, slowing down the process of Hillard’s demise. The shriek cry had turned into a low hum.

“Eighty two,” came the toll.

Hillard’s body jerked as muscle tore from the back but was otherwise unresponsive. The supervising watchman stepped in, checked for life signs then faced the crowd.

“Ladies and gentlemen, Hillard Steelten; assigned to one hundred and ten lashes for the crime of drunk and disorderly, perverting the course of justice and contempt of court, has succumbed to his crimes after eighty two lashes.” Several crowd members cheered, others looked disappointed that he had not gone the full distance.

Ghost wept. After days locked up together Ghost realised that Hillard was the closest human contact that he and Dead had experienced since escaping the morgue. He had driven Ghost crazy with his bumbling stories but had also kept him sane. Locked up with only Dead for company would have been a worse fate. Dead took note of Ghost’s distress.

“Did you know him?” asked Dead.

Ghost shook his head.

“Nevermind.”

Hillard's raw body was dragged from the stones, leaving a red trail behind. The chief watchman made a new announcement.

"Ladies and gentlemen, for the crime of manslaughter Charles Longpin has been assigned fifty lashes." There were several boos from the crowd.

"Should have been one hundred and fifty," yelled one angry onlooker clutching a distressed woman. There was a rumbling of agreement. Ghost assumed they were relatives of the dead man.

"Dead, you should probably feign some pain or this crowd's going to explode."

"What's going on? Am I getting whipped?" asked Dead

The guards looked surprised at the question.

"No, we just want to tie you up over here for a minute. No whipping, I promise," one smiled a toothless gape. They dragged Dead out to the centre, Ghost followed.

"Pretend you're in a lot of pain." Ghost warned him.

The guards tied Dead up, his shirt ripped open to reveal a mottled back.

"One," the leather lash cracked down and bounced harmlessly off his back.

"Now," Ghost hissed.

"Now what?" Dead asked.

"Fake pain," he ordered, frustrated.

"Huh?"

The whipper looked at his supervisor who gestured to continue.

"Two," came the count.

"Now," Ghost shouted as the whip made contact.

"Ghost, I have no idea what you're on about."

"You, you damned fool," Ghost railed. "You're getting whipped and having a conversation with an invisible person in the process."

"I'm getting whipped?" asked Dead surprised, trying to crane his neck around to see.

"Three."

"Now, act like you're in pain," ordered Ghost, jumping up and down.

"Ow, I'm in pain." Dead said in a loud, unconvincing voice.

"This is flyshit," yelled a disgruntled onlooker.

"He's making fun of us," cried an old woman with no teeth, leaning on a slim iron rod.

“The hooks,” ordered the chief watchman as the whipper scrambled to obey. The razor teeth emerged, glistening with the blood of Hillard.

“Four.”

The lash of the hook snared into Dead’s back and stayed there. No amount of yanking by the persecutor could free the hooks, lodged into the leathery skin. The chief watchman was required to take the hooks out by hand. They were untarnished by Dead’s blood.

Forty six more times the hooks snaked into Dead’s back with no response. By the end the whipbearer was exhausted. Dead’s back was covered in hundreds of small holes but was otherwise fine. The crowd was furious. They cried that the whips were blunt. The chief watchman tried to calm them.

“Look at his back,” shouted one unkempt man, his teeth yellow and black. “Of course they’re blunt.”

More growls and grumbles. The supervisor had had enough.

“The whips are not blunt,” he shouted, and to emphasis the point he took the hookwhip and lashed the unkempt man in the face. The hooks dug in tight and when pulled away pieces of flesh came too. The man held his face in his hands and whimpered, now blind in his right eye. On the hook ends hung pieces of wet, red flesh.

“Does anyone else want to tell me these are blunt?” he bellowed.

The crowd quieted, then from the rear came a suggestion that bribery was at play.

“Corrupt,” came the chant, as the angry mob built its temper.

Ghost was concerned, they were liable to rip everyone apart, including Dead. The watch knew it too and a small contingent marched out of the courts in quick step, bearing cudgels and shock prods.

With the threat of an uproar guards surrounded Dead and moved him back into the court, Ghost in pursuit. They were taken to a rail system that fed into the justice building. Dead was forced into a caged carriage while two guards rode in the following carriage, a sliding portcullis giving full view access to Dead. The two carriages were towed by a one man operated steam engine, the small steamer already burning in expectation. The tiny train jolted and passed through the underground tunnel that led to Ashmore Asylum, leaving an angered mob behind.

Christopher Geiland cursed the messenger upon hearing of Ivan's death. With a quick pace the noble dressed in furs and left the manor. The carriage waited, led by his agent Macleay, a strong man that had a knack for retrieving information in unsettling ways. Geiland gave no orders as he clambered up the steel rungs, rocking the wooden fixtures of the coach as he settled in. Macleay only drove to one destination.

Steel rimmed wheels skirted over a cobbled pathway as they left the estate, taking a twisting route designed to evade followers. A short distance was a long trip when Macleay drove. In his impatience Geiland entertained the notion of ordering him to a more direct route but dismissed the thought, aware of just how much danger they were in.

They passed south, going through the Noble's Quarter and into the Royal Plaza. They circled the citadel, Geiland peering out at the tall mass of stones. From the street there was no sign of the grief that existed inside. Geiland almost felt sorry for the Steward family, but thoughts of sympathy did not hold well in the large man. He had built an industry from the slavery and pain of others, breaking backs and clogging lungs in the Roughshed Ranges that his family had owned for generations. He was the main supplier of coal to the city, pumping out tons of the black fuel each day to quell the power hungry city. More families were fatherless because of him than from half the wars that had been fought within the city. He would not bear himself to cry for one more fatherless family.

The coach leered around the plaza, heading back to the Noble's Quarter through the left gate. They were close to where they began, Macleay only turning to the east when he was certain that they were not followed. The Longshore gates opened as they drew near, the guard notified in advance to keep watch.

The Longshore manor was not as lavish as the Geiland's. It was beset in rich woods, not rare ones. It was still one of the more impressive within the city, though the lord paid no mind as he waddled through the reception hall, ignoring a waiting servant. Macleay followed.

“Things are sour,” Geiland blubbered as he stomped into Senior Longshore’s office. He was met by several eyes, smiling at the approach.

“We were just talking of these sour tidings,” Senior Longshore informed him.

“So you know?”

“We do,” Geoffrey Goldshore said, looking up from a gold cuplet, enjoying the fruits of his wealthier brother.

“Beg pardon,” Longshore smiled, gesturing for Macleay to remove himself before turning to Geiland.

“What will we do? Our plan is spoilt.”

“It has a little, hasn’t it?” Longshore flashed his grin, while Geoffrey smirked into his cup. “But then, I think this will work out best.”

Geiland approached the pair, seating himself in a fur-trimmed elk sofa and helping himself to a drink.

“Go on,” he puffed, relieved in their calm presence.

“We were just talking about this Ammba girl that was foolish enough to get lost on your estate.”

“What of it?” he choked.

“Don’t concern yourself with her anymore. Follow our guide, order an investigation and find a scapegoat. Play the role I assigned you.”

“And the girl?”

“Forget her, I will deal with that myself,” Senior Longshore said with a flourish, helping himself to the fine selection of wine. “How fares Victoria?”

34

Pilus was a man similar to Callis in philosophy. He had not always been a priest, an ex-footsoldier of the Muhjhan crime lords, finding a better life in the church than on the streets. Callis saw something of himself in the new Esum. Pilus was calculating with a desire for promotion. Like many of his kin he wore scars, though his were bought through the harsh streets rather than the methodical

flagellations of devout priests. Callis saw a true priest of Aea-Baeni and had sponsored his rise to the leader's throne.

"I am a man of Aea-Baeni, in the Beast I take my glut." Pilus stated, rehearsing the speech of acceptance, standing before the council.

"Then it has been decided. Pilus Emar, under sponsor of Aea-Baeni and the council of El-Manati, shall be promoted to the rank of Esum, high priest of Ea-Manate." Isheal Esum stated, priest of Ide-Beldnae.

The council dispersed, several figures hanging behind to discuss politics. Callis and his new counterpart waited as Gaius Ipsum approached.

"Brother Pilus, congratulations on your rise," he greeted.

"Thank you brother," Pilus responded with a naturally guarded tongue, learnt from an early age in the service of crime lords.

"Have you had a chance to ponder my proposal?" Gaius asked in a low voice, facing Callis.

"It has been discussed and decided on. We are ready to turn the flock."

Gaius breathed deep, his chest bellowing with anticipation as he scanned the remnant faces in the room.

"The singers have lent us their voices. Come the next vote the Tower shall be ready to shift."

"How set are they in this move?" Callis asked, an anxious tone betraying his steel stare.

"They ironed strong. They do not wish to be the dragging wheel in an alliance any longer."

"Then change comes bearing to us. Let us hold it with devout hands," Callis almost chuckled.

"Yes brother," he smiled, passing a hand over his shoulder. Gaius left the Beastmen.

"Brother Gaius seems set on this victory," Pilus remarked.

"He is, but it would be unwise to think the factions have lent their true support to his cause."

"They are untrustworthy."

"As are we," Callis smiled, leading the way to their apartments.

Nielle kept one eye on Islemann. The black robed figure had stood motionless between the thrones for over an hour, awaiting the leader's return. The hood shadowed his twisted face and Nielle wondered if the

assassin had fallen asleep upright. He continued picking out the dirt that compacted under the dais slate steps. For all the talk of his unprecedented promotion Nielle had found little shift in his duties. He still had the same tasks but now had to carry around a heavy blade and wear a heavy cloak whilst doing them. Most disturbing though was his introduction to Islemann. Now that they were acquainted the man seemed to be a constant figure lingering over Nielle's shoulder.

"You missed an area," came a deep rattle. The boy looked up with wide eyes.

"Exc... excuse me?"

"You've quickened your pace. You're not doing the job right." Islemann's voice was a rattlesnake's warning.

Nielle did not respond, returning to the missed sections. They were the steps in front of Islemann. Glancing up, the servant could make out a gleaming white smile shrouded in black.

The game was interrupted by the presence of Callis and Pilus, still concerned with talk of votes and riggings.

"Bring wine," Pilus snapped at Nielle, a thankful order. The child ran to the wine cleft, fetching an expensive jar of Prytrian Black. He could hear the murmurings of his master, and the new priest. They were discussing votes and mannerisms of power. As Nielle returned, the talk shifted to the allocation of a new gold fledgling to replace the murdered one.

"I do not need one," Pilus spat. "He is enough."

A quick flourish in Nielle's direction.

"He has uses," Callis agreed. "And he understands much of Aea-Baeni. Still, it is expected of us to take one under wing. If we do not choose ourselves then they will assign one."

Nielle handed out two cups, pouring pungent alcohol. He could feel Islemann's stare on his back and a shiver crawled the length of his spine.

"There is a plain born fledgling that works the latrines," the boy interrupted.

"What do we want with a stinking bucket boy?" Pilus cursed. The muscles in Nielle's neck tightened as he heard a rattling chuckle in his ear.

"We teased him a lot... because he's deaf."

"That might be convenient," Callis mused.

Pilus agreed, "Go get him for us. Make sure he's washed first."

Nielle was about to take off when he felt a large hand run over his shoulder.

“Well done young sir,” Islemann croaked, phlegm gracing Nielle’s cheek. The child did not answer, shaking free and racing from the room.

35

Fredrick’s mind was tortured by unending doldrum days. Restlessness replaced fear, his time dragging on. After such a period of stagnation Fredrick had reached a point where the danger of trial would be a welcome distraction, waking him from his pondering hell. Few visitors came to his cell. Damian, once a regular, found to be absent. The council had barred the regent’s son from visiting his friend, an argument exploding just outside the cell days before, audible through the iron door. For days Fredrick pondered in isolation, unsure of his fate now that Ivan was now longer able to protect him. His lawyer had checked in once during that time, a scant visit to clear several details. There came no word of trial, Fredrick’s lawyer implying that it could be months before the issue were resolved. The council had suspended the date of the trial, pushing it back in order to distance it from Ivan’s funeral.

The care that Fredrick had been privileged to under Lord Steward’s reign dwindled. His books were not replaced, leaving a scant collection of worn novels. Even the bucket boy came less to empty his chamber pot, only once a day instead of on-demand as before, the stench of feces and urine heavy in the air.

As the son of a wealthy senator Fredrick was unaccustomed to discomfort and he sought solitude in sleep. His father, Andrew Themmond, had been ordered into the Northane Kingdom on a diplomatic mission three years past. Rather than dragging Fredrick into a hostile environment, his father had chosen to leave him in Ironwood. Andrew had been an old associate of Ivan Steward, the pair having studied for a time in the Capital’s libraries, Steward working towards his Masterhood, Andrew towards his senatorship. Ivan had welcomed the boy to Ironwood, arriving with a retinue of slaves. The regent had

granted hospitality and friendship, almost to the point of adoption. When news of his father's expedition ceased Fredrick had stayed under the shadow of the citadel, his first year gripped in fear at the thought of that final message. Word of his father never came and despite Lord Steward's attempts no trace of the senator could be found. The Kingdom was a dangerous place for an Imperial, the barbarians distrusting of the old powers that had enslaved its people for generations. Although he could never be certain, Fredrick felt deep down that his father was already dead.

He continued to watch the ceiling, so untired it hurt. A spider wove a delicate thread above him, its labour entrancing the boy for hours under a sputtering coal lit lamp, giving him a focus to stay the boredom and hunger.

Loud voices took a moment to register. There was a fight, the sound of metal clanging and a yell. Fredrick bolted upright at the noise, shaking from fear and cold. Someone swore, this time in Imperial, and Fredrick heard the thud of a body hitting the ground. Fredrick looked around for a non-existent weapon as the door sprung open.

"Fredrick, by the eyes of the gods."

The voice held a distinct Imperial accent. Fredrick recognised his father's slave, Justin Lukus, an older man who had spent many years teaching Fredrick the three languages of the counties.

"Justin?" Fredrick whispered, too scared to believe his own sight.

"Yea boy, come here." The familiar man wrapped an arm around the child, favouring his right.

"Are you hurt?"

"A little," the mentor winced. "That fatheaded guard of yours was too dim-witted to take a bribe so we had to scuttle. I was lucky it was two to one." Over Fredrick's shoulder stood a man watching the stairs, a studded blackjack hanging at his side. "He's reliable," Justin assured, ushering the boy out of the cell, "Your father paid a heavy weight in gold for his hand... we will be out of the city by nightfall."

"My father?" Fredrick inhaled, tears brimming over dark eyelashes.

"I will spare you the details till later. For now we must escape the citadel and the treacherous shadow of the council." They wound their way up the stairwell, cautious of any encounters. As they reached the top they were let through the prison door by an informed guard.

Fredrick could not resist tears when he saw Damian there, flanked by two guards, a wide smile flashed as they embraced.

“Justin told me,” Damian jumped, excited to be together.

“He’s alive,” Fredrick confirmed, the tears unstoppable as joy overwhelmed him.

“We will have an escort out of the citadel young sir,” Justin told Fredrick. “But we must act in haste. Say farewell to your friend and thanks, he has done much to secure your release.”

No words came from Fredrick’s pressed lips, the realization only dawning that he would not see Damian again. Damian was gracious, a genuine smile sufficing as they hugged farewell.

“I will visit you in the Capital one day,” Damian informed him as they parted.

“You will have pride of place in my home,” Fredrick responded, clean streaks running down filthy cheeks.

Two guards left Damian to escort Fredrick to the rear of the citadel along with Justin and the silent guard. Fredrick watched the man who possessed the blackjack, dressed in black armour that looked lighter than the heavy plate the guard wore, the thin chain quiet as he stepped a catlike path. He was not an Imperial, Fredrick could tell, he was tall and fair, his hair straight with gold flecks, the attributes of a native to Ironwood. He was also quiet, watching for danger and tense at all times, as if he were wound up and ready to strike.

They left through the rear yard, the dark dawn still a time away. A cracking frost snapped as they puffed to the stables. While the castle slept there existed the possibility of a servant catching them during a midnight errand. In the stables a drawn carriage waited, four casks set in the rear. The armoured man ushered Fredrick and Justin into the barrels, sealing each one in turn.

“Don’t make a noise or move until you see my face again,” he rasped into both barrels as they locked shut. It was cold and cramped in the casket, Fredrick had little space to move and his sympathies ran to Justin whose larger body must have made the squeeze all the worse. He could just make out the sound of horse shods clacking on cobblestones as the carriage swayed to. As driver, the hired man had donned a simple cloak over his armour, dressed in the fashion of a humble servant. The citadel guards loyal to Damian walked the horses, one set on either side, and escorted the carriage to the front gate.

“What’s this?” called a voice.

“Hey Jimmy, open the gate would you? This here wine merchant wants to leave. Councilor Gehrig is entertaining a bunch of his barbarian friends and they drank him out of stock and has sent for more.”

“Are you kidding? Those savages have the guts of slime fish.”

“Aye, they drink like it, I’ll admit. Certainly know how to get in the good books of the wine sellers.”

“I’d say... lucky bastards. You know the drill though, I can’t let anyone in or out during off-peak times without checking what’s in the hold.”

“Make an exception,” Damian’s guard called back with a serious smile. It sparked suspicion, the young watchman taking a renewed interest in the carriage.

“Rules is rules,” Jimmy could be heard saying. “You know what they’d do to me if someone got snuck out of the citadel and I was on watch.”

“You know what Gehrig will do to you if this wine man don’t get back soon with another cask?”

There was a pause of thought as a response.

“Nah, I’ve got to do it,” he decided. “Just make it quick and he can go.”

A pouch was revealed from under the driver’s cloak.

“I’m in a real hurry,” said the mysterious driver, tossing the bag to Jimmy’s feet, the coins rattling inside.

“What the fuck’s going on here,” Jimmy recoiled, aware of the setup. He arched around, trying to unpin the cold musket from his belt. It was a mistake, a bolt flared out from under the driver’s coat hitting Jimmy’s chest and passing clean through. At first the guards didn’t comprehend, raising their own muskets and pulling the triggers, the weapons frozen in the icy morning cold, failing to discharge. Jimmy stared at them with confused eyes, a small round dent in his plate. As he fell, face slamming into the cobblestones, the two citadel guards recoiled. The crossbow bolt had sucked out a loin of meat through the rear of the plate, dragging the tissue with it as it buried in a stone wall behind.

“Open the gate,” the driver commanded them in an emotionless voice. They complied, operating the spoke wheel that turned a chain, dragging the doors inward. The carriage left, leaving the two guards to clean up.

After spending more than two weeks locked in a cell Fredrick's entire being was twitching with impatience. The trip dragged on, the casks bouncing in the back of the wagon as the wheels skipped over the roads of Ironwood's wealthy quarters. They were stopped at a gate, guards letting them pass with the taste of coin, a smuggling merchant no concern of theirs.

Fredrick lost track of the twists and turns, confused to their whereabouts in the city. He breathed in relief when they stopped. The cask lid cracked off, a light sky showing a flash of dawn. Justin stepped out of his casket with a pale face and rickety legs, his woolen leggings stained with urine.

"Was yours half full of wine?" Fredrick laughed in good spirits. He stopped to admire the view, taking time to breathe in the subtle scent of pine that hung over the estate. "Where are we?"

"A well to do merchant by the name of Grammon Retcleft has agreed to smuggle you out of the city," Justin told him, suppressing vomit. "He is a pleasure of a man... hardworking and wise. You might get a chance to meet him."

Fredrick hoped so, he wanted to express his thanks as much as possible.

"This is a grand estate," Fredrick remarked, impressed by the sight of trees in the barren valley.

"He is very wealthy... and well connected. He knows your father."

Fredrick smiled again at the news. His father was alive, a miracle in his mind.

"We go inside," their guide informed them, leaving the fake wine carriage in the hands of a stumbling stable boy. Fredrick followed inside without a care, taking little notice of the expensive wooden skirting that decked the manor's lobby. Subtle incense hung in the air, a fresh start to a better life.

"The master will see you," the nameless man told them. Fredrick and Justin were surprised, expecting the man of wealth to lie in bed at the earliest hour. They strode up carpeted stairs, the thick wool dampening their tread.

"May I bathe first?" Fredrick asked, conscious of the stink that clung to him.

"Later. I'm under orders to bring you straight away. The master is anxious to see you in the flesh."

“More like our hired thug here wants to get paid as soon as he can,” Justin whispered to Fredrick, staying behind the menacing figure.

They entered a chamber set with an Oak desk and bookcase, adorned with minimal distractions. A man stood by a fireplace set to the side of the room, staring into the spitting pine fire.

“Master Retcleft,” Justin smiled. “I present you Fredrick Themmond, son of Andrew Themmond.”

The portly man raised his head, examining the boy with piercing eyes. He did not smile.

“Master Retcleft?” Fredrick asked.

“You have me mistaken child,” he answered, stepping forward. “My name is Geoffrey Goldshore.”

36

Bitter scowls etched the faces of the Creators and Wrathman as Pilus stood to vote. As head priest it was his duty to speak on behalf of Aea-Baeni. The coup had run as planned, the Singers had voted against their established alliance with the intention of forming a new coalition. Pilus cherished the moment, standing before the council as the newest member with the deciding vote. Callis sat by his side stone-faced.

“What vote does Aea-Baeni take, Brother?” Gaius Ipsum smiled, expecting victory.

“The Beastmen have chosen their path,” Pilus answered. “We vote to support the inauguration and placement of Sir James Pierce to warden of the state.”

Gaius’ mouth hung agape, as did many of the plotters. There was collective relief from the coalition, expecting to be toppled. They had lost one ally only to join with another.

“Then it has been decided. Lord Pierce, under sponsor of the regent’s council and support of El-Manati by a vote of five to four, shall be granted warden.” Isheal Esum, Ihn priest of Ide-Beldnae, stated.

The chamber fell into an echo of buzzing voices and accusing glances. The two heads of Aea-Baeni sat, accepting the glares and returning sly smiles.

“You have made too many enemies tonight,” Gaius whispered as he passed, the betrayed knight furious.

“It comes with power,” Callis recalled. The chambers emptied, leaving the faction leaders of the Creators and Wrathmen behind. They chatted amongst themselves, plying their thoughts together and structuring reason. Callis watched them approach and smiled a greeting.

“Brothers, it seems you have thwarted an embarrassing coup,” Isheal announced, offering a warm hand.

“We played our advantage,” Callis agreed.

“Some warning *would* have been appreciated,” grumbled Tyrus Esum. As a priest of Ea-Minae he disliked Aea-Baeni most of all.

“It was not possible,” Callis lied. “As a meakling faction we were not told till tonight about the plan. We had little chance to offer anything up.”

“You acted stern enough though,” Rigulus Ipsum commented, Tyrus’ counterpart.

“We acted like Beastmen,” Pilus interjected. “It is in our nature to seek advantage for ourselves.”

“And that has served us,” Isheal agreed.

“Are we to take these men into our cloister?” asked Tyrus.

“The singers have no chorus left. The howls of the beast will replace their music.”

“The beast does not howl,” spat Tyrus.

“It will for us, as long as there is power in the alliance.”

“Brother Isheal is correct. The beast seeks to hunt as a pact,” Callis agreed.

“The beast is treacherous,” Tyrus grumbled his skepticism.

Pilus barked at the comment, staring down the fat belted priest.

“Brother Tyrus, as a craftsman surely you believe that all terrors can be trained?”

“Take no heed of our vocal friend,” Isheal soothed. “Brother Tyrus rightly feels vulnerable. As so many do, he is acting out his primal urges as a means of defence. Sensibility and time will sooth.”

“I must admit that I expected less anger from a Craftsman and more from a Wrathman.” smiled Pilus.

“Young brother, not everything is so clear in these ashen days. I wish to welcome you to the fold on behalf of Ide-Beldnae,” Isheal responded.

“And of Ea-Minae,” Rigulus continued. “Despite your unexpected forging it is a welcome change. After nine years even the sweetest singer’s voice will grate.”

“Then I would toast to change,” Callis declared, holding out his drink.

Tyrus left before his companions could take cups, leaving three elders to bond with the new alliance. They spoke of changes and plans, of a crippled regency and burgeoning nobility. The leaders explained their support for Pierce, arguing that as a military man and known drunk he would be easy to manipulate. The church wanted more influence in foreign affairs, not only as a means of spreading faith but as a way of increasing recruits.

“The Imperial Empire has long been founded in stark religious tradition,” Iulis noted, Isheal’s other. “Ea-Manati has never been more than an interesting footnote in their own mess of complicated gods and temples. Yet this kingdom that foams in the west is not so secure in its beliefs. They are a people dedicated to personal gain and wealth over traditionalist ways.”

“The barbarians would sell their gods at the right price,” Callis agreed, thinking back to the few documentaries he had read on the Kingdom. “You plan to fill the ranks with them?”

“Only certain ranks. What good would it be of us to bring in recruits if they simply filter into other factions?”

“Importing these men is not the challenge. Convincing them to form their factions early is. Under church law, factions cannot advertise their province with the aim of filling the ranks. It is a choice made during the inauguration, years after their initiation.”

“But there are no laws against the regent advertising to foreigners,” Callis understood, a light head from the heavy wine. “Then why the wait till now?”

“Circumstance and timing. Few barbarians would willingly come to our treacherous door without the thought of profit first. We have sent many missionaries into the Kingdom with the aim of provoking lust for wealth, walking under the guise of Ea-Manati, but it is not enough. The regents command foreign law. If this Pierce can be convinced to pay for each immigrant prepared to swear an oath to Ea-Minae or Ide-Beldnae... or Aea-Baeni, then we can swell our ranks.”

“And then?” Callis could formulate his own ideas, but wanted to hear them from the source.

“Then we grow strong,” Isheal frowned. Callis did not probe further, knowing it was not yet warranted. “You should feel honoured to be let into the pact at this late hour. It has been many years in the making.”

“Yet the Singers were prepared to pull out of the deal.”

“They felt marginalized,” Iulis admitted. “A mistake that will not be repeated. Perhaps the Beast is a more fitting figure in this alliance either way.”

“It is,” Pilus stated without an emotion on his face.

37

“Idiot boy,” growled Freeman, storming in red-faced, his beard contorted with snarling lips. “You have given the Themmond child to the Goldshores.”

Damian looked up from his plate, stunned by his teacher’s entrance.

“Excuse me?” He stuttered, dropping a silver fork beside a half-eaten chicken breast.

“The boy... Fredrick. He’s in the hands of his accusers now, and it’s thanks to you.”

Damian could not believe it, he stuttered, trying to deny the truth.

“That’s impossible,” he cried.

“You helped lead the child out of the citadel. Do you not understand that he was being led by a Goldshore agent?”

“His father...” Damian began.

“His father is a skun corpse lying in the forests of Northane Proper. You have been fooled.”

Damian could not believe him, standing to face the old man. He tried to pass, to seek the news from someone else. An arm barred his way, bony fingers coiling around his slender arm. Freeman looked down on the boy.

“Your friend is bound to the noble’s court now, there is no stopping that.”

“But the law stated...”

“That he would be tried while under our provision. We have lost him, thanks to you.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“Then believe the council if you must. They gather now in the chambers.” He swung up his arm, letting the Damian through and following at his own pace.

The councilors noted Damian’s presence with surprise.

“Here he is now,” Damon whispered to Stephen, watching the young boy approach. “Welcome lord. What do we owe the honour?”

“Master says that Freddy is with the Goldshores, is this true?”

“It is,” grumbled Stephen in a foul mood. “And I hear that you were instrumental in his capture.”

“It was foolish not to consult with us first,” berated Clarissa, showing no respect for the young lord.

“This is illegal,” Damian protested, ignoring the complaints. “He must be brought back immediately.”

“He is under the noble’s provision now,” continued Clarissa. “The law favours the possessor.”

“But the court’s *had* favoured the regency,” he continued.

“The regent’s court favoured the regency,” Damon jumped in. “And he is no longer under that code.”

“Then we must launch an appeal.”

“We could,” stated Freeman, walking up behind the child. “But he would be executed before any decision could be sought. The two courts work independently of each other, an appeal does not guarantee a halt to the execution process.”

Damian gulped, his eyes welling.

“Then what do we do?”

“Nothing,” stated the old man, rounding the table and sitting in his leather chair. “There is nothing we can do for him... not within reason. The council will not risk the regency over the head of a spoilt foreigner.”

“Send a troop of men to take him back.”

Several councilors chuckled.

“And start a war with the nobles?” Damon asked.

“I command you to,” Damian ordered with his most authoritarian voice.

“There are many factors at work here young sir,” Stephen cut in. “Attacking the Goldshore house would be a fast way of bonding the families. Before you know it their troops would swarm the castle and quickly depose of all they see fit. The council is here to make decisions in the absence of your father, or a replacement. Until then we are the regency.”

“There is little that can be done for your friend now. If he is fated to join his father in the afterworld then it shall happen as such,” struck in Damon with a dry tongue

“It is hard to lose close friends,” Maria interjected. “The council sympathizes for you but our hands can not be played on this matter. Mourn your friend and carry on.”

Damian looked at each in turn, disappointed by their lack of support. He turned without word, pushing past the guards and descending deep into the castle.

Damian rushed through the barracks, searching for Bryce. He found him asleep in a bunk, resting from a nightwatch.

“Wake up,” Damian sputtered through tears.

Seeing the distress, Bryce bolted upright, scrambling for a weapon in his groggy state. “What is it?” He mumbled.

“It’s Fredrick. The nobles have him.”

Bryce swore at the news, pulling over his guard’s tunic.

“We need to get him back,” Damian said.

The soldier looked down at the pitiful child.

“What can we do?” he asked.

“Do we not have agents too?”

Bryce shook his head.

“They’re expensive. You know how the regency is kept in line. There is no money in the treasury for that type of thing.”

“There must be someone we can turn to?”

Bryce looked the child up and down, measuring him.

“Perhaps, though they are undesirable,” he whispered, taking care of those sleeping close by.

“Who’s they?” Damian looked hopeful.

“Your father once sent me on an errand. There are those in the city who can achieve things that are out of our reach. They might offer you a favour but they would expect something in return.”

“Such as?”

“I couldn’t say. They might see it in their advantage to help you, but it wouldn’t be free.”

“If it saves Freddy it would be worth it.”

Bryce breathed hard, aware of the danger.

“Get a carriage ready and meet me in the stable.”

Damian looked like a tiny child in the high backed Imperial-styled throne. He sat with nervous fingers as Gerard Jacobmann lit an elaborate black pipe, thick plumes of smoke swirling up.

“I must admit, it is a rare thing to have one such as yourself visit,” Gerard smiled, waving out a coal and flint lighter. “Usually my patrons rely on emissaries,” he noted, eyeing Bryce standing behind the child.

“Sir Steward wished on your presence personally,” the soldier informed, aware that Gerard disliked high society in his house, the arrival open to prying eyes.

“I am sure. And what would our young lord ask of someone lowborn?”

Damian shuffled and tried to sit upright.

“I beg a favour of you,” he offered, unsure how to broach the delicate matter. Gerard remained silent, prompting Damian to continue. “Within the citadel a foreigner was held prisoner awaiting trial. He was my friend and under my father’s protection.”

“I know this story,” Gerard butted in.

“He is no longer our captive,” Damian continued.

“He has been taken from you, and you want him back, Gerard said. “But human theft is a trade that I seldom deal in, nor would I expect cheap coin in return.”

“I have little wealth,” Damian admitted.

Gerard sucked on his pipe, inhaling the acrid smoke.

“Leave us,” he ordered Bryce.

The soldier hesitated for a moment, not wanting to see Damian trapped alone, but he knew his place. Gerard waited until the guard was gone, leaving him alone with Damian, before continuing.

“Do not put such faith in soldiers, no matter how noble,” advised the old man. “They say that you have older sisters.”

“Two.”

“So you are a long stretch from the regent’s seat.”

“No,” Damian blurted. “My father wished to raise me as heir.”

“The wishes of a dead man are worth little, but still I might see value in you. There is a man I can contact... a thief.”

“A thief?” Damian’s face screwed up at the thought.

“That is what you need, to steal your friend. I will hire him on your behalf.”

“And payment?”

“That will come one day. I view this transaction as an investment.”

“If you can save Fredrick, I will return the favour ten-fold when I have the opportunity.”

Gerard smiled stained teeth.

38

James Pierce’s broad back stood before the council, one knee pressed to the ground, his giant shoulders rounded. Each of the council took turns reading their script.

“Sir Pierce of the house of Reitlin, serve now and protect the future kin of Ironwood. Swear to the Manati and the Foundations of Stone,” they repeated.

“I set my path to the protection of the kin,” James repeated six times.

Master Freeman stepped forth as the longest serving councilor.

“Sir Pierce, you have been granted the duty of warden to the children of the late Ivan Steward. Take this burden with care, do not stray from your duty both to your kin and the Iron. Rise as ‘ex-Governt Regent’.”

Pierce stood tall while Freeman struggled to tie the ceremonial cloak around his neck trunk. From the side Damian and Haylee stood, agitated from the long procession. At either side of the hall were two representatives of El-Manati, their presence required to officiate the warden. From their hands clung incense urns, swinging back and forth, the heavy musk clouding the timber-decked hall.

“I hereby proclaim that Sir James Pierce, of the House of Reitlin, born of James Pierce the Elder, is to be known from this day as ‘ex-Governt Regent’, stand-in regent until Sir Steward’s decided heir comes of age,” Freeman finished.

Pierce turned to face the watching mass, a wide grin plastered across his bearded face, his hands upraised in a symbol of victory. Some claps greeted the announcement along with the odd cheer. Most of the audience remained silent, observing in amusement.

Freeman returned to the ranks of the councilors, a raised eyebrow questioning the wisdom of selecting Pierce. Pierce was large, loud and obnoxious, traits that did not sit well with the old man. The other councilors had argued on his behalf, suggesting that the slow-minded noble would prove easy to manipulate. The house of Reitlin was known as a forward thinking family, one that employed modern sciences and corporations to run their affairs. They were without a traditionalist thought, a concern that had dogged Freeman.

The representative for El-Manati stood forth to dictate a strict code of chastity and obedience to the Manati. In it he chastised the crowd for their past sins and ordered them to repent. He struck out at the gluttony of the nobles and sought an oath from Pierce. Under practiced speechcraft Pierce recited the oath of fidelity, gaining the support of the church. Once this had finished the court band struck on with ‘Blessed Wings in the Stone City’, the trumpets deafening the audience.

Pierce stood back, striding to the children and knelt, scooping them up in two thick arms. Damian and Haylee wheezed under the bear hug, the large man overexcited in his promotion.

“Sir,” Damian gasped. Pierce let go and the children peeled themselves off to the chorus of his rampart laugh.

“Do not despair now, fair children,” he chuckled. “Uncle James will protect you both.” There was a whiff of Danick ale on his breath.

Each of the councilors approached the lord in turn, offering a handshake in congratulations. Pierce took each one, showing restraint in not hugging them. The church representatives did not wish thanks, preferring to leave during the band’s performance, set to report back to the church.

As the band finished Pierce retook centre stage, inviting all the guests to dine in the banquet hall. The musicians grabbed their gear and followed the flow of bodies. Freeman advised Haylee and Damian to join in at least for a short time. Locked hand in hand the children stayed back from the flood, taking a relaxed speed.

“He’s crazy,” Haylee whispered.

“Drunk... I think,” Damian replied.

“Does he really want us to call him uncle? I could never imagine myself related to that.” They were hurried up by a stern, over the shoulder look from Freeman.

“You must not seem distraught in public,” he chided. “Until you are of an age then Sir Pierce will be your adopted guardian. Do not let the casual observer think that you are opposed to the idea.”

“But we are,” Damian bit back.

Freeman nodded. “That is not the concern I have. Your family needs to show a united front now more than ever. Weakness breeds invite to attack. Sir Pierce is a good fighter, popular among soldiers. He may not play the diplomat well but he will serve to protect you.”

“What of our mother?” Haylee asked with an unusual tenseness.

“They will have no connection. Your mother is dreadfully aggrieved, as I am aware you two are. She will not have to suffer his rudeness, she will get her rest.”

It was enough for Haylee. When she had been told of the adoption she pictured someone rushing to the wedding bed of her mother. It had torn her up for days, the thought of some stranger forcing himself into Kayla’s bed. She had not spoken of it before due to a feeling of silliness.

As they reached the dining hall the crowd had already set themselves to the long banquet table. Pierce stood at the head, cheering a toast to the house of Reitlin. His jubilant mood was wearing off on the crowd, soon sharing his laugh and loud voice. Servants flirted through the mass carrying drinks on trays, the cups vanishing with speed so that a constant stream of alcohol had to be injected through the kitchen’s swinging doors.

Damian and Haylee stayed with their mentor, eating sparsely and exchanging few words. They forced tight smiles whenever a question reached them, though thoughts of their lost father and sister plagued the pair. As the ruckus grew Freeman let them retire, doing likewise himself.

Across the table Pierce was caught in a drinking contest of Last Man Standing with three of his brothers. Each one lined up with a dozen cups, replaced as soon as it emptied. They were sculling to the cheers of the drunken mob. Gehrig stood at the front, cheering on while the other councilors stayed behind speaking in soft tones. Pierce’s youngest brother passed out, collapsing face first and slamming his head into the steel rimmed table. The oldest brother spat up his drink at the sight, laughing out of control and falling himself.

The contest remained between Pierce and his remaining sibling. They continued hammering through the rich ale before James could go no further. A combination of fish, cheese and ale churned in his gut. With a sudden spasm his cup shot away with the force of a spewing giant. The stream splashed out across the drinks and remnants of food, guided by the cheers and yells of a drunken crowd.

Pierce patted his brother's back, congratulating him on the win, beard full of vomit. As he stood back his knees buckled and he fell, passing out amongst the revelers amid a sea of cheers.

The children visited their mother, Kayla Steward. Since the loss of Ivan and Ammba she had looked worse than death, her skin grey and greasy, the light dulling in her eyes. Damian tried to run his fingers through her hair, the oily clags catching his hand. He reeled back in disgust, ashamed by his action a second later.

Haylee did not notice her brother's barely hidden revulsion. She had placed her head on the pillow next to her mother's, ignoring the stink that Kayla expelled. She hummed in a gentle voice, remembering a song that her mother had sung to her growing up in better days. She thought back to the time before her father was regent. Haylee had been born in the Imperial Capital though had few memories of the place. They had returned to Ironwood a few years after her birth, taking the journey through early summer to avoid the worst of the weather. For weeks they travelled in the coach, her mother heavy with Damian. Haylee had played with Ammba most of that time, pretending to be mothers themselves, looking after their own babies. On that journey there had been little to do but sing and tell stories. Her favourite hymns came from that time.

They had returned to the city after their first uncle was granted the regency, Ivan invited to act as councilor. It had been a busy time, her father concerned with state affairs, her pregnant mother trying to support him. Damian's birth weakened Kayla and she never returned to her vibrant self. At first it was a mild fatigue that dogged her daily activities. Over time the sickness grew, making it harder for her to escape bed, spending less time with the children. Haylee looked across at Damian, he had never known their mother like she had. It told in his manner, he was playing the part of dutiful son rather than a grieving one.

Three stone floors down the drunken Pierce had regained consciousness and was locked in a drinking match with a young Northanian merchant.

39

Thomas Longshore stared into his cup, watching the herbed Dermleaf foam in the Regale liqueur. He was not a drinker, the expensive tastes that his father shared not instilled in the child. Across from him his father sat watching, assessing how the boy reacted to the news. He wasn't angry, Senior Longshore could tell by his body language, displaying more of the pose of a man concerned with his own wellbeing.

"Where does this put us?" Thomas ventured, watching the leaf break up and sink into the thick liqueur.

"It makes us director," his father replied, swishing the end of his own serve. "Directors of the future regency."

The young man did not respond, touching the rim to his lips and holding back a grimace as the fiery brew burnt his palate.

"Tell me son, where do you see yourself in five years time?"

Thomas looked up into his father's composed face.

"Following duties," he replied. "Working with the business until you wish to accede it to me."

"The house of Longshore did not rise to power by plying itself to trends," Senior Longshore informed. "We are a house built from the returns of risk, climbing over the wrecks of slower, stupid families. I will continue to charge, where I see profit for us."

"It's a serious crime though."

"A risk," his father restated. "Chances build regents and kings."

"And what would you have me do?"

"This Ammba girl needs a rescuer. You say that she has rejected you before... as a bumbling flirt no doubt. She will not dare refuse you as her saviour."

"You wish me to storm her captors?" Thomas said, eyes wide at the thought.

“Of course not boy, you would not be at risk. The girl is held by criminals, long to hold a grudge but also willing to sell their own for the right price. Negotiations are already underway. You would be taking the girl back under armed escort without interference.”

“But still,” Thomas was unsure, the idea of risking himself for the girl not in line with his philosophy of self-preservation. “Maybe someone else should be sent to capture her. What if I am suspected of being part of the plot?”

“Stupid boy... Do you think that your father would simply bundle a crude rescue and hope that no one would bother asking questions? The Muhjhan syndicate is full of those that would sell out their own for profit. Truth is only a question of coin. There will be plenty of evidence bought to support our innocence.”

Thomas was quiet for a moment, reflecting on the idea.

“Why would an informant deal with the Longshore family?”

His father sighed, growing weary with the questions.

“They wouldn’t. They would be dealing with one of my agents.”

Thomas ‘ahhhd’, unaware that his father even had agents.

“I will be travelling with a rear guard, just so my presence is noted. The select apartment will be surrounded by the best Longshore men before you drown in glory. The criminals you kill will not be armed.”

Thomas felt his mouth dry, the liqueur not helping. Despite his quality with a sword he had never killed before. Harmond’s gored body haunted his dreams long after the incident.

“Okay,” he whispered, sliding the cuplet to one side and leaning forward. “When?”

“There will be a wait,” his father said. “News never travels that fast in the city. Observers would expect a drip system of information that might take a while to feed into the noble’s ears.

“So what do I need to do?”

“Prepare yourself... and keep quiet. This will test you child. A test to see if you deserve the Longshore name.”

“My lord, I did not expect to see you this morning,” it was a genuine truth Freeman told, staring at the pale giant as he crossed the council hall decked in heavy plate. Pierce did not answer, preferring to grunt his way past the other councillors and planting himself in the regent’s chair.

“It’s a little too early for me to shirk my duties,” he managed after settling in.

“If you feel unwell then perhaps you would be more comfortable...” the Master was cut short by a raised finger and a scowl.

“Where is Gehrig?” Pierce asked.

“Sir Gehrig sent a message to inform that he would not be attending this morning,” Stephen answered.

“Then have a message sent that if he’s not here soon I’ll strip him of his station... and more.” It was said with command, several councilors beginning to question their expectations of the guardian.

“Before he gets here I have some changes to make,” Pierce informed them, placing a mailed fist on the table and turning to Freeman. “You are the senior councilor here, correct?”

“Uh... yes,” Freeman’s voice stuttered in surprise.

“And you were opposed to me?”

“I... I...”

“Yes or no?” Pierce roared at the frail man, like a lion preparing to gorge.

“Yes... yes...”

“And why?”

“I... I... I preferred a Bartlett.”

“Then you were wrong,” the thunder continued. “I have no use for a senior councilor that cannot sway his own council. Get out,” the room seemed to shudder with the ferocity of his voice.

Freeman stared at the giant, his tongue flapping about in his skull like a drowning fish.

“You deaf old man?” Pierce’s face snarled like a rabid dog’s. “Get out or I’ll throw you out piece by piece.”

The Master stood with palms outwards, hoping to explain himself. Pierce did not give him the chance, standing too and swinging a mailed backhand into the old man’s face, knocking out the teeth on his left side. Freeman flew back, cracking his head on the oak table and rolling off to the side, spluttering incoherencies. A guard came and

dragged the ex-councilor away to seek medical care while Pierce returned to the faces of stunned onlookers.

There was a moment of silence as the guardian measured their reactions, enjoying the uncomfortable silence he had created.

“Good morning,” Damon spoke, breaking the void.

A wide smile cracked Pierce’s lips as he barked.

41

Peter and Terrance held heavy eyes, diluted to black spots through prolonged drug use, helping them to keep watch throughout the morning. They squatted in a soiled apartment in Poor Man’s Quarter, the doors fortified to withstand a break in. They held duty till midday, told to make sure no one tried to enter the building or let their hostage escape.

“Who is she anyway?” Peter asked, closing the peephole in the bedroom door and returning to their game of cards.

“Don’t know mate, some little piece of arse that needs watching, who am I to care?”

“You know, the money’s good on these jobs but by hell are they boring.”

“Go jerk one out then, I’m sure she won’t mind.” Terrance cracked a laugh.

“That’d be right, I could imagine old Iron Teeth screaming at me now, ‘you were meant to watch her, not splash her with your seed’.”

They both cackled, returning to their game. Iron Teeth was the right hand of Puello DeYemond, father of the Muhjhan crime syndicate and responsible for handling the most sensitive of jobs within the family. He had picked Peter and Terrance as they were proven loyalists to the family and old hands.

“You know, I can still remember meeting Iron Teeth for the first time, would have only been ten or so back then... scared the shit out of me.” Peter laughed, sipping at bitter water.

“You wouldn’t be the first, you remember Greasy Paws? Used to get so scared around Iron Teeth that the old man was convinced he

was mute. Ended up having a bet on it with him...Next time he spotted Greasy shaking away he went up and planted a big kiss on his face.”

“What happened?” Peter asked, sure he had heard the story before.

“Greasy snapped to and called the old man a ‘finger wringler’. Don’t think he liked that too much cause he bit off one of Greasy’s fingers.”

Peter threw in his hand, waiting for a new deck to be played.

“That would get it done,” he mused, reaching for his cup again.

“I don’t know how you can drink that stink.”

Peter shrugged, looking at the murky water.

“I’m thirsty,” he admitted. He had been chewing Hardweed to keep himself alert, the brittle root drying out his mouth.

“So am I, but you wouldn’t catch me touching that rusty puke water.”

“I’d love something else,” Peter agreed, touching the rancid liquid to his lips again.

Terrance stared at him for a second before smiling.

“Go into the kitchen and check behind the stove.”

Intrigued, Peter went away, returning with a mischievous smile and a bottle of Danick whiskey in his hand.

“Don’t drink too much,” Terrance warned him, taking a glass off the younger man. They toasted to Iron Teeth, each bearing the harsh liquor with pride. The powerful drink threatened to choke them, the toxic brew leaving an enticingly sweet aftertaste. Terrance dealt up, handing another poor card to his counterpart, a second deck hidden in a special sleeve pocket.

The bottle rocked as the two men danced around the table, tripping over each other. Two glasses had made the men lose their composure, the strange drink mixing with the Hardweed to give an undesired effect. Peter hummed as he danced, pretending to float around the dining area.

“You know what? I feel completely pissed,” Terrance laughed.

Peter stopped, sweating from the effort.

“You know what I love?”

“What?”

“That little thing in there,” he said, pointing to the main room.

“Let’s go have a proper look,” Terrance said, producing the key and unlocking the door.

Ammba's body stiffened at the creaking sound of a door opening. A black hood covered her face, breathing difficult through the fabric.

"I reckon she's pretty," Peter said.

"You don't know much, do you whelp? All noble ladies are ugly."

"What?"

"I swear... bloody ugly."

"No shit, we'd better leave her hood on then."

"She's got a cute body though," Terrance noted, moving closer, his earlier silliness forgotten. Peter stepped in too, seeking a way to flush out the fire that the alcohol had lit in him.

"What say it love? You feeling lonely, stuck in there?" Terrance's hand felt out, groping a firm breast. "My god, you are tight."

Ammba's scream muffled out, her body's struggle prevented by tight ropes.

Peter stepped in, taking the other breast in hand, squeezing it hard enough to make Ammba cry out in pain.

"You know what else I'd love?" he slurred.

"Shut up Pete and help me get her out of this chair. Don't bruise her up."

Ammba breathed heavy in the closed blackness of the hood. Thick, hot air crowded her. She tried to struggle but was quickly held down by calloused hands, her legs spread out. She wept, trying to conjure up images of places elsewhere but failed when a stabbing pain punctuated her groin. The pain thrashed between her legs, keeping her firmly locked in reality. A girl's whimpering reverberated through her head, intensifying the discomfort.

The pounding stopped, withdrew, and was replaced by more stabbing monotony. If her assailants spoke she did not register, wrapped in her own misery.

There was a single final push, and then nothing.

"Oh god that was tight... Never felt anything like that before," Peter said with a satisfied sigh. "It must have been even better for you going first, you lucky bastard."

Terrance didn't speak, preferring to dragging Ammba's limp body back to the chair and retying her. He leaned in to her hood, placing his mouth close.

"Listen, you'd best do to forget about that. I don't like killing girls." The words did not even register, Ammba too torn between pain and distress, trapped in her own recurring thoughts of shame and

horror. She was panting hard, her body twitching in uncontrollable heaves.

The men left her, locking the door to the world.

42

“Ivan Steward was a dutiful man,” Pierce boasted, one hand resting on his speechpad. “A man birthed in the fires of steel and iron, forged into the shape of regent and protector.” Pierce was sweating, eyes struggling to focus on the words as a gentle sway urged him to and fro. He had spent the night drinking with Gehrig again, their revelry ending only hours before.

To Pierce’s left was a steel palate with Ivan Steward resting on it, eyes sown shut. Close observation would have noted the scar that traced the neckline. Surgeons had removed the dead regent’s head and scooped out his brain, the procedure assuring that he would not reanimate before his burial. Whereas most corpses were given a fast cremation in the city to prevent reanimation, important figures of state were made exceptions of, trained practitioners employed to disassemble the body.

“Lord Steward was born into the house of Steward in 1206, the youngest child of fifteen. His father was Charles Steward, his mother Daenna Longshore...” Pierce continued to read the life dictation of Ivan Steward, struggling on his feet. It was traditional to note all life events and achievements in a statehead’s eulogy, the speech itself spanning thirty pages of well packed script and running for near an hour.

Pierce ended the speech with the details of Ivan’s final days, retelling the events of Harmond’s death and the lockdown of the citadel. Specifics of his murder were shared, including the manner of poison and time of death. Many of the crowd, bored by the long speech, passed time by placing bets on whether or not Pierce would collapse, higher stakes going to a chance that he might fall over the corpse.

The safe bet prevailed, Pierce finished his speech and stepped down, letting a representative of El-Manati engage the crowd. The priest was gaunt, skeleton fingers leafing through an ancient manual on the rights of departure. He spoke in a rambling tone, taking time to pronounce each word as they rolled from his tongue. Even distraught Damian found his attention waning, his mind drifting elsewhere. He was thinking of Fredrick.

Pierce and the council had severed all ties to the foreigner, refusing to launch any sort of appeal. The death of the regent had sated many of the families involved, the only notables still seeking Fredrick's execution were those directly related to the incident. Despite this the council, under Pierce's command, saw no advantage in arguing on the issue. Pierce had pointed out that he was a noble himself and that if Fredrick had not been stolen away then he would have likely given up the child.

Damian looked over at the large man with scorn. Pierce was pale and shaking, his forehead covered in a sheen reflecting the sun that speared through half shut windows. He did not look fit to carry a slop bucket let alone run matters of state.

Damian's thoughts shifted to Ammba. There had been no clear word on her abductors even though a team of investigators had been working on the case. Damian wondered if she even knew of their father's death... if she were alive. The council were delaying talks concerning the regent's successor until her whereabouts were discovered, preferring to focus on channelling resources into the search. A child servant from the house of Geiland had been questioned over the matter, the young boy accused of taking a bribe for letting several cloaked men into the compound through a maintenance gate. Under extended interrogations it had been found that the child was paid by one of the crime families, though he was ignorant to which one and why. The child had succumbed to the pressure of seeing his own organs displayed, a final cruel act before his death.

News of the child's death reached the citadel as dawn rose over the city through the gift of a severed head, a present that Damian found little comfort in. Pierce had the head staked to the front gate of the citadel so that visiting mourners had to pass the hollow-eyed remains. It had proven an interesting talking-point for many of the guests waiting for the ceremony to begin.

The priest continued his dirge, his voice seeming even more laborious now to Damian's ear. He was inflecting on the Old Readings, a traditional text that spoke of death coming before life.

"Life was born from the same death. Rheagnar, shining in his golden wings that shadowed the earth became struck down under the scourge of Ea-Mertain, forebear of Ea-Manati. From the rancid droplets that split from his wounds came the roots of all animals and man, sprung from the same fruit. From that we are born, we must continue. All death creates a newborn... the greater deaths will lead to the creation of many. This is the way of the beginning, it will not end until the last drop of blood dries from the veins of all and only dust clots in our hearts." It was a brutal philosophy that clung to the church, justifying them through murderous strategies, suggesting a celebration in war and plague.

Despite the rich history of the church philosophies, Damian remained ignorant to them all. Like his father he had little to do with the influential organization, preferring to keep his distance from the fanatics and only swear allegiance at official events and when the church demanded it.

As the priest wound up with a series of prayers, Pierce took the pulpit again. This time he needed only one page to read from, declaring that Ivan Steward be anointed to the annals of Ex-Victorial Kin, the ancient book that recorded the reigns of kings and regents alike. Pierce announced that the funeral had finished, inviting the guests into the banquet hall to dine with him. The audience were glad of the break, a steady pouring of feet leading the way. Haylee sought to comfort her grieving mother, leaving Damian alone with the body of his father. A cloaked figure approached unseen.

43

"I come on behalf of Jacobmann," the mysterious man announced. Damian jumped at the approach, suddenly feeling vulnerable in the empty hall, aware of the lack of guards. "My name is not important."

"What do you want?" Damian peeped.

“Information. Your benefactor is paying a lot of money so that I rescue your friend.”

“Fredrick,” Damian agreed, brightening. “But what information could I provide?”

“I am not in the business of stealing things that I’m ignorant of. I want you to relate everything you can about Fredrick. Tell me about his personality, his likes and fears.”

“What is your name?” Damian quizzed.

“I don’t have one... tell me about Fredrick.”

In the empty hall Damian tried as best he could to explain his friend to the thief. Before him lay his father, dressed in traditional funeral garb, eyes closed to the world.

“Will you get him back for me?” Damian broke from his lecture.

“If it’s possible. These things shouldn’t be rushed. If he is tried in noble court and pronounced guilty then their law states that he has four weeks grace to make an appeal. Once he is a prisoner of the state prepared for execution then he must be taken to Ritcave to serve out his sentence. I plan to pick him up along the way if I can.”

“What if he isn’t taken to Ritcave?”

“It’s a gamble, but the safe bet says so. The nobles want to be seen as acting within the scope of their laws on this issue.”

“But Fredrick is a foreigner.”

“Noble law is noble law. We have to play a waiting game.”

Damian wanted to object, to rail against the thief, but he knew that the man’s purse was filled from another hand.

“What do people call you?” Damian pressed.

“Most call me Locke.”

44

Nielle’s temper was bearing thin as the deaf fledgling smiled crooked teeth. Wurt was not his real name, but it was all anyone knew him by. He was skinny and a full head shorter than Nielle, an idiot light flickering in his eyes.

“Scrub the whole floor,” Nielle yelled at him, as if a loud enough voice could penetrate through his deafness. Nielle indicated with

sweeping gestures, trying to express his meaning. Wurt smiled back, his top gums showing high over the teeth.

It had fallen to Nielle to explain the duties of a fledgling. While at first Nielle had thought it would ease him off his workload, he now realised that the opposite was in fact true. So far the boy had made more mess, smearing wet ash across the pristine tiles of Aea-Baeni's apartment.

"You need to rinse first, like this," Nielle dunked the mop then wringed it, scrubbing in one direction as opposed to the chaotic back and forth motions of Wurt. As a principal bucket boy Wurt had spent years carrying out the defecations of a thriving complex. It was a skill that he excelled at, able to carry four buckets by hand and a fifth balanced on his head. He had never learnt another skill, and smiled blank eyes at his teacher.

"Nielle, come with me," Pilus snapped, striding over the wet slate. Wurt was left to make do with the mop, reverting to his previous method.

"What would you have of me master?" Nielle managed, keeping up with the hurried priest. There was no reply as they entered Pilus' study, offset from the main atrium.

"Callis confides in you," Pilus stated, locking the door. "Tell me his plans for Aea-Baeni."

"What plans?"

A fast hand shot forward, sprawling the child out.

"Answer the question."

"I don't know... honest."

A steel-toed boot landed in between his ribs, winding the buckled boy.

"Don't lie to me," spoken in a frighteningly calm voice.

"I... I... I..." Another boot, this time in Nielle's side. "I'm not lying," he coughed, blood in his spit.

"Callis is not telling me everything. Tell me who Islemann works for."

"I don't know. I've only recently met him myself."

Pilus knelt down, wrapping an arm around a shirt collar.

"If you don't tell me, I'm going to remove that little stump hanging between your legs."

As if to emphasis Pilus held out a short carving blade, the point pressed to Nielle's thigh.

"I swear... on Ea-Manati."

Pilus stared hard into the child's wet eyes, calculating his response.

"Then you will find out for me, and soon. I do not believe the stories that Callis feeds me. If you don't come back with information then I will cut you loose from the house."

With a push Pilus stepped away, leaving Nielle to suck in hard fought air.

"Get back out there," he pointed. "And don't mention this to Callis."

45

Fredrick spooned the cold gruel, grimacing at the taste. He choked it back, letting the congealed liquid squirt down his throat, trying not to retch. All his meals were minimal affairs. His cell was cramped, just enough room for him to lie out on the bare stone. He was developing a harsh chest cough but with no one to complain to he had to bear it. His bowl was replaced once a day. A small drain hole in the centre of the room was his toilet, he had to squat to make use of it, hoisting his pants back over his unwiped arse.

There was no heating in the damp cell either, the nights frosted the cell and Fredrick had multiple chill burns where he slept on the stone floor, the thin blanket little comfort. There were no windows or books to chisel away the days, Fredrick relying on etching the walls to keep himself occupied. He used one of the shards of stone that littered the floor to cut into the brittle walls. So far he had covered much of the rear wall in his primitive drawings, covering topics from monsters and knights to cityscapes from his memories of the Imperial Capital.

He was busy cutting out the leg of another warrior, caught up in some imaginary war, when the door to his cell opened. A large man with a face of stubble scowled at him, cracking his knuckles once before gesturing for Fredrick to follow. As Fredrick approached the large man cracked him in the ear with an open palm, sending a ringing thunder through the child's head.

"That's a warning. Get any bright ideas and I'll hit you hard. You stink." The man hit Fredrick again around the ear, making the boy stumble. "My name is Oktave," he spat, grabbing Fredrick by the arm

to stop him from dropping. “You’re in my care until you look fit for court.”

Octave wrenched the boy from his feet, throwing him in the direction of the exit by one arm. Fredrick was marched through the manor’s dungeon, the occasional moan emitting from a cell but otherwise empty. They took the servant’s halls, keeping the filthy boy from contact with any of the house’s notables. Fredrick struggled to stay upright, incarceration and malnutrition leaving him weak.

They came to the back of the manor, a bitter rain flooding the back lawns and swirling around their feet. Fredrick wore simple leather sandals, the water burned his feet, making him cry out. Octave replied by punching the boy in the back of his arm with one knuckle, deadening the muscle and bruising it. Fredrick tried to turn, to make some challenge but the large man scruffed him by the back of his unkempt hair and marched him into the stables.

Octave threw Fredrick to the ground, the dry straw clinging to his sodden body. He rubbed the back of his hair where it had been pulled, looking up at the angry man.

“No foreign dog deserves the right to bathe among his superiors, mutt. You will do so here. Strip.”

Fredrick complied, knowing that only violence waited for refusal. He stood before the man, frail and thin, his body convulsing from a stifled cough. Oktave took no notice of the child’s tender bearing, pulling a collection bucket from a drain point and dousing him with it. Fredrick spasmed as the freezing water hit him full in the face, air rushing from his lungs. He started to shake out of control, trying to rub white fingers over his bruised arms. Octave took a second bucket, once again sloshing it out towards the boy. Fredrick saw it coming and jumped, avoiding the stream. Octave swore in rage, bowling into the child and pushing him to the ground.

“You think you’re brave you little shit?” he exploded, spit spraying from his mouth. He swung a fist down, the heavy knuckles mashing into Fredrick’s face and splitting open the nearly healed scar that Harmond had inflicted up him. Blood started to weep from the fresh wound when Octave dropped a second fist, this time crushing the boy’s nose so that it scrunched up and out of shape. Fredrick tried to cry out but his chest was spasming with the large man on top of him and the fresh blood draining into the back of his throat caught his breath. A third punch fell, this time pounding into the side of his head, the blow breaking the skin around the eye. Fredrick lost his sight and

consciousness as a fourth fist landed on his chin, causing a fracture in the jaw and sending the boy into a fitful dream.

He awoke in the rain again, the freezing temperature drawing him back to reality. His face felt swollen and burning, his vision lost in his left eye. Octave had dragged him out into the swirling rush of water by one leg, rubbing the child's body with rough hands to clean him. Most of the filth had been removed by this and when he was satisfied Octave picked the boy up under one arm and dragged him into the house.

He was taken to a holding room. Miranda, a fat servant woman, waited by a heated element.

"Here's the boy," Oktave told her, thumping him down on a rug at her feet.

"Is he alive?" She asked, a worried tone drawing to her voice.

"For the moment. I'm going to get a drink, I don't expect you to have any trouble with the little cock. If he plays up I'm going to kill him."

"I'm sure Geoffrey would have something to say about that," she defied.

Oktave slapped her across a whiskered face.

"You call him lord or master, slag." He swung back his hand so that she was caught with it a second time, the back of his knuckles wrapping across her other cheek.

"Yes sir," she uttered, submitted to the head watchman. Oktave left her, still vent up with aggression and hoping to meet more negligent servants to rail on. The fat woman looked down at Fredrick, angered by her own treatment.

"Get up child," she said, slapping him on the side of the leg. He didn't move until she pinched one of his testicles between her fingers, his body rising up in pain. "Stand up and be still," she warned him, letting go of his genitals. They were small and shrunken from the cold and too sensitive for his likes. He tried to rub the pain out of them while Miranda dried him with a rough towel.

"You'd best do what you're told boy," she wheezed while rubbing his body, her sagging breasts bouncing around under her dress. "That Animal Oktave would like nothing more than to cut your sweet little pecker out of its holding pen." She said it while grasping at his genitals again, taking a quick grope before Fredrick could pull away. She smiled at him, flashing black and grey teeth.

“It’ll be the last chance you get to bed a woman,” she grinned. “I don’t mind if you want to stick it in the Old Slag.”

Fredrick was too weak to fight her, instead picking up his clothes and dressing himself. Miranda laughed at him, a thick, rancid breath passing his crushed nose.

Fredrick was taken under armed escort to the Noble’s Court, a marble building set in the middle of the Lord’s Quarter. The courthouse was surrounded by various administrative structures and mining corporation headquarters. Inside the marble courthouse much of the furnishing were constructed of Yellow Oakwood, the rich material imported from the Imperial counties a century before. Fredrick stood in the dock, a guard stationed behind him, a shockprod weighing at his belt. The guard had made it clear to Fredrick when they arrived that he would have enjoyed sodomizing the child with the weapon. In his current state, still battered from Oktave’s beating, the thought of causing trouble had not entered Fredrick’s mind.

The Jury came into the courtroom and sat four to either side of the presiding judge, each one wearing a ceremonial sash of purple silk. The Judge wore a red sash and heavy cape, a golden crown of tymenut leaf placed around his brow.

Through one half-closed eye Fredrick noted the faces of the jury, entertaining no hopes when he recognised both Geoffrey Goldshore and his surviving son Ramond. Fredrick also recognised Senior Longshore sitting on the council with several other important noble heads. The few faces that he did not recognise were of little importance, he knew. The jury had been decided by its own members, the most influential of them having the right to say.

A lawyer for the prosecution and defence team arrived, a symbolic gesture for the boy whose fate had already been set. The lawyers talked amongst themselves for a moment before approaching the judge, saying few words then returning to their seats. Fredrick’s lawyer did not once acknowledge or look at him, keeping a steady eye forward.

“I address the members of the jury to say that Fredrick Themmond, charge of Ivan Steward and accused of the murder of Harmond Goldshore, be brought before us. I have it on faith from Master Themmond’s representative that the child is aware of his actions and has put in a plea of guilt,” said the judge.

Fredrick turned to stare at the man they called his lawyer, a mailed hand wrapping over his shoulder from behind and squeezing him to stillness.

“Under a plea of guilt Master Themmond is subject to serve a punishment of entailment. How does the jury vote to this?”

One by one each member rose, announcing their support towards the punishment.

“Under a decision of eight to nothing, Master Themmond is to be taken to Ritcave Prison for his preparation of departure. In a period of no less than thirty two days is he to undergo the ritual of entailment. Under this plot the meat from his arms and legs are to be removed with tempered pinchers, the open wounds to be filled with smelted lead. He is then ordered to have his organs removed from his body and burnt before him, his body to be filled with smelted lead. If he has not succumbed totally to the ritual he is said to be forgiven by the Manati and may still walk with him in the afterworld. To end his life and take this path Master Themmond must stand of his own will and light the pyres of department. If he is able then his sins will be forgiven and he will walk with the builder and destroyer.”

Fredrick snorted, the simple act causing a searing pain through his swollen face, he knew there was no chance of surviving the ritual. He had heard of the impossible repentances that were common among the noble's and church's punishment. He had no care of them either way, he worshipped Imperial gods and there were no such claims that could save him. His guard dragged him from the court, a black, iron-caged coach waiting for him at the rear, ready to escort him to a waiting rail cart. A masked figure guided him into the cage and climbed aboard, lashing two donkeys chained to the coach. They were headed for Old Bond Station where a waiting steamer was ready to take him to Ritcave Prison, set far south in the Notorious Clefts.

46

Thomas tightened his knuckles around the hilt, the blade still resting in its sheathe. The icy rain that hammered his steel plate hid the fact he was sweating. Thomas had spent the morning in a state of

nauseam, much of it sitting on a toilet, trying to control his rapid breathing and calm the beat of his heart. Throughout the many hours he had spent training in platemail it never felt so awkward as it did that moment, the tailored set feeling wrong on his tense shoulders.

From across the street stood a well-guarded carriage, his father watching from the shelter of a heated chamber. The chief watchman approached the shifting boy.

“Our men are in position my lord,” he yelled over the rain pinging off tin roofs. Thomas did not turn, keeping an eye locked on the front door of the apartment. He checked the two muskets secured under his weather cloak.

“I guess it’s time,” his whisper lost in the dirge.

Thomas turned to his escort, Tylor and Brian, two hardened veterans with more scars than years, noting their readiness. It was an easy job for them, assist in the murder of two unarmed men and share the glory, they were eager to begin. Tylor, the elder of the two, smiled at the young noble, sensing his nervousness through a poorly conceived poker face.

“Don’t worry about it lad, first time for me was the same.” He clapped him on the shoulder, giving a slight push. It helped steady the boy. Thomas raised his hand and dropped it, giving the signal. A nearby worker slapped a donkey’s arse, causing it to bolt. A chain tightened as the bridle caught and the front door was wrenched off.

The apartment was an ill-lit, two-story affair. The entry room pooled with stagnant water caught in the lip of the front step. The three men waded through, splashing their iron boots. Under cover Thomas drew his pistols, his escorts doing likewise.

“Remember, I take the kills,” he informed them. “Don’t get involved unless I’m in danger.” His fear had waned, replaced by a new emotion. He wanted to seek out his victims, to become a man in his eyes and those of his father.

“It’s not thunder,” came a voice upstairs. “I swear I heard something down there.”

A man stood at the top of the steps, peering into the dark depths. Thomas did not speak, relying on his right hand to steady the musket. With a yank of the trigger he felt the force of the shot, the lead ball flying upwards. It cracked the man in the leg, glancing off the thighbone and travelling up into the groin. The victim let out a bizarre

moan, sounding like an off-pitch singer. He limped backwards, stunned by the shot.

“Take your time and aim,” Tylor warned him. Thomas had practiced his shot little in the yards, preferring to dedicate his time with a sword. The advice sunk in. Switching hands to the loaded pistol Thomas started up the stairs, steadying his aim. The man he had shot leaned against a far wall trying unsuccessfully to prop himself up. With a second crack the man’s head imploded, the force of the bullet tearing through the skull and sucking it back in on itself. Thomas stared at the remains for a moment, emotions stirring inside a sea of conflicting thoughts. As he reached the top of the stairs Thomas grasped the stair rail, his boots slipping in the blood pumping from the corpse’s leg.

He turned, a barrel pointed at his face. Before he could react a trigger was pulled, the clasp snapping shut to the handle. There was a resounding click and a surprised look of fear. A deft hand had removed the flint piece from the clasp earlier, making the weapon useless. Thomas drew his sword, while the other man struggled to produce a footknife, named for its length. Thomas swung in a controlled arc, his blade catching on the side of a plastered wall before it could complete the turn. The opponent saw the opening, lunging forth and bringing up the blade. It scraped along the front of his plate, searching for a nook to bury in. Thomas reacted fast, dropping his sword and hugging the man’s arms, locking them in place. Although not fully grown, Thomas was a match for the thin man, used to sneaking rather than brawling. They pushed at each other, neither able to break free. Together they slipped in the blood and fell. The other man fell on Thomas, his weight pushing down on the blade. It sheared through the plate, digging into the thick mail links beneath.

“Help,” Thomas cried, fearing a wound. Tylor complied, charging behind the knifeman and dragging him into a headlock. Thomas lay, checking himself. When he realised it had not passed through he stood, taking his sword back up.

“You bastard,” he yelled, pulling back and releasing in a stab. Tylor jumped out of the way in time to avoid the blade as it exited the victim’s back, sliding through gut. The victim moaned as Thomas twisted then wrenched the blade free.

“It was meant to be lethal,” Brian hissed, watching the wounded man squirm in a foetal position.

Adrenalin surged in Thomas as he stabbed a second time, this time the sword striking the man's neck, entering between the jugular and spine and passing out the other side. He struck the voice box, an alien grating sound coming from the man as he continued to writhe. Thomas watched him, convinced that he had killed the man.

"Strike again," Tylor huffed, surprised at the victim's resilience. This time Thomas swung down instead of stabbing, an uncomfortable arc due to the narrow hall, the blade hitting the back of the neck and opening the flesh, revealing a puckered slice.

"That's not lethal either," Brian moaned. "Strike an artery."

"I'm trying," Thomas spat back, frustrated.

Brian grasped the knife handle protruding from Thomas' breast plate and yanked it out, handing it to the boy.

"Use this and be precise," he ordered. With more control over the smaller blade Thomas was able to open an artery on the still writhing man, flicking the tip into the already open neck and guiding it across, ending his life in a splay of blood.

"That shouldn't have been so difficult," Brian admonished.

"Give him a break... the boy's a hero now," Tylor grinned. "Let's go rescue the lady."

Thomas stared at the sagging corpse, disappointed with himself. He was meant to have killed both men with a single bullet, kills designed to raise no questions. Instead he had shot the first man twice and butchered the second. It might raise suspicions if an investigation were called. Looking down he could see the shimmering footknife still in his shaking hand. He exchanged it for his sword, wiping the blood clean and taking a set of keys off the victim.

"This one," Brian noted, standing next to an iron door with a thick padlock. With only two keys to choose from Thomas had an easy job unlocking the door. On the other side sat a figure, hooded and dirty. She wore dark leather pants and a stained linen shirt. As Thomas stepped closer he noted the blood near the hem of the shirt.

"Ammba," he called, sensing her tenseness. "It's Thomas."

He stepped closer, sliding the hood off with care. Ammba recoiled when it slipped away, dim light stinging her eyes. Thomas sought her bonds, cutting away the cord that tied her down.

"I'm here to rescue you," he assured her. She did not answer, bringing slender arms around, rubbing the numbness out of them. "Are you okay? Can you stand?"

She managed a nod and took Thomas' arm, attempting to stand. She could not, her weak legs struggling with the minimal weight.

"Carry her out," Brian instructed. Tylor grabbed a thick woollen blanket from a bed.

"Wrap her in this, she'll freeze out there."

Thomas agreed, placing the rug over her shoulders with care, trying to be gentle with the girl despite his mailed fists.

"How did you find me?" She whispered, tears now rolling down her cheeks.

"My father... well, one of his agents."

"Why didn't my father's men come?" she asked, looking up into his blood specked face as he navigated the precarious stairs. Thomas did not reply. Instead he feigned ignorance, whispering for her not to worry.

The rain caught them as they stepped outside, a cheering cohort of Longshore men welcoming them into the street. Soldiers clapped their shields as Thomas crossed the street with Ammba bundled up, her arms around his armoured neck. He lifted his charge into the veiled carriage, the warmth of a coal burner exuding from the space. Thomas raised a hand to his troops in victory, a weary smile flashing through the pour of rain, before he joined the confine of the carriage.

"Miss Steward," Senior cooed. "I am so sorry to hear of your hardship."

Thomas settled on the step next to hers, the exhausted girl leaning onto the ruined plate.

"Thankyou," she spoke softly.

Thomas felt a tug in his belly, feeling that his first impressions of the girl may have been misplaced. He knew she was strong, already the light returning to her eyes

"It was a pleasure my lady," the lord soothed. "But not the last of your hardship I fear. There has been an accident, your father murdered."

Ammba gasped, covering her mouth, a sudden sense of despair falling.

"I'm sorry Ammba," Thomas offered.

Her body contorted as she held in the sobs.

"I need to see my mother."

"Not possible I'm afraid. I fear that the house of Steward has fallen under a tyranny my lady," Lord Longshore reached across the burner

and placed a hand on her knee. She flinched at the touch. "If you return to the castle then your life will be forfeit."

"My life?" She could not believe it.

"The regent's substitute has made it clear that he wants Haylee settled to the regency. The church disagrees, claiming that you are the legal heir. They do not support Haylee. Lord Pierce, your appointed guardian, will have you murdered once found. That is why the regent's knights were not used just now."

"So I am to hide while my family grieve?"

"No child. You will be safe under my house. This Pierce would never risk attacking a noble house. You must stay with us until he is deposed."

"And my family?"

"I am working on extracting them from the citadel. It is not the place you left. The guards have tripled and that again, your siblings locked away in cells," Senior's lies came naturally.

Ammba tried to swallow, a struggle through a contracted throat.

"Why do the church or nobles not intervene?"

"They underestimated this tyrant... Everyone did. He has a loyal sect of supporters tied to the army lending him their strength. A direct attack on the castle would be fruitless and few nobles or priests wish to see another war in the city so soon."

"And what would you do?" The tone had a demanding hint in it, the lord noted with interest. Thomas had not noticed, listening to his father speak with an eloquence he rarely saw or knew himself. He did not know what was the truth and lies when they were delivered with such execution. Thomas doubted he could ever speak with such a level of grace.

"I have not decided yet. I have an agent in the citadel, a woman. She might prove useful though I am hesitant to test her too hard yet. A murder is not an easy thing to accomplish, especially when I can have no direct hand in the execution. I fear that waiting might be our best option for now."

"I do not wish to wait sir." Ammba was angry, Senior sympathising with the girl and calming her.

"You will have free reign on our estate Ammba. I will inform the church of your rescue and they might dispose of this mad dog for us. Until then we must tread with care. I am assigning my son Thomas to watch over you, he is resourceful in a fight, as you must be aware."

"My blood-soaked warrior," Ammba nodded. "I'm aware."

She smiled at Thomas.

"You have blood too," he stammered. "Are you hurt?"

Ammba's eyes dropped, only now noticing the blood on her shirt.

"It's nothing," she whispered, eyes downcast.

"Are you sure?" he persisted.

"It's her cycle, Thomas," Senior told him with a terse voice, passing off a scowl at his child.

Ammba did not respond, watching the stone buildings of Ironwood's poorest quarter slip away in a crack between the curtains, her mind shifting elsewhere.

47

The inn was a decent sort, frequented by town workers seeking meals or a drink after a long day. At one table sat a pair of off-duty town watch, their batons replaced with sagging coin purses.

O'ryan spat a thick globule into the corner, heady Danick rum drowning his ills.

"This man never existed," he cursed, taking a deep draught.

"He is a mystery," Manderley Serravia agreed, sipping at his own cup.

For two weeks they had stumbled through the dark corners of Ironwood in search of Dead. Between them they had questioned each of the crime families with no success and found little forthcoming from the main players of the merchants and nobles alike.

"He's got to be foreign," Manderley continued.

"Then why didn't he have a fucking accent?" The question was slurred, spit touching Manderley's cheek across the table.

"Then someone's hiding him. Ironwood's not that big, people can't just disappear."

"Big enough for some," O'ryan huffed.

From across their table the two off-duty guards eyed them, O'ryan's loud voice an unpleasant distraction.

"What the fuck are you staring at?" O'ryan cursed, gripping the table with tight knuckles.

Even off-duty it was hard for the insult to be ignored. The closer man, a thick middle-aged Neanderthal with short cropped hair, stepped towards the table.

“Great,” Manderley muttered. “Let me handle this.”

O’ryan ignored him, standing upright in a flash and striking out two quick punches. The aging guard stepped back, a crumpled nose plastered to his face. The second guard, now standing with a stubby dagger, advanced.

“You want to die as well?” O’ryan barked, vaulting onto the table and lashing out a steel-tipped boot.

There was a gurgle of pain as the guard retreated, one hand holding back his teeth. O’ryan jumped to the floor and charged, grabbing the dagger arm and sending a hard cross into the man’s jaw, pulverizing the already bloody mess. The first guard stepped back, cradling a broken nose and ready to sound the watch.

From the bar strode a man with a black patch on one eye, a navy blue vest over chain mail. He stopped the guard, whispering into his ear. There was a hint of dissatisfaction before the caveman backed down. The intruder approached the second guard, still circling with O’ryan, and interrupted him.

“Get out of the way,” the guard tried to order him, instead large fountains of blood poured forth.

“End the fight. That’s an order.”

“No Patriarchtsman... orders the watch,” was managed through shattered teeth.

“You’re off duty, and about to kill one of Puello DeYemond’s men.”

Surprise filtered through the bloody gob, then fear. The dagger disappeared and then its wielder, leaving shamed but thankful of a missed tragedy.

“What do you want?” O’ryan fumed, returning to his seat and taking Manderley’s drink.

“You keep interesting company these days Serra.”

“You know me,” Manderley shrugged, sitting upright from a slight cowering position. “Always business.”

“What do you want Killan?” O’ryan probed, pumping his right fist, noting a swelling.

“Is it broken? If so I know a good medicinist nearby.”

“I don’t take charity from Patriarchtsman.”

“Excuse my companion’s demeanor, we’ve had a hard run of it of late,” Manderley admitted.

“So I hear. My birds tell me that Manderley Serravia has been running around town with one of DeYemond’s henchmen breaking all sorts of noses. I’m keen interested.”

“You two know each other then,” O’ryan noted.

“Just like you, we in the Patriarcht’s fold require reliable street word.”

“I’m surprised that old fool has the sense to keep up with the street.”

Killan’s eyes blackened.

“Old acquaintances will soon count for nothing if you continue that line,” he threatened.

O’ryan backed off and for a second Manderley swore he saw a hint of fear creeping through his aggressive companion.

“How do you two know each other?” Manderley quizzed.

“It would be unwell of me to lavish the inner details of our Patriarcht’s workings. Let me just note that he likes to hire men of O’ryan’s disposition for unusual work. Suffice it to say that O’ryan was less than satisfying in his performance. I suggest you remember that if you continue running your business venture.”

“I wouldn’t listen to any word that one of these liemongers tells you,” O’ryan bit back, any sense of caution now lost.

Manderley kept his mouth closed, aware that he was in the company of dangerous men, his own temperament lending to a more civilised bearing.

“Nevertheless,” Killan continued, “when you tread on a lot of toes eventually you make a wrong step. You may think that because you enjoy the protection of DeYemond that you are safe but there is nothing stopping an anonymous sliver from ending your business.”

“We’re being hunted?” Manderley asked, his brow digging low.

“No... not yet that I’m aware. There is a shift in the city. If you listen carefully you’ll hear it. Some powers will grow strong, others will wither. All exchanges lead to disorder though.”

“This is why I left your service,” O’ryan interrupted. “You struggle to say the simplest thing.”

“These are not simple times. When you tie yourself to a power you suffer its consequence. If DeYemond takes a wrong step he will take you down with him. Is that plainer for you?”

“I hear you... but,” he didn’t finish, O’ryan’s drunken slur trailing away.

“So what did you want of us?” Manderley continued, his back turned to his companion.

“I’m interested in the man you are seeking. The descriptions I receive from your victims tend towards the unusual.”

“What have you heard?”

“A nameless man, without memory, wanted for multiple homicides. Tell me Serra, how many men has O’ryan murdered in the search for this murderer?”

“None yet... That I know of.”

“Fine, and the description of your chase?”

“We want him for questioning over three deaths.”

“Were they violent?” Killan’s eyes seemed alight, as if a morbid flame flickered within.

“The first? No. The others... Why would a Patriarchtsman be so interested in such a thing?”

“The physical description of the man, as I’ve heard it, matches someone I once knew. I would like to see his sketch.”

Manderley stared hard at Killan, weighing up what the motives could be. When first hired he had expected the chase to lead to a rival crime family, his own neutrality serving some element of safety. He realised now that if the Patriarcht were involved then no benefit could be sought from finding the killer. If there were a link to the murders from this end he did not want involvement in any way.

Reaching one hand under the table he struggled within his rucksack. He was watched, not only by Killan, but also O’ryan now, the drunk’s interest piqued by the possible new lead. Manderley sat up, a rolled parchment clenched in stressed fingers.

“There,” he muttered, pushing the portrait across the table.

Killan stared at the image, silent for a long time.

“Do you know him?” O’ryan broke.

“Yes, I know him,” Killan nodded, handing the portrait back. “I murdered him.”

The train continued its treacherous route along mountains devoid of habitation. It bounced along a single rail line that snaked around jagged rock faces and clung to a precarious foundation. The rail itself butted out from the rocks, a common design with Ironwood Rail aimed at preventing snow from clotting the line. Since his awakening Ghost had not experienced so much fear as now. Looking through the iron grate of his carriage floor he was presented with a monstrous drop.

“How are you feeling?” he asked Dead, trying to occupy himself.

“Strange,” Dead confessed. “It’s in my guts.”

Ghost nodded.

“You’ve been complaining of that a fair bit.”

“Do you know what it is?”

“I’ve got an idea, but it’s not much good telling you here. We need to wait till we’ve got a better chance to escape.”

“We can’t get out here?” he asked.

“Not unless you feel like jumping down.” Ghost said. “Wait till we’re in the asylum. If you can escape without attracting attention then that’d be best. That means no killing people.”

The cage jarred as it wound round a bend.

“No killing, got it.”

Crenulated walls and arrow slits came into view of their narrow window as the train continued its trek. Ashmore Asylum had once been a fortress, built into the side of Grimbold mountain nearly a thousand years before, created by the Patriarcht as a place of fortitude for his lordling sons.

It had been abandoned out of a want of convenience not long after its inception, the lords of Ironwood seeking a more accessible home closer to the city. It had stood empty for eight centuries before King Asis had reclaimed it as a second prison, prized for its isolation. Under the regents it had become the asylum. Escape would not be easy.

The rail crossed a bridge and passed through the black walls of Ashmore, stopping at a waypoint. The guards stepped off the platform, one leaving to request extra assistance with the potentially violent arrival. Two more guards arrived, dressed in red vests instead of the green that the city watch wore. On their chests they bore a castle cracked down the middle.

“That bring back anymore memories?” Ghost asked, gesturing to the symbol. Dead shrugged.

The four guards flanked Dead as he stepped out of the carriage. Each carried their prods in hand, ready for an assault. The metal rods emitted a cracking sound as electricity surged through the metal pole attached to a hefty battery, ready to discharge on contact. Ghost noted that the men wore special gloves with a strange lining on the hands that held the prod.

They reached the courtyard, a slate square thing that had worn away over time. A thick barred cage now engulfed the yard, breaking off at points to lead into the low security wing and children's wing. A series of gallows hung above the length of the yard. Bodies, ripened from exposure, swung from ropes, left to decay. Ghost noted the assortment of victims, ranging from old women to children and everything between, and blanched. Many corpses, left for so long, were unrecognizable with only a few muscle tissues holding the corpses in place.

The procession of men stuck to the main path, leading to maximum security and what would have once been the castle keep. They passed another checkpoint before coming to an empty room. Dead was ordered to remove his torn clothes. When it looked like he would resist Ghost ordered him otherwise.

Stark naked, Dead was marched down a long corridor to 'level one containment'. The final checkpoint was a cage. Dead passed through and was locked out on the other side, alone with Ghost.

"Meals are twice a day in the canteen – level four, you'll hear the bell. Miss them and miss out. If we call you out then come back here to be collected. There are informants inside so if you think about taking off, or you go around killing people, we'll know." The gruff voiced guard had to speak loud over the cries coming down the hall. "Charles Longpin, enjoy the next ten years in Ashmore."

The guards turned their backs and locked the far cage, leaving a solitary figure to keep watch. Ghost looked at Dead, his naked body scarred and toughened. Fluid was seeping from between the stitches in his chest and Ghost noted a swollen belly. As Dead had refused food and drink since awaking Ghost dreaded what was causing the bulge. Dead walked off to explore their new home with Ghost following.

"This place is disgusting," Ghost riled as they passed through the dim corridor smeared in human remains. The stone walls had been covered in cheap plaster years past but had cracked and worn away in

many places to reveal the founding stone beneath. Blood and feces decorated several sections of wall, either in delirium or art, Ghost was unsure. Fingernail scrapings ran the length of the corridors, their manic tears crisscrossing the plaster and stone.

“You will fit right in,” Ghost decided.

Rooms broke away from the main corridor at regular intervals. Some contained rags with naked bodies sleeping in fits, others bore the wrath of a raving inmate, venting their insanities into the building. Every inhabitant was a naked mess, covered in grime and unkempt hair.

The corridor turned into the lobby, a dilapidated stairwell the main feature. The once carpeted steps worn down to smooth stone. Over the din of moaning that filled the air came a semi-rational voice.

“Hey, you there,” pointed a man with long greasy hair, wearing a light smock. He approached Dead, taking care not to step in a puddle of blood. “You’re new here, the name’s Malcolm,” he protruded an open hand which Dead ignored. “Got a name?” he queried.

“You might as well be honest,” shrugged Ghost. “You’ve finally made it to the loon’s hut.”

“It’s Dead,” he growled, staring at the thin man with animal eyes.

“Hey, calm down friend, I’m just trying to greet you. All new bloods need to go to the top,” he said, pointing a bony finger up the stairwell. “You’ll find the king up there, he runs the show. Anything that goes on around here has to go through him.”

“Ask him who the king is,” suggested Ghost. There was no reply. “Dead?”

Dead couldn’t tear his eyes from the man’s face, there was a hint of a memory etched into it that he couldn’t place.

“Why are you here?” Dead barked.

“Me? I’m Malcolm Enricho, I’m sure you heard of me. I worked in the Patriarcht’s household for a while, carrying out his cutting operations. That’s basically corpse disposal. Anyway, to cut a long one short, they said I was cutting up the wrong bodies. What if some noble’s bitch went missing from time to time, eh?”

“Oh you’re definitely going to fit in here,” Ghost snorted.

Dead nodded.

“Do I look familiar to you?” he asked.

“Can’t say that you do. My memory’s not what it used to be though,” Malcolm frowned.

“Know the feeling,” Dead agreed.

“Look, if you want to trade stories then hunt me down after you’ve spoken to the king.”

The stairwell ascended five levels, each flight similar to the previous. The final floor was guarded by two stocky men, one bent over due to a bone deformity that twisted his limbs and swelled his skull, the other tall and thick.

“What’ya want?” sneered the tall man, sizing Dead up.

“I’m here to see the king.”

“He don’t want to see you,” bubbled the deformed man struggling to spit out his words.

“Wonderful,” Ghost declared.

“I’m going to pass, and you’ll be going for a long drop if you don’t get out of my way,” Dead warned.

The men were surprised. They were used to visitors being intimidated by their appearance.

“It’s okay,” the tall man laughed. “We’re just playing with you. I’m Scotty and this is Mutt. You are?”

“Dead,” he confirmed.

“Ah yeah, whatever. Listen the king’s kind of got this thing about new bloods. Either you play his games or you’ll find yourself confined pretty quick. The basement levels are resigned for guests that don’t play. I don’t think you live long down there. Just a warning.”

Scott nodded Dead through, granting access.

They stumbled into a well-lit room, each humming bulb powered and working. Men and women sat around the chamber, clothed in plain smocks. At the far end of the room sat a man in a wheelchair rocking back and forth, his fat figure covered by a robe. Tufts of black stubble struggled on his chin, his hairline a receding coward. Two men holding iron rods stood either side.

The king noticed the entrance and motioned for Dead to approach.

“Welcome to my sanctum,” the invalid rasped with heavy breath. “I am King Joanne III, eighth son and fifteenth child of King Hermatt II. How can I acquaint you?”

Dead looked lost and needed urging from Ghost.

“My name is Dead.”

“Fitting for this place, where important men are sent to die, I assure you.” Each word was a struggle, tiny sweat beads gathered across his brow as he ventured on. “Of fifteen children, I am the fourth

last surviving, driven here by my treacherous siblings. I chose to be stronger than the mortal coils of flesh though and have created my own kingdom, one built from the misery bestowed on the inhabitants and forged ready to help retake my throne,” King Joanne puffed.

“Oh no,” Ghost whimpered.

“What do you want?” asked Dead.

“What do I want?” the crippled man replied, amazed. “I want to taste my brother’s last breath on my cheek, to hear him shudder as I clutch at his life strings and rend them agape... in time this will come to pass. You, Dead, must choose. Whose side will you ride with in this war?”

“Take his side, and sound like you mean it,” Ghost hissed.

Dead gave a subtle nod.

“For your majesty.” He dropped to one knee.

The king smiled, showing brown teeth.

“A worthy subject - arise Sir Dead.”

Dead stood, his scarred corpse overshadowing the king.

“I have a mission for you. Perform it well and I will bestow the royal garb upon you.” He waved a stubby finger across the room, highlighting the smocks that his entourage wore, the tips of his fingers dark blue.

“What would my king have me do?” Dead asked.

Ghost was surprised at the fluency with which Dead was able to speak all of a sudden, at sorts with the grumbling short sentences his deceased companion preferred.

“Sir Dead, a man walks amongst us... a man of the enemy. Inciting words against me and stirring strong emotions. He hides in the sub-level, where my men fear to tread. We have waited for the coming of a strong knight, someone of your temperament, to plunge those depths and remove the offendant. The man you seek is known as Louise Rambler, a sly-tongued deviant known for hiding in shadows. Bring me his head and I will bestow you with many gifts.”

“Oh yeah, I can see this king overthrowing the current royal line in Ironwood with this vast army,” Ghost said grinning, “Ask him for a weapon.”

“I have nothing to spare I fear,” grieved the cripple after listening to the request.

“Medical supplies then.”

“That I may have. Bring me the cancerous head and you shall receive.”

Ghost looked at Dead's bulge, they needed to be fast.

49

"How is your new friend," Callis asked, his eyes flitting shut. He sat in his throne, one hand curled around a cup of Prytrian wine.

"He's worse than useless," Nielle sneered, polishing his master's boot.

"I thought you were going to teach him duties," Callis responded after a long minute, staving off sleep.

"I try. One might as well be teaching a statue."

"A statue?" Callis asked.

"Well, something stupid."

"It doesn't matter," Callis quipped, shutting his eyes again. "As long as he keeps his mouth shut there won't be a problem. If it makes you feel better you have my permission to beat him. You are higher ranked than he is after all."

"Maybe I should feed him to Islemann," Nielle offered.

The master opened his eyes, peering at the boy for the first time.

"I recommend that Islemann is kept secret from Wurt."

"Why is Islemann so dangerous?" Nielle asked, remembering the mission that Pilus had forced on him.

"What should I tell you of him," Callis mused, sipping at his dark brew. "He is not of Iron stock, nor does he come from an Imperial or Northane background. Islemann comes from a tribe set far south in the mountains, past the reach of Ironwood's mining grip and the speckling of other tribes that you may be familiar with."

"He doesn't look that different," Nielle mentioned, abandoning his chores and focusing on the master, still waiting for his question to be answered.

"You've only seen him in one skin," Callis' smile brimmed.

Nielle looked confused for a moment before realising that the strong alcohol was turning the priest mirthful.

"He has more than one?"

The question received a barking laugh. "I'm sure he likes to collect them. My word says that he's had his eye on yours for some time now.

Just because he is not currently in the tower do not think that he is any less to be feared. Thank yourself lucky that I see some value in your continued service.”

“What makes him more dangerous than you or I?” Nielle pressed.

“That is something that you do not need to know... at least not for now. Unlike you, Islemann does not work for me. He only makes himself visible to those he wants. In your case this may not be such a good thing.”

“I’m just curious.”

“And I’m drunk. Help me to my room.”

Nielle pressed himself to the master, supporting the sodden weight. With much struggle and side stepping they navigated to the master chambers, Callis laying down on a simple mattress and slipping into a drunk’s sleep.

Nielle stepped back, turning to leave. It was rare moment that he found himself in the master’s room. While the furnishings were fine wood, there was nothing extravagant. One desk contained an assortment of well-filed documents and the fire’s mantel was clear of all ornamentation.

As if out of sorts with the rest of the tidy room, Callis’ keys sat to one side of his desk. In a perfectly filed room they screamed out at Nielle. The boy took note of his master’s snoring heap, reaching out a trembling hand to the set.

In his mind Nielle feared Pilus more - the master he did not know. Since his station within the high priest’s quarters Nielle’s abuse had always come from Callis’ counterpart. First Gustus’ cane, now Pilus’ strike. It was a rare thing for Callis himself to punish the boy and with that thought the child pocketed the keys. Nielle tiptoed through the chambers, seeking out the Beastmen’s dungeon and the locked doors within.

Despite the event having long passed, the death chamber of Aea-Baeni still held a faint aroma of Gustus Esum’s cooked flesh. The clean up from that bloody night had reviled Nielle, flashing memories of the dead man’s meat succulently peeling from the bone coming back to the child. It had fallen to Nielle to carry the corpse to the furnaces for a final cremation, a task done piecemeal as the child had been forced to dissect the fat man himself. It was a deed that Callis had insisted the child take care of personally. In his mind, Nielle wondered if his master wanted to turn him into another Islemann.

Past the death chamber stood a foreboding iron door, unpassed before by Nielle. For a moment he considered the possibility that Islemann could be waiting behind the door for him. Callis had confided in him that the killer was out on a duty however and Nielle raised the keys, shaking fingers rattling them forth as he struggled to fit one to the lock.

Before him was a deep black chamber. The child took a nearby coal lamp sitting in a recess and struck it with a flint stick. Shadows danced down the eerie hall, looking like black ravens chasing the frightened child as he stumbled in half darkness. One black door marked the end of the hall, unlocked and awaiting. Nielle stepped through.

Many candles lit the chamber, sputtering shadows crisscrossing black walls. It was cold within the iron tomb, despite the many tiny flames, and condensation touched everything not alight. Silver and dark red beasts corniced the ceiling, black tongues and blue eyes menacing down with sadistic smiles. At the far end of the room stood a shrine, a two-headed twisted wolf beast with razor teeth snarling in suspended rage. A stone pallet lay by its feet.

Despite the cruel imagery that haunted the room Nielle was infinitely more terrified by the two figures standing before him, eyes boring down.

“A disappointment,” Callis hissed, showing no sign of intoxication.

“For you... yes,” Islemann croaked, smiling pointed teeth.

“I...” Nielle wanted to explain.

“Do not bother with excuses,” Callis berated. “I know that Pilus sent you. It’s what I would have done. You chose the wrong side to play the pawn.”

“Please...”

“He’s entered my chamber,” Islemann cackled. “You know the rule.”

“Yes,” Callis agreed. “The rule. Nielle, you are no longer in my service. I give you to Islemann to do with as he sees fit.”

Callis pushed past the wide-eyed child, pulling shut the door. Nielle turned to follow, an unmarked wall where a door once was. Islemann stepped closer, his swollen eye seeming to flush, the pock scars in his face pulsating. Nielle grasped for the Ihn’s dagger at his belt.

“Do not bother with that toy,” Islemann remarked, advancing on the boy.

Nielle ignored his voice, taking the blade and stabbing out. There was some resistance as the blade cut into Islemann, entering at the belly. The child looked up in his frightened gaze, to see a smiling glare confront him.

“You fail to listen again child,” Islemann mused, taking one hand and lifting back his cloak. Nielle choked at the sight. Dried serpent-like muscles gripped the blade and held it in place. A thin yellow slime smeared the blade and turned it a ruddy brown as it sought the hilt.

Islemann reached one hand out, clasping the back of Nielle’s head and held his stare.

“I knew when I saw you that you would come to me.”

Nielle struggled, the scent of Islemann’s musty scent too much to bear.

“Let me show you the true beast.”

In one violent action Nielle was enveloped by a crescendo of contortion.

50

Rafpheel Tyme-Lal tried to focus his mind away from the itch. He sat in a soft elk hide seat, dressed in silk. He was aging fast, at thirty his hair had thinned, a receding line appearing a few years previous. His father had been Opfer Tyme-Lal, father to the Greenskin crime family. With his father’s disappearance four years past Rafpheel had taken on the lead, assuming control of the family.

He was not a large man, though suffered from the gait of one who spends too much time in conversation. His distinguished feature was the horrible cracked skin that covered his body and face. He had spent many years as a child tied down to prevent scratching, the frenzied acts ending with gouged flesh. As an adult he still slept bound, his state of control failing during the night.

As he sat, waiting for the visitor to arrive, he found the itching worse. He began rubbing his back into the chair, sighing in relief, before becoming aware of his actions and stopping. Doctors and

herbalists could achieve little with him, the severe skin disorder too much for any drug. The best they had given were narcotics, numbing his body and mind to the point where he forgot his pain. He had refused the drug this morning, preparing himself for the guest.

The far door opened without fanfare, a simple servant leading with James Pierce in tow. He wore a thick plate and unkempt hair, striding on heavy legs. Rafeal was at first impressed by the man's size, only noting the heavy gut and fat face as he came into view. He stood, relieved from the touch of the chair, shaking hands with the giant.

"Lord Pierce," Rafeal nodded, offering a cup of strong Brandish wine.

"Sir Tyme," he replied, taking the cup with thirsty lips.

"I must admit to surprise when your agent contacted me. I am not accustomed to dealing with royalty."

Pierce did not correct the slip.

"I thank you for the hospitality. It is my understanding that your father had some hand in the play of the city."

"He was a secretive man. He shared little."

"I'm sorry for your loss," Pierce tasted the wine, signing his approval.

"Four years leaves behind a lot of grieving. I assume you are here on business matters."

"Aye," Pierce agreed, relieved to be free from small talk. "I seek your sponsorship."

"Sponsorship? You mean money."

"That too. I am regent, as you are aware, to a pack of baying nobles intent on draining the blood of the ruler." Rafeal watched emotionless, expecting the point. "They do not support the regent as they should, leaving him to the cold. I am a man of military, I can see the pitiful offerings that they mask as station. Without their full support I am vulnerable to outside attack."

"What do you want?"

"I have men but not material. The citadel is a toy castle, ready to collapse under light assault."

"You see me as a soldier?"

"As a commander. The castle is weak."

"It looks strong to my eyes."

"Thirty years ago perhaps. Now it could be torn apart with enough thapenithine."

"As could any fortress I assume."

“Any fortress of stone. I wish to build an iron citadel.”

“Iron? That would cost more than any family has.”

“No. I need iron, with it I can have plates forged to reinforce the walls.”

“You would need...”

“A mountain of iron,” Pierce finished.

“And you think I can afford this?”

“Of course not. I never planned for you to. Your territories broach the Western Runs. Tell me how many live in the Stony Moorlands?”

“Who’s to know,” Rafpheal shrugged, wondering where the talk was leading. “Only the old and stupid would choose to stay there.”

“Yet many of the houses were built during the Iron era, set on metal foundings only to have stone built on top. The land is yours if you can bring me that iron.”

“What use would I have of it?” he asked, frowning. The land was desolate for a reason, the sprawl of slums generating no wealth and distant from the capital.

“You would have no use of a title either?” Pierce asked. Rafpheal barked a laugh, his tight mouth folding open.

“Lord of a wasteland?”

“It will not always be a wasteland. Once cleared you will have leave to redevelop the area, building a city of your own.”

“And this would be with my infinite wealth?”

“When I am king there will be changes in the city. The Petruvian Way clogs under heavy spring and summer traffic. I have been presented with an intriguing proposal to build a new road, sweeping around Cragscleft Mountain and into the Simmonian Plain, a direct link into the Kingdom.” Rafpheal eyed him, trying to ascertain how much was false.

“A new road? It would take too long to get around, no one would choose to use it.”

“They would when they feel the burden of a new toll on The Petruvian Way.”

“If this is so easy then you should pull down these houses yourself.”

“If you knew the nobles then you would understand. The regent has no right to construct in the city. If they find out then I will be fast challenged.”

“I can understand why.”

“You are hesitant?”

“Yes... and no. You make great promise though I find myself doubting your words.”

Pierce breathed deep, trying to control his frustration. “Great kings are borne of promise. You have a choice: stay here as crime lord, feared by commoners and ignored by greater society; or seek the nobility yourself. A single task is all I require. Surely your people can handle it?”

“I have the people,” Rafpheal conceded. “A noble title you say?”

“Not just that - holding a city title. You would be bounded into the highest ranks of the noble court.”

Greed bred fast in the plagued man. He lost himself to thought, picking at the irritated skin on his arm. Pierce watched, fascinated by the man’s complexion.

“Regents cannot make nobles,” he recalled. “That’s the job of the king.”

“I am aware of that,” Pierce told him in a stern voice, a silent understanding formed between them.

“It’s tempting. How will you hide the work from the nobles?”

“That is the hard part,” he granted. “I will be sending my most trusted men into the Stony Moorland. They will forge the plates there and ship them only when ready. I have already started to set up workstations in the area and coal should start coming in within the next few days.”

“You’ve secured enough coal for the job?”

“I’ve struck a similar deal with father DeYemond. Your families will be working together on the job. Don’t worry though, he has been offered mountain title, leaving the city title to you.”

“The families do not work well together,” Rafpheal scowled.

“For a greater good. Puello DeYemond has assured me that he will honour any truce during the program. When you are nobles then feel free to bicker till your throats chafe.”

“The coal will be stolen then?”

“Filtered,” Pierce corrected. “It won’t be missed.”

Rafpheal poured another drink, the constant itch forgotten for the moment. He was skeptical to a point but knew that the Tyme family would be nothing without risk. If the fat regent was right he could drag his children from the criminal world and jump the ranks of social hierarchy.

They clinked glasses, sealing the deal.

A lack of signage hid the basement from casual wanderers. It took much hunting and questions for the two companions to discover it. Dead had to wind his way through the mazelike rooms that beset the keep, minding his step past crazed lunatics and threatening dead eyed starers.

They found a guard standing before a heavy chained door, a constant grin on his face.

“Can I help you?” he asked in a high-pitched chortle.

“I’m on a mission from the king.”

“Then you must know the password,” tittered the guard. Ghost took a closer look at the man, there was an odd light in his eyes, too wide and unstill. He leaned on a rusty bar that doubled as a weapon. The most disturbing feature was the stump at his groin where a penis once hung.

“He’s not wearing a cloak,” Ghost realised. “He mustn’t be part of the king’s guard.”

“Tell me who has the key, before I splinter your skull,” Dead demanded.

The crazed man’s lips rose in a deprived smile. He leaned forward. “Then splinter it,” he whispered with a chuckle.

Dead didn’t object, slamming a wide fist into the man’s skull, sending him sprawling through the mould-addled ground. The guard lay unmoving.

“That was quick,” Ghost noted, unable to take his eyes from the withered stump that prodded outwards. “Though you didn’t find out about the key.”

His thoughts were disturbed by the sound of snapping metal, Dead tearing the chains from the door with little effort.

“You can be efficient when you need to be.”

The basement was dark, a rare bulb still existing to hum out its last light. Dead stumbled in the darkness, knocking over discarded waste. He was sloshing through puddles with each step. The basement echoed in silence, the screams and ravings of the main keep left behind, only

the ominous drip of pipes and the occasional scrape of metal to be heard.

“This has to be a joke,” Ghost whispered. “We’re not going to find anyone alive down here.”

Dead wanted to agree with him. He was experiencing an odd feeling, not of fear, but a discomfort.

“This is a place where dead people come to die,” he stated.

“Let’s turn back then.”

Dead shook his head, he needed to press on, as if his promise meant something. He had sworn to fulfill the oath and that did not slip from his memory like so many thoughts. It was an anchor in his mind, something to retain when all else was forgotten. He knew he could not abandon the pledge.

They spent a long time sludging through the pit, hopping from one light source to the next distant one, missing rooms and corridors that hid in the dark recesses between them. They were being led, unknowing, to their fate.

The scrape of metal became louder as they pressed forward, the shriek cutting through the silence and echoing past them. Ghost wanted to retreat, to forget about the mission, but he was chained to Dead. For someone that had already passed over he was displaying an impressive amount of fear.

Dead fell, his feet caught in a metal chain discarded at one stage. He looked at it though the dimness, noting the heavy shackles at each end. The pair looked at each other without answer.

A rounded corner saw a strong light ahead. They progressed, each minding their step. The scrape came again, near on top of them. The light ahead coaxed them forward. More shackles hung overhead along the corridor, their chains brushing Dead’s knotted hair as he passed.

They entered the rounded dungeon, lit by several bulbs stationed around the walls. Naked bodies hung from shackles welded to the ceiling, pieces of flesh and organs removed. Ghost did not speak, the horrors of before did not match. A hemp sack hung from one anchor, a steady beat of gore dripping out. Around the room there were bodies impaled on poles embedded in the cracked stone floor, the figures contorted as they writhed.

The fear that Ghost felt came from the energy in the room, he was in tune with it to an extent. As the spirits had passed over in anguish and despair they left an aftertaste, like bitter fruit, that Ghost could

taste in the back of his mind. Dead sensed something too, unsure of his own emotions. The mutilated corpses and rotting meat tempting memories inside his own brain.

A steady rasping followed them as a figure stepped from the darkness behind them, a blade dragging along rusted pipes.

“You don’t like it, do you?” came a sadistic voice.

Both turned. Before them stood a naked, bloated man covered in filth. Dried blood congealed over his genitals and thighs with streaks slashing his chest. His right arm was a stump at the elbow, the limb replaced with a spike, its end sharpened to a crude blade.

“You Louise?” asked Dead in his expressionless tone.

The fat man laughed, spitting phlegm.

“So, the crippled king sent you,” he wiped his chin with his remaining backhand. “There is no Louise I’m afraid.”

“Shit,” cursed Ghost.

“Who are you then?” Dead asked, finding a strange interest in the man.

“People don’t ask me my name, and I don’t tell them,” he admitted.

He stepped forward, frustrated by the lack of emotion.

“I’m the king’s lapdog, so to speak. He likes to send me scraps. That’d be you.”

Another step.

“You can’t kill me,” Dead told him, “I don’t live.”

The dog laughed, a bellow that wept with more spittle.

“I know,” he grinned, “no one does.”

He moved with unexpected speed, the spike thrusting forward, its sharp point burying deep into Dead’s round belly. There was a gush, yellow liquid erupting from the wound and spewing forth in a jet. Dead felt instant release as the bile emptied from him, a colony of maggots leaving their host. It came out strong, blinding the assailant whose single hand tried to shield the rotting stream.

“Kill him,” Ghost ordered, snapping Dead from his second of relief.

Dead complied, barreling into the man and pinning him down. There was a struggle as they fought to kill each other. Dead stood, grabbing the spike in stern hands, his foot pressed on the other man’s chest. The dog’s shrill cry broke the chamber as the weapon wrenched away, sucking out flesh and bone that had formed to the metal.

Dead hovered over the cowering man, his remaining arm pressed to the stump to slow the gush of blood. Dead wanted to say something cruel or witty, to mark his final moment with torment befitting the man, an honour to a psychopath. But there was nothing. His mind had failed again. Frustrated by his own inability, Dead roared, ramming the spike down onto the dog's skull. It struck the forehead, scraping along the bone and down the side of his head, pinning the ear to the stone floor.

"Do it properly," the dog growled, assigned to death, a flap of skin hanging over one eye. Dead did, the spear didn't bounce twice. The metal pierced skull and then brain, causing wild convulsions that knocked Dead over. He watched the twitching from the ground, still seeping fluid and maggots himself.

"Dead, open yourself up," Ghost ordered. Dead held his standard idiot glare, confused again. "You're rotting from the inside. I thought it was happening before, now I'm sure. Your body isn't using its organs so they're rotting. They need to be removed."

"You're serious, aren't you?" Dead didn't like the idea. The scars from the last surgery still unhealed.

"Use that pole you planted in that crazy bastard's head."

Dead tried to remove the spike, held in by suction, the brain holding to it. He put weight on the spear but the head moved with it. Next he pulled the whole head back then slammed it down, trying to crack open the skull. Three times he was unsuccessful.

"Hold his head still with your foot," Ghost suggested, feeling strange to give advice on weapon removal from a corpse. Dead followed the advice, planting a foot over a gaping chin and trying to force the weapon free. It still held. He forced his foot hard up against the metal and leant down on the spike, using his foot as a leverage point. Veins bulged in his neck as he rested his body on it. There was a crack and the spike flew out along with fragments of skull.

"That was harder than it looked," Ghost admitted.

Dead snarled at him as if to point out that he had done all the work.

"Time to open yourself up," Ghost continued, oblivious.

Dead struggled with the spike, holding it with wet hands as he tried to saw himself open. Starting with the pre-made hole he cut upwards, his arms heavy from fatigue. Dead had opened a hole large enough to

place two hands in. Ghost ordered him into the light and peered inside, fighting nausea.

"You need to take everything out," he gasped, returning upright.

"Everything?"

"Yeah, it's all rotted, lungs, guts, heart. You're a maggot farm. Remove it all."

Dead looked worried but paid faith in his companion. With clumsy hands he worked on tearing out his innards, the rotting organs coming away with enough force. They collected in a heap, at home in the chamber of remains.

52

It was chilled in the sparse apartment as Locke awoke, distant dreams scurrying from his mind. He crumpled deeper into the blankets, hoping for some last scent of warmth, when Maria entered.

"Come back to bed," he called.

"No," she chided. "It's half the hour to noon. You sleep too long."

"I can't help it. I spent half the night turning."

"I know," she scowled down, the look lost through bleary eyes.

"How would you, through that snoring?" he smiled

With one cruel motion she wrested the blankets away, leaving Locke to curl into a naked ball.

"What's with you lately?" She probed, sitting on the bed and pulling on a thigh long boot. "Work?"

"I think I should move in with you," he avoided, curling an arm around her waist and pulling himself closer.

"I don't. It wouldn't do to live with a thief."

"You think I'd hurt your reputation?"

"No. But I don't want the watch kicking my door down when they finally catch up with you."

"Thanks," he muttered. "Obviously if your door is at risk then it would be out of the question. What if I retired?"

"From thieving?" She grinned. "And what would you do for coin?"

"Well, I could..." Locke fell silent. There was no other job he knew.

“Why are you keen on this anyway?” she demanded. “Has your landlord finally seen sense to throw you out?”

“No, not yet. I just think we work well together.”

“Are you trying to tell me you’re in love?”

“I’ve always been in love with you,” he shrugged. “That’s not what I’m trying to say. We’re... compatible.”

“I don’t want to be in love with you,” she whispered to him, one hand combing his hair. “It makes things too complicated.”

“What if I retire with enough coin to support us both?”

“You don’t have any,” she reproached.

“I can get it. I’ve been approached for a major job.”

“What job?”

“Do you know of this matter with the foreign boy and the Goldshores?” She shrugged strong shoulders. “It doesn’t matter. I’ve been hired to steal him.”

“From the Goldshores?”

“No, from the prison.”

“Ritcave? I’m speaking to a dead thief.”

“It can be done,” Locke corrected. “I’ve been information hunting. The place isn’t as watertight as rumour would have us believe.”

“It’s set in the Notorious Clefts, how do you expect to get there?”

“My employer has supplied a steam carriage. I can use that to gain access.”

“Locke, this is a fool’s errand.” she sighed, a genuine look of worry evident.

“Yes,” he agreed. “But without it I’ll just be another beggar hunting scraps on the street.”

“And the pay?”

“I’ve been promised three thousand.”

Maria whispered a soft coo, aware of the many years work such an amount represented.

“If you come back alive I promise I’ll love you.” She said with a kiss to his forehead, rising from the bed and leaving to spend another day drudging her body through the lone alleys of the city.

Locke watched her leave then leant over the bed, catching the blankets in hand and rewrapping himself in them.

Haylee awoke, groggy from a poor sleep. She had drifted away in the recliner next to her mother's bed again, a habit since her father's death. She felt as though the people she could once rely on for support were all leaving her. There had still been no word on Ammba, Master Freeman had been expelled from the citadel and even her brother seemed distant to her in the past weeks. The only person she now felt comfortable with was her mother, and she was dying.

The room was covered in an impenetrable darkness. She reached over and felt in the dark, tracing her fingers along her mother's arm and up to her cheek. She could still feel a slight breath whispering out of tired lips. It was cold in the room, the main fireplace extinguished, the only warmth coming from a small heating element set near the bed. There was no temperature control to affect its output and Haylee wrapped herself in a thick elk skin coat. She could not sleep in the cold, choosing to light a coal burner and step out for a walk.

The halls of Greenstone Keep were cast in shadow and frost, visited at times by patrolling guards or late night servants but otherwise empty. She wound her way through the carpeted halls, trying to air the clog of thoughts that struggled in her mind. She had not slept well since her father's death and sister's kidnap, late night walks common for her. She tended to sleep late too, tossing in bed till the sun was high up. No teacher had been employed after the sacking of Freeman, either Pierce did not expect her to study so soon after her father's death or he did not care, she was unsure. She had seen very little of the man since he had been granted guardianship. Her servant Silvia had mentioned stories of Pierce's late night binges and extreme moods. Silvia was the one person in the house that she spent any time with now, the middle-aged woman bringing her meals and helping with the care of her mother. She worked late nights in the kitchen, Haylee hoped to find her there.

Haylee passed through the banquet hall, not expecting to meet anyone but servants cleaning from the night before. She was surprised to see James Pierce still up, drinking with a sour faced Gehrig and several men that Haylee did not know. They were all leaning hard, as if the night was taking its toll on their posture. Pierce was listening to a joke, waiting for his cup to be filled, when he saw Haylee enter the hall. He gestured for her to approach.

“What are you doing up young lady?” he slurred.

“I could not sleep. I came to visit Silvia.” Pierce nodded, his head bouncing around as if it were not attached properly.

“Do me a favour if you’re going back there, fill this up.”

He held his cup out in a crooked way waiting for her to take it. Haylee silently obeyed the request, leaving the man.

“Good girl,” he called with a smile plastered to his face.

Haylee found Silvia in the kitchen at work on another servant’s face.

“Sit still and stop squirming,” she berated, trying to force the man’s nose back into place. He jerked away, giving out a yelp.

“What happened?” Haylee asked, worried by the sight of the blood. Silvia turned from her patient, concerned to see Haylee about so late.

“This foolish boy wanted to retire for the night and thought it proper to ask our lord. You can see the result. Why aren’t you in bed?”

“I couldn’t sleep,” she sighed. “I had that dream again.”

Haylee was haunted by a reoccurring nightmare. In it she could see the dead face of her father, bloated with black eyes. He would turn to look at her, opening his mouth to speak, trails of saliva matted in his maw. In the dream he was trying to talk, to warn her of some impending doom, but every time he tried he would choke on his own tongue. The more he tried to speak to her the more panicked his eyes became, until he was looking around frantically, those black eyes swallowing her being. She would be drowned in them, the fear and horror overwhelming... and then she would wake up. It was the same dream each night. An oddity of the brain she had been told, with no meaning outside her personal fears of the future. Yet she could not shake the image from her nights.

“I am a slight busy now dear,” she said, trying to hold down the boy long enough to take a better grasp of his nose. “If you run to bed I will come up soon and mix you a sedative.”

Haylee nodded, walking over to a half empty wine cask and pouring it out. Silvia gave her a strange look but Haylee implied that it was for her guardian. She left to the sounds of a struggle, the boy yelping like a stung animal.

Haylee crossed the hall, offering a cup to the sodden man. Pierce looked up and leered, his beard ungroomed and needing a cut.

“Thank you young Haylee,” he smiled, taking the cup and sloshing half of it down his tunic. “Have you met our guests? This is Admiral

Herot Fielding, a wonderful strategist. I spent many years training under him during my stint in the army.”

The admiral lifted his head out of a puddle of wine, took one look at Haylee and collapsed. “And this is Gihart Wurstheim, a merchant from Northane Proper. We have been discussing a new trade deal to start bringing in Kilnfrog meat from the forests up north.” Haylee curtsied to the drunken man, a nodding mad grin returned. “And of course you know Gehrig, our barbarian councilor.”

“Sir,” Haylee greeted, Gehrig offering a slow, staggered nod back, trying to give the impression that he was sober.

“Have you ever had Kilnfrog before Haylee?” The girl shook her head, wondering when she could leave. “It’s got a sweet taste to it. A bit chewy but the bloody beasts are so rampart up north that we could feed a house for a year on what it would cost for a typical month’s rations.”

“That’s interesting,” Haylee told him, obvious that it wasn’t.

“I guess,” Pierce shrugged his large shoulders. “Come sit, we have not spoken much at all since you were placed in my care.”

Pierce sat back and patted his lap, indicating that she should sit there. Haylee was hesitant, unsure of him. Without the words to excuse herself she gave in, sitting on the knee of his large left leg. She felt sick at the smell he gave off, a combination of sweat and heavy wine. He smiled at having her there.

“How are you coping with the change?” he asked her, bouncing her a little bit on his knee.

“It has been hard,” she whispered, feeling uncomfortable.

“I could only imagine,” he replied. “It was many years ago that I lost my own father. He was killed in a riding accident.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” she said in her soft tone.

“You speak too quietly girl,” he smiled. “Come closer.” With one arm scooped around her waist he lifted her up with ease, pulling her into the centre of his lap. “That’s better,” he chuckled.

Haylee wanted to scream, to tear free and ran away. She sought the help of the other men, their eyes planted to their cups or shut, not daring to intervene.

“I’d better go,” Haylee warned him.

Pierce snorted.

“You’re up now. You might as well stay and drink.”

“I’m not of that age,” she told him in a sterner voice.

Pierce roared out in a laugh that half-deafened the girl.

“You’re twice the age I was when I started drinking. Here take some,” he shoved his wine cup in her hand.

Haylee looked into the golden cup, the remnants of the red brew swirling in the bottom.

“Drink it,” he urged.

Haylee hesitated once before bringing the goblet to her lips, the pungent wine dancing on her taste buds. She screwed up her nose as she swallowed, trying not to breathe any in.

“I was younger than you are when I started doing other things too,” Pierce whispered, bringing a hand up under her skirt and running his calloused fingers along her belly.

Haylee squirmed in his grasp, trying to break free.

“I’m not going to hurt you,” he said, keeping one hand firmly on her arm. He brought his other hand up under her shirt top, pinching the nipple underneath, his large hand engulfing the small breast.

“Stop it,” Haylee hissed, shaking in his grasp.

She twisted back and forth, swinging one arm out and scratching at Pierce’s face. He let go of her, bringing a surprised hand up to his face. Haylee broke free and ran to her room, charging past guards, navigating the black halls of the keep. Haylee barred the door and jumped into bed, still clothed, crying under the blankets and waiting for the dawn.

54

Freeman rubbed the left side of his face, the swollen cheek still sore from where Pierce had struck him with a mailed fist. He had lost four teeth, while another four had been knocked out of shape. For days he had lain on a hard mattress in the home of Jacob Hornsberg, an old acquaintance and merchantman. The house sat in a less affluent area of Trader’s Loop, a humble two-story home set with coarse stone and plaster. Jacob made a living from exporting pieces of art and craft out to the Imperial Capital, managing two runs a year before the autumn snows and ice made the journey too risky. He was a pessimistic man, expecting the worse and preferring safety to risk. Freeman had sought his aide, looking for a place to stay free from the backstabbing and

dramatics that many merchants fed off. He felt a type of safety in the Hornsberg home, enough for him to lie low and gather his thoughts without worry.

His legs were still weak, having rested idle for many days. He had spent the first week after the attack doped on numbing drugs, unable to gather the coordination to step out of bed. As his face had settled down he was taking less of the drug, his mind becoming clearer and allowing him to plot a way back into the castle. He had already decided that Pierce's reign had to end fast, a decision made before losing one side of his jaw. His exile from the court had stuttered those plans, making a simple murder more complicated. While he still had agents within the citadel he had not been in contact with them, nor did he know if they were still loyal to him since his fall from grace.

He gathered a woolen robe from the bed head and wrapped it around his frail figure, tying it tight. Slipping into elk skin slippers he left his room, a balancing act that required enough attention to prevent collapse.

There was only one guest room in the house, the rest of the building dedicated to family rooms and one room for the house servant. For a man of wealth Jacob lived a frugal life, avoiding the extravagant luxury that many of his peers descended into. It made the Master comfortable, feeling that his friend was guided more by morals than his purse. He would need that trust if he were to regain his station, he knew, ascending a flight of simple stone steps and making his way to the study.

Jacob was set to his desk, a common practice through the colder months. A heated element ran under the length of a window facing out to the cluttered streets of the lesser merchants. Despite its presence the room remained cold, the heater left off until the heavy snows came. The merchant looked up from a letter, smiling as Freeman waddled to him.

"It's good to see you about," he wheezed, trying to stifle a cough.

Like many in the city, Jacob had contracted black lung, having lived too long in the ashen city. Although some people showed resistance to the disease, cases of the sickness were on the rise as more of the city burned up coal in order to stay warm. Those who stayed through the autumn were most at risk, the swirling winds sprinkling the black ash right over the city proper.

“Thank you. I am feeling better,” Freeman sat opposite him, helping himself to a glass of watered wine. It was a cheap vintage, nothing more than he expected.

“I was hoping you’d make a swift recovery. Your face looks better now. When you were first brought to me I hardly recognised you.”

“I could imagine... Has there been any word from the citadel since my assault?”

“Nothing new, I’m afraid,” Jacob shrugged his slender shoulders. “Miss Ammba is still missing from all. Pierce seems to be consolidating himself within the castle. He is weighing the merchants with another tax now, didn’t seek the approval of the noble vote, rather imposing it himself. As you can imagine both the nobles and the merchants are up in arms.”

Freeman scratched at the white stubble forming on his chin.

“If the nobles are against it then how does he plan to collect?”

“The army. He’s cut a deal with them from what I hear.”

“A dangerous move,” the Master stated, wondering if another war was inevitable.

“It’s a small tax,” Jacob sighed. “But one that all registered merchants must pay. It’s a flat rate increase, so it’s the minor merchants that really suffer.”

“And the major ones will pay up rather than cause a fight,” Freeman agreed. “Though the nobles might challenge him over the matter. They have traditionally been the source of the regent’s income. They would not like this shift back to the old structure of self-management,” Freeman mused.

“Well, if they wish to challenge him they need to be fast. A rumour merchant tells me that Pierce has ordered the forging of steel reinforcements for the walls of the citadel.”

“That would cost more than what a simple flat rate could provide,” Freeman pondered. “It was an issue that was raised from time to time when I was councilor... There was never a simple solution.”

“Well, I don’t know about that. This lord Pierce seems more resourceful than anyone gave him credit for.”

“Including myself, I’m afraid.” Freeman tasted the cheap wine again, the vintage unaccustomed to him.

One other thing you might find of interest,” Jacob said, stretching out his thin arms. “The child accused has been tried by the nobles.”

“So he is dead?”

“Not yet. He has to undergo the Ritual of Entrailment.”

“So Pierce gave him up?”

“No, he was smuggled out.”

“Interesting,” Freeman thought. “It seems Lord Pierce is not so secure in his castle after all. To smuggle out the child would have required someone working against him from the inside.” Freeman thought of his own agent, an older woman that had been in the employ for years. “Would you do me a favour Jacob? I wish to have a gift sent to Haylee Steward but I fear that it would not reach her if it bore my mark.”

“You want me to play your little games?”

“Hardly. I just fear for the girl and need to know if she is okay. I would not expect you to incriminate yourself in anyway.”

Jacob crossed agitated fingers, disliking the notion that he might be used in a game that he didn’t know the rules to.

“I would not ask if we were not close friends, you and I.” Freeman tilted the cup back to his lips, the flow of cold liquid burning the holes where his teeth had been, and monitored the merchant’s reaction.

55

They returned through the wet passages, following the lights. Dead walked faster, more capable of speed and balance since his rotting insides were removed. The wound in his belly looked nasty and was sure to attract attention.

They reached the murky steps that led back into the inhabited areas of the asylum. The man that Dead had knocked unconscious earlier was awake, standing with shaky legs and talking with two other men. He spluttered when Dead slammed open the door, fresh chains tearing apart, half a shattered head held in Dead’s left hand.

“You’re alive?” The guard asked in his high-pitched voice.

“No, but I am here,” Dead was menacing. The two other men, both dressed in the plain smocks that denoted a position of influence backed off, seeing the danger.

“I thought I splintered your skull already?”

The shaky guard looked to his companions for help, they offered none.

“What do you want from me?” he begged.

“I want to know why you didn’t warn me of what was down there.”

“Ahhh, I, uh,” the man fidgeted. “I, uh, was... I mean, you... you knocked me out before I could say.”

Dead eyed him, a semi-smile peeled back.

“Maybe,” and a fist slashed out, jarring the man’s twitching chin.

He fell back, cracking his head against the hard plaster, and laid still. The two onlookers said nothing and paid no resistance when Dead walked past them, still clutching the decapitated remains of the king’s lapdog.

“Your majesty, there’s a problem.”

The king tore his attention away, frustrated, the dancing inmate ignored for a moment. She wore a partial smock and had dark matted hair but was still enticing.

“This better be important or I’ll feed you to my dog.” he threatened.

“That’s the thing,” rattled Scott. “The dog’s been...”

He was cut short as the doors at the far end of the hall parted. Dead stormed in clutching the dog’s head, with the deformed Mutt trying to give chase. The king tried to straighten in his wheelchair, his body rocking back and forth in a futile fashion. Dead reached the dais and dropped the remains at the king’s feet, the fat head unmistakable.

“I see you brought me the head of the traitor,” King Joanne stuttered, trying to look calm. “You truly are the greatest knight I have ever serviced.” A fast sweat broke his brow.

“You tell me this man’s name was Louise?”

“Louise... yes, why yes of course he is. Did you not find him where I mentioned?”

“The reward,” mentioned Ghost.

“There was a reward,” Dead took from cue. “We were promised medical supplies.”

The king was still in shock, trying to stutter through his answers. “Yes, medical supplies. I, ah... I would need one more task before you receive your reward,” he stammered.

“No,” Dead growled, a menacing air engulfing him. “A king must always pay his debts.”

“And I will, I will... I just have one more task.”

“I am through with tasks,” broke Dead. “And I have one more gift to bestow on you.”

Dead reached inside his belly, liquid seeping out as his hand squirmed around. The fist came back, in it a thick chain with heavy shackles attached. The king looked on in horror.

“What are you?” came a sputtering heave.

“I am the progeny and the harbinger,” Dead roared, clutching the chain.

Ghost recoiled, as a bullet searing through his mind. The words held weight, though he had not heard them uttered before. Within an instant Ghost understood a piece of the puzzle. King Joanne and Dead held a link, however tenuous. In the King’s presence Dead had lost his bumbling mannerisms, the aura of the royal a spiritual anchor in which Dead could weigh down and connect with the remnants of his past self. In this moment of insight Ghost knew with morbid clarity that Dead was not aware of this link.

“It is time for you to seek your place alongside you ancestors,” Dead cursed, swinging the chain overhead.

“Dead, wait,” Ghost cried out, too late.

The thick coil spun hard, gathering momentum and crashed down on the stationary royal. The iron smashed through, cracking the skull in one blow and emitting a sickening thud throughout the chamber. No one intervened. The guards watched on mute, the dancing girl stood with covered mouth and the king’s retinue wept.

Joanne’s head slumped forward, the top of the skull open wide and visible through the balding hair. The body would have fallen out had it not been for the slim chain that ran across its chest. A stench filled the air as the dead man’s bowel opened up.

The crowd woke slowly, as realization dawned. There was no anger or despair, but the knowledge that their reality had changed. No longer would the asylum be run from within, there was no authority now. Dead had murdered a royal member and changed the social hierarchy of Ashmore Asylum with one stroke.

As the understanding grew there was a surge of discontent. Of insane men who had been charged with following rules for too long. Several surged up and attacked, not Dead, but the guards who had been granted authority by the king and accepted by the wardens unwilling to enter the keep.

The room burst into anarchy. A dozen men grabbed the dancing woman and threw her to the ground, forcing her legs apart. Screaming drenched all as the Mutt was torn apart, crazed shouts descending through the keep. Scott managed to escape the chamber, running from the savagery.

The madness spread, each level erupted, as a community of the violently insane that are released from all charge. Inmate murdered inmate, raped and tortured, fulfilling every diseased thought that could be entertained. Bodies flew down the stairwell, their screaming ending in abrupt clacks. Others were victims of the mob set off in a random chain reaction of violence. Scott did not escape, a steel rod penetrating his rectum and rammed up through his collarbone. He screamed as they mounted him for display in the lobby.

Ghost and Dead did not participate. They watched for some time, unthreatened by the mob violence they had caused. The king's body had been pulled apart and strewn across the hall. They stepped over his pieces to leave.

"What did you mean when you said you were the progeny and the harbinger?" Ghost finally asked.

"What?" Dead's abrupt self had returned.

"Back then. That's what you called yourself when the king asked who you were."

"Really? The words mean nothing to me?" Dead ran a hand over his stubbled chin, hairs that would never grow further than the short whiskers that they were.

"Dead, whoever you were before you died, I think it was important. Back in the city you recognised the sign of the Patriarcht without hesitation. And when you spoke to the King you were like a different person."

"What are you saying? That I'm royalty?" Dead's grim smile showed through.

"No, I don't think so. Otherwise someone would recognise you. Tell me, what did you think when you murdered Joanne?"

"I'm not sure," Dead admitted. "It's like there is a weight off my mind, as if killing him has released a small part of me."

"And?"

"That's it. I don't know what the meaning of it all is."

"Well, whatever it is, we won't find out by hanging around here any longer. We will want to get out of here fast and I doubt the guys

running the show are going to let this mess go on for long. Once they calm things down they'll want to know what started it."

The pair left the chamber and returned to the place they had met Malcolm, pushing their way past crazed inmates. Several times Dead had to use force, overpowering those who hindered him. Malcolm was not far, they found him in a room on top of a female inmate, her eyes lifeless.

"Hey," Dead called, wanting his attention but forgetting his name, ignoring the necrophilic act.

"Hey, it's you," Malcolm pulled himself out of the victim and stood. Ghost felt ill. "Had my eyes on her for a long time," he admitted. "What do you want?" he seemed relaxed, speaking in a calm voice, different to the man they had met before.

"We need to escape," Dead stated with a reminder from Ghost.

"Good luck," he smiled. "You'd be better off just enjoying yourself."

"So you can't help?"

"I didn't say that," he replied. "There might be a way, though it could only be a rumour."

"What is it then?" Dead pressed.

"I've heard that there's a series of tunnels connected to the basements around here, not much wider than a man though. Problem is, if what I've heard is true, which I ain't saying it is, they branch out in a maze that you can get stuck in."

Ghost considered the possibility. "Ask him where he heard this from."

"There's an old guy who lives here. Been a prisoner for years, told me about it once in his delirious state. I wouldn't trust him myself, but then look at me," he leered.

"Where is he now?" Dead asked.

"He might be in his room, doesn't get out much. Of course, someone might be pulling him to bits as we speak, you never know."

"Where's his room?" It was an urgent question.

"Somewhere on floor one. I can't remember exactly. I think it's on the eastside. The old fellow's name is Marcus Ambriery, ask around, someone there will know him."

Ghost ordered Dead to follow, leaving their informant to return to his pleasure.

Pierce stood, abandoning his meal and a discussion with Gehrig, grumbling as he witnessed the procession shambling through the hall to greet him. Georgia Pierce led the march, flanked by a series of servants, men and women.

“This is a touching welcome,” she sneered, greeting her husband.

“If I had known my distant wife was visiting I would have turned out a carpet.”

“I’m sure. It would have given you time to empty the sluts from your bed. I’m assuming they still service you in my absence.”

“They service me when I like,” Pierce spat, grumpy at her arrival. “You look fatter.”

“As do you, dear,” Georgia smiled back. “I had hoped to arrive before my brother’s funeral. I assume you took the eulogy.”

“I prattled on like they told me to, if that’s what you mean?”

“Such tender words you speak.”

“What do you want me to say? I never met the man.”

“It doesn’t matter. I will have Master Freeman show me the tomb.”

“Freeman is no long employed in the citadel.”

Georgia raised an eyebrow.

“Do you run the council now?”

Pierce did not reply. He liked his wife little when they were wed, taking on the union as a strategic partnership. They had not seen each other for three years, Georgia preferring to remain at their villa in the north, Pierce remaining in Ironwood throughout the year. It was a situation that Pierce was keen to maintain. As long as they were married he held the right to govern in the regent’s absence.

“Gehrig here will take you,” Pierce informed her.

The foreigner looked up from a daydream, surprised.

“A barbarian?” Georgia jeered.

“Aye,” Gehrig stood. “Gehrig Yemoon at your service.” He took Georgia’s hand in a traditional Northane greeting, placing his on top.

“Well, at least you have trained him,” Georgia said.

Gehrig smiled at the jibe.

“Come then barbarian, show me my brother’s tomb.”

“She’s a Steward,” Pierce told Gehrig, giving the foreigner a push towards his wife and returning to his own meal. Georgia’s servants were led away, taking the substantial luggage train up to a spare guest room set aside for important visitors.

“So, you are from the Kingdom?” Georgia’s voice echoed down the smooth stone corridor of the Royal Crypt.

“Yes, lady. From the Upper Reaches.”

“A long way to travel.”

“It was,” Gehrig agreed, his face lit by buzzing lights as they wound deeper underground. “I’m ex-infantry. We came down to fight the Imperials and I wound up here.”

“Fascinating. Is it much further?”

“I’m not sure. I’ve never been down here.”

Georgia let out a laugh.

“A big help then. James must’ve known.”

“I suppose. You two are bonded?”

“We’re married,” Georgia corrected, taking the lead. “He sleeps in the city, I sleep in the country... It works.”

“But you are here now?”

“I must be by my husband’s side while he holds the regent’s position. It is because of me, after all, that he claims it.”

She halted, seeing the tombs of her brothers Felix and Kalim, taking a moment of reflection before pressing on. Ivan’s tomb came next, sealed tight with iron bolts. A simple engraving of a stag gilded the crest piece.

“The family emblem,” Georgia sighed.

“I am sorry,” Gehrig remarked. “For your loss.”

“He played his role. His death was necessary, one could say, for Ironwood’s future.”

Gehrig seemed taken back by her coldness.

“Did you have him killed?”

She laughed again, this time mocking, and turned.

“You know my servant girls swear that all barbarian men are hung like beasts. Is it true?”

“What do you mean?” Gehrig asked, thinking that he had misinterpreted her.

“Your cock,” she pressed closer, placing one hand under his crotch and squeezing it. “I think they were right,” she smiled, pressing her body against him.

Gehrig did not rebuke, enjoying the feel of her body rubbing against him.

“Your husband is wrong,” Gehrig slurred, slipping a hand under her coat and taking a breast. “You’re not fat.”

Georgia smiled at him, kneeling down and pulling apart his leggings.

“You barbarians struggle with our language only when it is convenient,” she chided, placing his growing cock in her mouth.

Gehrig relaxed as she worked, enjoying the skill that the Steward woman exhibited. As the pressure grew he sunk into an animal-like state, pulling her up to him and wrenching back her clothes. She did not resist as he rubbed calloused fingers across her swollen genitals, pulling back the lips and sliding two fingers in.

“Fuck me,” she breathed hard, leaning back across her brother’s tomb as the barbarian guided himself into her, rocking her body across the engraved crest piece.

57

Locke puffed through red cheeks as he dragged feet through ankle-high snow, throwing down a rucksack laden with supplies. Even through double-rimmed elk skin boots his feet were numb. Resting in a squat he peered over the ridge of the Pointed Hawk and down at Ritcave Prison. It was set deep in the Notorious Clefts, further south than Ironwood and at a higher altitude. Locke had sequestered a single carriage steam train, designed to transport light goods and important people, to make his way into the ranges, following the double railed tracks that cobwebbed the mining routes.

Through his informant Locke had learnt the routes leading close to Ritcave, able to abandon the single carriage train unbothered at a mine, the workers heading into the city for winter. If he stayed on the tracks his route would have taken him around the Pointed Hawk and back into its belly, awaiting the first of two checkpoints leading into Ritcave itself.

Locke chose to avoid the confrontation, following rough goat tracks and traversing the Hawk. He sat watching from afar, seeing

little activity outside the black walls of Ritcave. The mountain once belonged to the Geral family, the center of an unsuccessful mining operation. Little more than granite existed in the jagged stones and the Geral's, forced into bankruptcy, had given up the land title to the state. After that, the mountain lay quiet for decades, until high crime within the city and full gaols required an external plot for criminals. As it was, Ritcave was formed. A single black gate house covering the hard tunnels that spidered back into the mountain.

Locke had not found any information on where Fredrick would be housed within the complex. He knew though that the close tunnels would make avoiding others difficult. Locke hoped that night would bring a skeleton crew of guards, giving him the opportunity to slip in unknown.

He shifted in and out of a light slumber, the only recession from the biting cold. Locke prized himself on the ability to sleep in any situation, finding an opportunity on the peak of the Hawk, his back pressed to a cold boulder, squatting to keep off the snow. Night came in such way, through fluttering dreams and frozen breath.

Locke slipped out of his fitful sleep at times to check the height of the moon. He waited for the deep night, where even heavy drinkers and alert guards would wane in their duties. It was time, he knew, and his fur coated winter suit cracked as he peeled away from his stone rest.

A quarter moon lit Locke's path as he slipped down the side of the mountain, high falls broken by the snow as he clambered over cliffs, his rucksack beating his back. Locke knew that another way would need to be sought to return, that the boy would not be capable of rappelling the cliffs up to the Hawk's peak.

Descent ended at a rail line, settled with snow. Locke followed the path towards the prison, no light or guard marking the entrance. The thief passed the main gates, relying on his informant's advice regarding a service door set to the side.

Most information in Ironwood could be purchased at a price. A retired warden saw little wrong in selling a rough drawn map for coin. Nor were there complaints when Locke had pressed for information regarding patrol routes, times, services and all manner of menial information that the thief had insisted on learning. It all came readily, with a price attached, and Locke had parted with much of Jacobmann's coin in fulfilling his inquest.

The informant's advice was worth the toll. Locke found the mentioned door and worked on the lock, slipping a pick through the iron keyhole. It was a simple mechanism, proving little trial to the man who had practiced on similar locks since a child. With the expected 'click' Locke pressed into the prison.

A change in temperature struck Locke as he stepped further inside, heat rising through the complex from a furnace deep in the system. Locke paused a moment, reveling in the warmth and taking time to hide the heavy bag of supplies near the escape door and shirking his coats. With a lighter load he pressed into the prison, passing through a dark stone kitchen, its fires exhausted hours earlier.

The halls and rooms of Ritcave were quiet in the staff quarters, most of the watch sleeping unaware of the intruder in their midst. Locke weaved through the barrack rooms, avoiding the main passage that led deeper into the prison for the moment. He sought the prison keeper's office, advice suggesting that he could find Fredrick's whereabouts within a ledger.

As he snaked through the complex he heard a sharp intake of air and stopped dead. A boy had left his room, half asleep and dressed no better than a bucket boy, ready for his pre-dawn duties of cleaning the staff latrines. He stared at the thief, unsure whether to raise the alarm or pretend ignorance. Locke unfroze, taking out his blackjack and rushing the child, cracking him on the top of the head. The boy fell and Locke scooped him over one shoulder, pressing towards the keeper's office.

Several coal torches burnt along the main staff hall and Locke worked with frantic fingers on the office lock, unconscious body beside him, hoping that no one else would stumble his way. Locke's fingers were unresponsive and the usually cool thief found himself in a different state. Luck had almost upset his plans and Locke felt the urge to forfeit the mission. As his pick worked its job Locke tried to breathe calm, dragging the child into the office and lighting a weak coal lamp.

With most of his supplies sitting at the prison entrance Locke searched the room for something to tie up the child, eyes eventually settling on a tapestry. Locke tore a stretch off the piece and used the frayed material to bind the child as best he could, placing more of the tapestry over the boy's mouth. Unused to tying knots for the intention of holding people Locke hoped it was enough to hold the child.

Locke's hands felt around in the keeper's desk drawers, searching for the ledger. A book, leather-bound and heavy, caught his hands and

he dragged it out into the light, flipping through the ledger to find Fredrick's location within the complex. It was an easy find, the foreign child a late delivery to the mountainous prison, the entry sitting at the last page.

Locke scanned through the text. It stated that Fredrick had arrived in poor health and received medical attention, being confined to a cell in the infirmary. It was a blessing, Locke saw, and he thanked the gods that he would not have to delve into the deepest parts of the mountain where Ironwood's worst criminals sat behind black walls. Locke checked the unconscious child once more, ensuring that the bonds held tight, before locking the office door on his exit.

"Fredrick," Locke whispered, shaking a shoulder.

A faint groan emitted from a bruised face.

"My name's Locke. Your friend Damian sent me."

"No," Fredrick moaned. "No."

"What is it?" Locke asked, aware that the infirmary was not far from the staff quarters, removing his set of picks.

"I know who you are. You've come for me."

"That's right."

"The Goldshores. You work for the Goldshores."

"Excuse me?"

Fredrick tried to sit, restrained by a chain coupled to a ring at his chest.

"I know you. You aren't from my father. You're a Goldshore agent."

"Keep your voice down. You were taken by the nobles. Do you not remember?"

Fredrick tried to shake his head clear, heavy sedation and stress causing his thoughts to overlap.

"My name is Locke," the thief repeated as he lowered a shackle to the floor, moving to a second. "You were tried by the nobles and sent to Ritcave prison... here. I was hired on Damian's behalf to retrieve you and take you home."

"To Ironwood?"

"No, the Capital."

Locke placed one arm under the child's and helped him upright on the medical palette. Fredrick's head swooned on its neck and slipped backwards before Fredrick could stop it.

“You’re not going to be able to walk out of here,” Locke grimaced, laying the child back down and scanning the jars that lined the medical chamber. For a moment Fredrick felt a jab in his arm before his tenuous grip on consciousness was torn away with the aide of sedatives.

Alarmed voices chased up and down the corridors as Locke hid in a dark corner with his loot flung over shoulder. The assaulted bucket boy had awoken and slipped his bonds, the thin limbs of the child too limber for makeshift rope. Sleepy guards struggled to arm themselves as a siren wailed through the prison. Deep in the bowels of the prison captives were exploding in violent jubilation, thrashing in their cells and hoping for a breakout.

Two heavy set guards flashed past Locke’s hiding place, muskets in grip, lunging to block off all escape points from the gaol. There was little chance of escape through the way he had come, Locke knew, preventing outbreaks was a well-rehearsed drill among prison staff. Locke cursed himself for the soft fool, contemplating that a single jab of the blade could have preempted his predicament.

Locke backtracked, ducking between thin shadows, hindered by the child. Before any guard took the presence of mind to check Ritcave’s newest inmate Locke returned his prize, laying the heavily sedated child on the table and replacing the chains over Fredrick’s chest so that a glance would think they still held. With one burden lifted for the moment, Locke checked his path, returning to the main hall’s shadows.

The guards were still out of sorts, many still bumbling around half-dressed, others trying to find the cause of the commotion. It was growing apparent to them that they weren’t experiencing a breakout and some took the opportunity to leave their posts. Locke used this to slip deeper into the complex, where the shadows deepened and he grew more at home.

As a former mine the prison was characterized by a series of interconnecting chambers. Locke followed his memorized map to the deepest point, where the worst criminals were held. Cheers filled the chamber, a two-story plan with cells beneath and wardens patrolling a top balcony. Locke snuck by, making for the balcony where a series of levers rested at a control panel. Two guards walked the balcony in opposite directions, passing one another in route. Locke stood in

shadow with his dagger pressed hard in hand, his blackjack useless against a helmeted foe.

The patrol passed each other, their backs turned. If the maniacs below saw the flash of a blade they did not announce it. Locke stalked the other guard, aware of the flintlock pistol carried by the nervous man. A second stroke fell from behind and Locke rued that he had broken a no-kill record of close to ten years.

The levers all fell into place and stunned maniacs stepped out, silent for once. They looked up to see Locke, two stolen pistols in hand.

“Breakout,” Locke shouted down at them, tossing the pistols to the inmates.

Realization cracked in their faces as the chance to revisit their keepers with bloody retribution dawned. Locke pointed down a chamber, ordering them to free the others, while he made his own way back up.

Word spread fast in the complex that the breakout was on, many guards rushing to reposition themselves. Some cracked under the pressure, firing their muskets into shadows, destroying nothing but stonewall. Locke pressed onward as fast as he dare, aware of the throng of approaching violence. Cracks of gunfire echoed back and forth in the mines of Ritcave and by the time Locke reached the infirmary he was panting hard. Scooping Fredrick up, he hid away in a nearby storeroom, hoping that the breakout would reach its way into the open.

For a long time Locke heard the back and forth shots of bullets exchanged through the gaol chambers. For each inmate killed a dozen hands sought the fallen weapon, smothering the remaining guards. Shearing metal echoed as locked doors were shot from the hinges and a heavy throng of celebratory cries hammered Locke’s ears. Pressed to one corner in the tight cupboard Fredrick flinched but remained unaware.

The pair waited for a time after, Locke choosing to depart long after the final gunshot had faded into memory. No freed inmate stayed within the complex, piling high on the steam engines stationed outside and riding the lines. Locke did not know how many had made it out, though shattered bodies of both parties sprawled the corridor of the gaol. With Fredrick over one shoulder Locke sought his stashed

rucksack and thick coat. From within the bag he produced a second winter suit, dressing Fredrick in the life saving outfit.

They left the deserted prison, a bitter scowl of wind biting at their flesh. Fredrick squirmed over Locke's shoulder, mumbling in a half-awake state. The thief ignored the child's discomfort, concerned more with their flight. The steep descent that Locke had traversed to reach the gaol could not be retraced with Fredrick. The prison trains were gone and Locke did not wish to follow that path either way, aware that once word of the breakout reached the city guards would be flooding the line searching out escapees.

Locke turned his back to the rail system, choosing the long way around the Hawk. The gradient was less steep, but the path much further and did not guarantee a hook up with the main line. From his information scouting Locke knew that to the southeast of the prison were several small mining operations of little worth. Most mines kept a spare steam carriage in case of failure to prevent strandings. If Locke could not traverse the Hawk then he saw slim hope in other options. He trudged on, Fredrick bouncing across the thief's back as fresh snow dropped.

58

Marcus Ambriery's cell was located well off the main corridor in a dark corner. '1E34' was etched over the entrance, the lettering difficult to see through the poor light. There was no door attached to the frame. Dead found the old man asleep, wrapped in a series of worn rags. Ghost ordered Dead, reminding him of the man's name and their objective.

"Marcus Ambriery?" Dead asked.

There was a slight titter under the rags but no other response.

Dead called again, louder, and the man peered out. He was older than Ghost had expected, a high cheek structure emphasizing the hanging jowls that stretched downwards. His thin skin was speckled purple and wrinkled.

"What?" he croaked. His white hair pointed in all directions.

“A word tells me that you know something about getting out of here.”

“Ask me later,” he moaned in a honking voice. “I’m sleeping.”

Marcus buried his head into the rags. Dead approached.

“Be gentle,” Ghost chided.

Dead tried, shaking where he thought the man’s shoulder should be under the covers. Eyes reappeared, grumpy.

“It’s urgent,” he assured.

“What? Is the place falling down?” Marcus asked, ripe with sarcasm.

“Yes... well, just about. Everyone’s dying.”

The old man sat up, looking closer at Dead, noting the gaping belly hole.

“Look’s like you are too,” he rattled.

Dead didn’t reply, instead providing a strong arm, letting the frail man stand.

“Ask him about the tunnels,” Ghost ordered Dead, who submitted.

“Those?” Marcus replied. “No one believes me about those. Well let me tell you, before I came here to retire,” he smiled, “I worked in the Great Inglet Library as a cleric. Of course, the officials didn’t appreciate me burning certain scrolls and thought I’d do better to stay here.”

“Get to the point,” Ghost sighed to himself.

“Get to the point,” Dead parroted.

“Don’t repeat that, you idiot,” Ghost yelled.

The old man’s eyes grew thin, bushy white eyebrows furled.

“You know, they don’t put you in maximum lockdown for burning books. Killed myself some smartarse wise aleck like you to get in here.”

“Apologise Dead,” Ghost demanded.

Dead scowled at Ghost, feeling the victim.

“I’m sorry,” he released. “But I’ve got an annoying voice that tried to get me into trouble.”

“Me too,” the old man smiled. “Ain’t it a bitch?”

Marcus Ambriery confided his story regarding the underground tunnels. They once acted as a well, connecting to a reservoir that ran into the back of the mountain. There was a main tunnel that dropped into the pool, other branching tunnels hewn out later to prevent possible escape through winter when the water would freeze.

“There is a problem,” Marcus continued. “There’s little room in one of those tunnels and they drop almost straight down, forking out at points,” he motioned with his fingers, pointing them to the ground as if to emphasise. “You go down the wrong tunnel and you won’t be able to get out. No room to turn around.”

“So, what’s the solution?” Dead asked.

“I’m the solution,” he quipped. “Read enough books and you come across these things. I’ve got a brilliant memory and I know the right path.”

“So what is it?”

The old man snorted.

“If I gave up that sort of information I’d want to be getting out myself. Those tunnels are filled with water so if you’re planning an escape then you must have some ideas about getting through.”

“We don’t,” Dead lied.

“I call bullshit on that one,” the old man cursed. “Either take me with you or don’t go, it’s that simple.”

Dead looked to Ghost for help.

“Agree to it for now,” Ghost decided. Dead acquiesced to Marcus’ wish.

“Did I mention they’ve stationed a guard near there too? Some half-mad killer,” Marcus continued.

They passed the remains of the lapdog, the head removed in a crude surgery.

“You weren’t joking,” Marcus stated, impressed.

“How far now?” asked Dead.

“Not very. I used to come down here a fair bit before him,” Marcus said pointing to the corpse. “I remember this chamber, not so grisly of course.”

A sound reverberated through the air as of distant generators powering down, the lights blinking then fading out.

“What’s this?” asked Dead.

“This? This is how the wardens deal with riots. First they turn off the lights, then they storm the building. You can expect half a hundred well-armed and armoured troops to be storming the lobby about now, zapping and bludgeoning anyone they find.”

“Lockdown,” Ghost whispered. “We’d better hurry.”

“They can see in the dark?” quizzed Dead, ignoring his friend.

“No,” cackled the old man. “They carry torches.”

“We’ve got to keep moving,” ordered Ghost, sick of stupid questions.

“We can’t see,” Dead complained. “How are we meant to go on?”

“You can feel with your hands,” Marcus offered. “It should be round the next bend and through a door on the right.”

Marcus led, his hands put to good use. Dead tried to feel his way but the nerves in his fingers were unresponsive. He walked past the turnoff, calling for Marcus to stay on track.

They stumbled slow, finding the door and forcing it open, the steel grate screaming on the stone floor. It stuck then tore at the hinges, the metal gate crashing to one side. Ghost panicked, hoping no one heard.

“In the centre of this room you’ll find a well with a grate. I did mention the grate didn’t I?”

“It’s no problem,” Dead called through the darkness.

“Good. Now, how do we plan to get past all this water?”

“This will be interesting,” Ghost hummed.

“Well,” Dead offered. “Tell me the right combination and I’ll let you know.”

“No deal friend. You said you’d take me.”

“Actually, we said we’d only bring him this far. Dead, you need to find out what path to take.”

“I was planning on holding my breath,” Dead said in the darkness, directing his voice to where he thought Marcus stood.

“What?” spat the old man. “This is your great plan? Talk about half-arsed. You sure as hell ain’t learning the route from me.” Marcus crossed his arms in defiance, a gesture lost in the unlit room.

“Tell me, or you will die slow,” growled Dead. There was no answer.

“Grab him,” ordered Ghost. “He’s going to escape.”

Dead acted fast, charging to the spot he thought the old man was, grasping at air. The skulking man had manoeuvred away in the darkness.

“Block off the door,” Ghost commanded.

Dead backtracked, using his bulk to prevent escape, and waited. The three stayed in the room, trying to outsmart each other.

Ghost paced the room, listening for any faint sounds that would betray the old man.

“They weren’t joking,” came a distant voice, echoing through the hallways. “Someone finally got him.”

“We’d better check the well,” came another, faint but audible.

“Damn it Dead, we’re going to get caught.” Ghost paced around the room, straining ears. He thought he heard something. Moving closer he picked up on a light snoring. Marcus had fallen asleep hiding from Dead.

“Quick, he’s just here,” shouted Ghost.

“Who is?” Dead asked. They had been lying in wait for so long that Dead had forgotten why they were there.

“Not now.”

Dead’s voice had stirred the old man, the snoring stopped.

“Just charge at my voice and feel in the darkness, you should grab someone.”

Dead accepted the blind order, running through the darkness at Ghost’s voice. His foot knocked over some discarded pipes and he fell, reaching out with groping hands. Something caught in them, a thin leg, Dead’s fingers locked to it.

“Help,” came the scream, plunging through the bowels of Ashmore.

Distant footsteps sloshing through water came fast.

“Get the combination off him,” screamed Ghost, unable to keep still.

Lights bounced off the walls outside as the guards raced to them.

“What’s the combination?” Dead yelled.

“Help me,” came the frantic reply.

“Hurt him,” Ghost screamed.

Dead took hold of the frail man’s hand, crushing it in his own. Bones snapped and an earth rending shriek doused them.

“The combination,” Dead repeated, unaware of what he was asking for.

“Alright, I’ll tell you,” Marcus sobbed.

Torchlight flooded the room, scorching everyone’s eyes. Two men stood in the corridor, one carried a shock prod, the other a cudgel and shield.

“Let him go,” ordered one stocky guard.

“The combination,” Dead growled again, squeezing the shattered hand.

“Left at the third and fifth joint... that’s it.”

Dead didn’t understand, he squeezed the hand again, prevailing the room with another yelp.

“It’s alright Dead, I’ve got it,” Ghost told him. “You need to rip out that well grate and get in before the guards can stop you though,” Ghost continued, pointing at the now visible well in the centre of the room.

Dead sized up the two guards, advancing on them, holding Marcus as a shield.

“Dead,” Ghost yelled from the well. “Don’t let that shock stick get you or you won’t recover.”

Dead rushed the guard with the shock prod, throwing Marcus onto him. There was a piercing crack as the weapon discharged into the old man, hurtling him back into Dead. The guard swore, removing the burnt out battery on his weapon. Dead ran to the well. A light grate wrenching free as he ripped it up, throwing it with strength at the other guard. A shield caught the impact, stunning the man for a half second.

“Get in,” Ghost yelled, anxiety fuelling him. “Two rights, a left, a right and then a left. Anything after that just keep going right.”

Dead didn’t understand, choosing to dive in rather than seek clarification.

The well was tight, as predicted, Dead’s shoulders almost too broad to pass. Ghost dove in after him, his presence unaffected by the water. With no buoyancy Ghost sank fast resting against Dead’s feet.

One guard reached through Ghost, grabbing at Dead’s leg, swearing as fingers burnt from icy water. Dead shook free, his whole body convulsing as it slithered down the tunnel like a desperate worm.

The guard surrendered his hand numb with pain. The other guard, frustrated by the failure, dipped his freshly charged shock prod into the water, discharging it into the well. Ghost felt the energy throb around him and noticed Dead’s stillness. They weren’t deep enough, he realised, the guards would be able to slip a noose down and drag up Dead’s corpse.

They didn’t, satisfied with killing the escapee, uncaring of a polluted well.

Dead woke, confused and panicked. He could talk but water distorted his vocals. Ghost spoke from behind, the spirit’s voice clear through the water.

“You’re awake,” Ghost pronounced. “Good. You’ve got to make your way down this tunnel. When you come to an intersection stop and ask me which way to go.”

Dead relaxed, if Ghost knew what they were doing then he needn't worry. He started the slow process of descending the tunnel, rolling his body over and again to make progress, trying to feel the way with nerveless fingers. Twice they came to a joint, both times relying on Marcus' information. The tunnel gave no room for mistake, no where to turn around in the cold, black depths.

They took a left turn at the third intersection as required. Ghost wondered how long they had sunk for, to him it felt like days. Dead entertained no such thoughts, he had a command and was following it like a machine, overriding his memory and removing the necessity to think.

They delved further, Ghost waiting for the fourth joint. It did not come. The tunnel ended in a harsh wall, blocking all access.

"What now?" Dead burred.

"We're stuck," Ghost cried, his worst fears coming to fruition. "Can you go backwards?"

Dead tried without result, travelling down was hard enough, the other way an impossibility.

"Well?" asked Dead.

"Well nothing," Ghost mourned. "We're stuck."

They were quiet for a long time, alone with their thoughts. Marcus had won his fight. Trapped in the pit there was nothing. Dead closed his eyes and dreamt.

59

Ammba sat in the Imperial recliner, knees tight around her chest, clasping a worn novel in one hand. Each time she started to read her mind would wander, the words mixing up on the page so that she spent more time finding her place than she did reading. A roaring Pine Tar fire cracked behind a mantelpiece. Thomas lay sprawled in front of it, a quiet snore reaching her ears. As her personal guard he had accompanied Ammba everywhere, doting on her and playing the good knight. She tired of his act, attempts at goading him into letting his guard down so that they might hold a prolonged conversation failing. It was clear now that he was incapable of the sort, preferring dumb

action to sophisticated speech. Watching him twitch in a dream state, she wondered how the boy could have been borne of the father.

Ammba had found better company in Senior Longshore, inclining to spend her nights sipping wine with him by the master fire and talking of events past and those to come. Thomas fell asleep most nights in the same place, bored by their repetitive tones and struggling to pay attention. The lord had left the estate on an errand two nights past, assigning his personal servant to act as Ammba's in his absence, aware of the lack of conversation exhibited by his son.

Estella returned from a break, taking the recliner next to Ammba's and nursing a drink. She was older than Ammba by ten years, long black hair and olive skin inherited from her deep Imperial ancestry. She had come to Ironwood as a merchant's slave, Senior seeing the value in the girl and purchasing her. Under his care she had grown to favouritism, incurring the displeasure of Senior's wife. The jealous matriarch chose to spend her days entertaining young servant boys in their holiday villa rather than bear a harsh city and uncaring husband. Senior had paid no mind, preferring the company of his serving girls to his wife, and he would not question her motives as long as she remained discrete.

Now Estella was Ammba's, to entertain and serve. She was smarter than Ammba, the young lady soon realised, and Ammba enjoyed the many stories the servant told of the Imperial Capital and its provinces. She fast grew to cherish their company, finding companionship in the woman and relying on her gentle care to seek self-healing in herself. She had not spoken of the rape, keeping the horrors locked away in her mind, always threatening to bubble forth.

Ammba had tried to suppress the memories, to pretend they had not happened, a battle that she could never win. She struggled with many tasks, the simple act of reading a novel too challenging for her. Even her favourite stories left her empty, the romantic quests of heroes rescuing ladies and dying in their arms too unreal and stupid in her new reality. The true horrors of captivity had been worked on her over and again during her bondage. The books never mentioned that. They were full of honourable villains that remained chaste, more like monks than criminals.

Hence she sat in her recliner, unable to connect the words of her novel into a coherent sentence. Estella sat apart from her, reading through a transcript and making notes on a papyrus scroll with an inked feather. Ammba lowered her book, sighing in frustration. It

caught the servant's attention, hazel eyes looking up with a casual smile.

"Not a good book?" Estella quizzed in a deep voice, thick with accent.

Ammba crossed legs, pursing her lips together.

"I couldn't tell you. I can't read it."

"Then it isn't one."

"What are you reading?"

"This? This is just a transcript on traded ores from the mines. If you've want to be truly bored then I suggest you read it."

"You seem to be okay with it"

"Lord Longshore has asked me to check all daily accounts for him while he's away. It should fall to his eldest, but..." She didn't finish, watching the young man's chest rise and fall in a steady rhythm.

"Is he a good man?" Ammba asked.

The question made Estella smile.

"As good as any man can be I guess," she flicked a tendril of hair from her face. "I have met many worse than he by far."

"And many better?"

"One or two," she nodded. "Though they don't last as such in the city."

"What do you mean?"

"Oh, nothing. The city is a corrupting force. It breeds treachery and intrigue, stepping on the weak and vulnerable and destroying people's dreams."

"Ironwood is hard," Ammba agreed.

"It's not just Ironwood. The Capital is the same, as are all the cities I've visited. I doubt it is any different in the Northane Kingdom, or further past them. It's human nature to benefit from the loss of others Ammba."

The younger girl was quiet for a moment, a sad inner voice agreeing with the woman's summary.

"You mentioned that there are cities past the Kingdom. Is that true?"

Estella brightened at the change of subject.

"I spoke to a barbarian merchant once who said he had travelled the length of the Kingdom, through the Dismal Forest and Weeded Wood. There are two main races in the Kingdom, the Northanes we are familiar with, those short, hairy men and women that struggle with manners. At the other end of their land is a similar but different race.

They are darker haired but taller, speaking in another tongue. The merchant that I spoke of was a bastard of the two races, struggling to find identity in either.”

Ammba’s book lay on the ground, her attention captivated by the picture of an alien world.

“He told me that beyond the Kingdom lie more of this race, not yet subjected to the barbarian kings. They struggle under a warmer sun, tilling the soil and growing strange crops that I’ve yet to taste. They’re a hardier race but argumentative, unable to unite under a single banner or consolidate their differences. Beyond these people he spoke of an even worse breed of race. Short black haired savages that attack with primitive spears and stones, scurrying away whenever a pistol would fire in their direction. They lived in tight mud cities, a thousand starving savages in each, he tells.”

“This man must have been brave,” Ammba imagined, sighing with the dream of adventure.

“Greedy more like. He set out with half a troupe just to kill some beasts for their tusks, leaving their slaughtered bodies to cook in the sun. From the way he talked of his time, it sounded like he wasted his fair share of hands dragging the heavy prizes back. It took him three years to return, the profits earned enough for any man to live wealthy until the end of their life. He always talked of returning though, plotting a different line east to seek out cities that were supposed to be built from gold. Whether he did or not I have no idea.”

“A city of gold?”

“Yes. Men are driven to kill themselves by their own greed, and that of others. There would never be such thing as a gold city, the mineral only forms in small amounts. Even if you took every last ounce from the Cragft Alpt you’d probably not have enough for a simple house.”

Ammba admired the servant, seeing past the fantastic daydreams of men to conclude a rationality that she would never exhibit. She watched the woman scribble notes for a while. Ammba struggled to explain the emotions she felt for the woman, an admiration and attraction that was new. Estella stood, taking the scroll to a shelf and filing it away. She returned to stare at Thomas, still snoring by the fire.

“Our lord means well,” the servant whispered. “But he is more guard than lord.”

Ammba smiled, rising herself.

“Come, I will escort you to your room,” Estella said.

“Should we wake him?”

Estella chuckled.

“Let him dream. It’s what men do best.”

She locked arms with the young girl’s, strolling into the hallway.

“It will be a cold night,” Estella noted, keeping to the carpeted stretch. “You can share with me tonight if you’d like.”

Ammba looked at the woman, trying to assess her motives. They were lost in her dark features, looking everywhere but the girl.

“I would,” Ammba answered.

60

“Pierce seems set to take on the nobles,” Pilus remarked, sitting sideways in his iron throne.

“How so?” Callis asked, pulling himself away from a worn scroll on the histories of Ironwood.”

“A contact of mine - an old associate, informs me that he has made contact with Rafpheal Tyme-Lal.”

“In what regard?” Callis sat up interested.

“It seems he has plans to promote certain criminal minds into the nobility.”

“That is not the job of a regent,” Callis observed.

“No, it’s not. My informant suggested that Pierce is seeking to promote himself.”

“That would be suicide. I am sure you friend got his information mixed.”

“I doubt it.”

“Then we shall soon have a new regent. No noble would stand for it and I doubt the church would take lightly either.”

“We are the church.”

“What are you suggesting?”

“If Pierce lays claim to kingship then we should support him.”

“For what benefit?”

My associate is Rafpheal Tyme-Lal. If Pierce takes a kingship then he owes it to Rafpheal. If we support Pierce then Rafpheal owes us.”

“You think we can control Pierce... or the crime lords?”

“Nothing is done without the church’s approval in this city. With their support we can strengthen and reinvent ourselves within the church.”

“That is a giant undertaking,” Callis pointed out, an expression of greed touching his lips.

“It all depends how events unfurl. If we position ourselves correctly then we could reap great rewards.”

“If... when Pierce claims kingship we will need to convince the others to support him.”

“That is the challenge,” Pilus noted. “They might shy away from a war if it came to it.”

“Perhaps we should consider those who would oppose the idea...”

Pilus nodded, understanding the sinister undertone. Neither man would shy from assassinating one of their brethren for self-promotion.

“It would also do to consider those nobles most staunchly opposed to a return to monarchy.”

Callis nodded, holding forth a drink in salute.

“Tell me, where have our servants gone? My cup has sat empty for some time,” Pilus asked.

“The idiot child? I don’t know,” Callis replied.

“And your suckle boy?”

“He has left my service on account of incompetence.”

“You removed him?”

“Of course, the boy strayed against me, in your duty no matter.”

“I would have expected more from him,” Pilus sighed. “I guess he wasn’t such the hidden gem that you thought.”

“Well, he pleases others now.”

“This Islemann of yours?”

Callis nodded but did not speak.

“Tell me of him?” Pilus pressed.

“Was that Nielle’s mission?”

“It was a test to see his value... which he failed, but it served a double purpose of sorts. This man of yours compels my interest.”

“He is not my man,” Callis admitted. “In a sense I serve him.”

“Excuse me?”

“Have you heard of the tribesmen of Ith’aki?” Pilus shook his head. “I’m not surprised. They were once the dominant tribe among the Iron Reaches, before the time of the Patriarcht.”

“That was a long time ago,” Pilus noted, receiving a sarcastic smile for the trouble.

“Yet this man still lives,” Callis said. “And sought me out as a true follower of Aea-Baeni.”

“The Beast’s image of Ea-Manati?”

“No. Julkett, the two-headed wolf. The mother of Ea-Manati, in a philosophical sense. Lies and perverted truths have twisted her into what our brethren worship today. You should know, as my counterpart, that Aea-Baeni is the transcended being of this beast.”

“You are suggesting that this god once existed?” Pilus half-smirked.

“It was never a god. Fearful tribesmen placed that epithet on a creature renowned for desecrating their homes and possessing their people.”

“How does this lead to Islemann?”

“Islemann was possessed by the beast, infested with a type of parasite that kept him alive and gave him certain improvements.”

“Such as?”

“His strength is unparalleled by man, and despite his appearance he is incredibly hardy.”

“Why haven’t I heard more of these parasites? Why are they so rare?”

“From what I can discern there once existed different variations. He carries one string but cannot infect others with it.”

“A pity,” Pilus shrugged.

“Why is that? Would you wish to be infected?”

“If it made me immortal? Of course. You wouldn’t?”

“It depends, I can’t say how much freewill Islemann has. It stands to mind that if parasites have infected his body then they would take over his mind too.”

“Perhaps,” Pilus breezed over. “Why did he seek you out?”

“That is my mystery,” Callis sighed, leaning back in his throne.

61

Haylee thought it was a strange gift, turning the black statuette over. She held a two-headed dog, polished to give the steel a light sheen, mimicking a fur coat. Tiny razor teeth pocketed the two

mouths, threatening to tear the skin of any who dare test with their finger. The letter that had come with the gift was a terse message, printed on a coarse scroll.

'To commiserate your loss,'

Jacob Hornsberg

Emporium of Exotica

The page was pressed with the seal of 'JH' and addressed to her. She turned the statuette over again, noting the fine craftsmanship. Silvia finished drawing a hot bath for the girl, approaching with a smile. Since the night with Pierce, Haylee had dogged the woman throughout the citadel, nursing an imagined security with the servant's presence. She had not confessed her run-in with Pierce to anyone, though Silvia had noted the increased nervousness in the girl.

"You seem fascinated with it," Silvia noted, removing the gift and helping to undress the girl.

"It's an oddity," Haylee admitted. "I have no idea why someone would send such a thing."

She walked to the tub, sinking deep into the heated water, Ty leaf petals swirling in the milky liquid.

"I will send your thanks to Master Hornsberg later."

"But a two-headed dog? It looks grotesque."

"The two-headed dog is a sign of resilience and strength," Silvia chatted, pouring water over Haylee's shoulder length blonde hair.

"I've never heard that," she sputtered, wiping a slight sting from her eyes.

"It's an old charm. The sort that the church frown upon."

"An ancient legend?" Haylee asked, turning in the tub. She knew little of non-consensual history, the official diatribes requiring church approval.

"I wouldn't say it's ancient. If you were my age then you would have heard stories of Julkett growing up."

"Julkett?"

"The two-headed wolf. One head devours, the other protects. It's a classic story outlawed by the Manati. When the worship of the old gods was banned centuries ago much of that ancient lore was kept alive in fables and children's stories."

"So Julkett might have once been a god?"

“I think so. It is not hard to see the connection between his dual nature and that of El-Manati. They both create and destroy.”

“Maybe they are the same?” Haylee considered, splashing her face with eyes pressed tight.

“Whether that were the case or not I would never repeat such things aloud. The eyes of the church are many and they would not deny the stripping of flesh even from a regent’s daughter if they committed the blasphemies.”

Haylee huffed, she thought it had been a good idea.

“I think I should visit Sir Hornsberg personally,” she decided, letting Silvia rub her back.

“I will go on your behalf,” Silvia suggested.

“That’s not necessary. I would like some time out of the citadel and this gives me the chance.”

“You are vulnerable outside the city.”

Haylee was quiet, reflecting on her sister’s tragedy.

“I will sneak out then. No one needs to know.”

“If you are set in this line then I will guide you to the Emporium. You’re right, it will be good for both of us to escape the castle for a while.”

Silvia continued to scrub Haylee, running a stone wash over her tender back.

“This is it,” Silvia noted from a veiled cloak. Hidden away in Trader’s Loop sat a small but well-furnished shop, the words ‘Emporium of Exotica’ painted on its glass storefront.

“We should have come earlier,” Haylee stated, worried by the early nights that came with the deepening autumn. Silvia responded by hurrying her into the store.

Subtle incense greeted them. A thin man approached, examining the fine cloaks that hid their faces.

“Welcome to the Emporium of Exotica,” he managed, erupting into a coughing fit as a type of unwanted exclamation mark. He pressed a handkerchief to his lips, removing the black spittle that gorged his mouth.

“Thank you sir. I am looking for one Jacob Hornsberg, would this be you?” Silvia said.

He nodded, not yet able to speak.

“On behalf of my mistress I wanted to thank you for this gift.”

She smiled as the statuette of Julkett appeared from beneath her cloak, disappearing just as fast.

"Please," he wheezed. "Let me not keep you here. We should retire to better quarters."

With a swift step he locked the front door, hanging a 'closed' sign. He guided the pair to the rear of the shop, passing through stores of antique furniture and crafts.

"This is my home," Jacob coughed. "You are most welcome in it."

They passed into the entryway of a quiet apartment, so plain that Haylee paused to wonder why such a man would bother to lavish gifts on others when his own walls were bare.

"If you would be so kind as to wait here I will prepare a drink."

Silvia did not respond, letting the man leave them by an unlit fire.

"Do we need a drink?" Haylee asked.

"I would be surprised if he returned for one," Silvia replied, correct.

Jacob did not return. Haylee gave out a yelp when Master Freeman entered, his face still swollen. She ran to him, giving a tight hug while he let out an uncomfortable laugh. Silvia approached on more dignified terms, shaking hands with the Master.

"I wasn't sure if my message would be received," he smiled, relieved to see the woman's face.

"The citadel has changed," Silvia murmured. "But it might as well collapse if they got rid of me in the process."

Haylee stepped back, trying to unravel the curiosities of her confusement.

"You know each other?" She asked.

"We are in acquaintance Miss Steward," Freeman nodded.

"Haylee, it would be best if you were not present," Silvia warned.

Haylee's face screwed up, offended at the thought.

"If you stay do not expect to be spared any grim details."

"It's okay," Freeman vouched. "Miss Steward needs to be part of the talk."

Silvia pursed her lips, surprised by the Master and conceding to their combined will.

"Tell me of Pierce's motives. Does he seek to challenge the nobles?" Freeman continued.

"I have not heard such," Silvia replied. "He is filling the castle with rabble, half of them have never seen a real battle, just cheap arms."

“He is paranoid,” the Master mused, rubbing his bruised face.

“Becoming more so. He takes food and drink from one servant... and Haylee. I’m not sure if paranoid is the full word. He loves the military, his library is full of books on wars and conquerors. I fancy that he sees himself in a similar light.”

“The regent’s guardian was not chosen to conquer the city. The council should see this and dismiss him,” Freeman stated.

“Word tells me that the council play a diminished role these days. He prefers the outside company of that barbarian Gehrig to any civilised class. Now that you are gone there is little backbone left,” Silvia said.

Freeman nodded, self-aware of his own worth.

“Has he said anything regarding the children?”

“Not publicly,” Silvia shrugged.

“I’ve always been surprised how much information can leak from a pickled tongue.”

“Pierce is a professional at that. I fear he’s had too much practice at guarding his drunk words.”

“How have you handled it Haylee?” Freeman asked, turning to the girl.

“I stay out of his way. I think Damian does likewise...” She did not mention her encounter in the hall.

“A decent plan, but one we might have to challenge.”

“You have a proposal?” Silvia asked, fearing the question.

“A simple poison should suffice. We are in agreement that he must be removed, correct?”

Silvia nodded, Haylee remained still.

“You wish to use the girl?” Silvia asked.

“You said yourself she’s the only other person able to bring him food and drink. Who do you trust more, Haylee or his serving wench?”

“Serving boy,” Silvia corrected, stalling for time. “There would be too much risk.”

“Can you get a poison into his food?”

“Not without the child tasting it,” Silvia agreed. “We could use a slow release drug.”

“And you scold me for risk?” Freeman snorted. “We both know how ineffective they can be. How much dose would you need to take down a prize like Pierce?”

“Too much,” Silvia swore. “There are other options.”

“You do not need to consider them,” interrupted Haylee. “I will deliver the poison myself.”

She shuddered with the memory of his cruel hand pressed hard to her breast. Silvia frowned, unhappy with the choice.

“I will teach you how,” Freeman beamed. “It will need some practice to perform without detection. Easy enough to learn, once the trick is mastered.”

Haylee thought of her own father’s death, the topic of poisons reopening the wound.

“What poison?” Silvia asked. “Tylon Ferment?”

“No, I would never use such a poison, it carries the risk of detection.” He looked to Haylee as he spoke, noting her forlorn look. “Dreamweb would be a better choice.”

“That’s difficult to come by.”

“For some,” the old man shrugged. “I know a few stockists, there shouldn’t be a problem getting some. Visit me in three days and it will be prepared.”

“Three days,” Haylee verified.

Never before could she have considered murder. Pierce would make a fine start. The idea of waiting seemed unbearable to her.

“Three days,” Freeman repeated. “Keep away from Pierce until then.”

They left the house hours later, staying up over an unlit fire discussing the future of the city. Freeman seemed unconcerned by Ammba’s disappearance, almost noting it as a convenience. He was also terse during talk of Damian, preferring to focus his attention on Haylee and her position. Silvia noted the old man’s attention too, recognizing his schemes. When confronted with them he did not deny his intentions siblings.

Numbness hugged Locke’s entire body. Pain had turned to agony long ago, before his own mind had shut it out. With the burden of carrying Fredrick through a frozen wasteland littered with sharp inclines and precarious drops, Locke’s body neared the point of shut

down. Blisters pocked the exposed skin at his face while his winter suit, sodden by continued snowfall, dragged him down. With a final heave, the thief turned mountaineer dragged his charge into a shallow rock outcrop providing partial shelter from the turning blizzard.

Locke pushed the child as far into the rock as he might, before pressing his own frozen body close, hoping for some tiny spark of warmth to reach him. Hours passed, the pair rocking in and out of fitful sleeps, sharing similar nightmares. As night grew thick in the mountains there was only a slim register of time for Locke, awakening the next day, not sure whether he had dreamed the night passing or if it had happened, feeling just as exhausted.

The snowstorm headed north, passing the sheltered pair as they awoke. Locke tore off a stretch of duck jerky, handing it to Fredrick, the boy struggling to chew with his shattered jaw. Neither felt talkative and they prepared themselves in silence. Fredrick tried to stand but was too weak, his wobbling legs a threatening sign, the swinging motion tempting the jerky to regurgitate.

Locke resigned himself to another stint at dragging the boy across the mountains. They had travelled east along the side of the Hawk, unable to find a point where they could double back and return to the abandoned steam carriage. Locke was sure that they were now in the Notorious Clefts Proper, a poor stretch of ranges that held little mining attention.

His map showed one potential landmark, a small mining depot further south. Locke knew that if he kept his bearing then he would stumble across the rail line that led to it. Most lines deep in the mountains were built so that they did not become bogged down in snow, raised higher than a typical city line. With luck, Locke thought that he would be able to spot the line even with the amount of snow that had fallen through the night.

He clambered on, shoulders and back already stiff. Rather than slinging Fredrick over one shoulder as before, the child was now strong enough to hold onto Locke's neck so that the thief could piggyback him.

The deep autumn's sun reached its zenith in the south, a grim reminder of the dark days fast approaching. Despite his hardship Locke pressed on, proving his wiry strength could hold out under strain.

They descended a slope and stood in the center of a sharp valley. No sign of a rail line was evident and despair started to creep into

Locke's thoughts. Fearing the end, he took a gamble. Locke turned south and followed the valley away from the city. Fredrick received no answer when he questioned the plan.

Fredrick shrieked, lifting Locke's weary eyes. Before them, rising out of the valley, stood the remains of an abandoned mining depot. Weariness was washed away and replaced with excitement as Locke stumbled forward with Fredrick bouncing on his back. Without certainty they had followed the line to the station, the thick snow covering all trace of the iron rails. Locke's excitement grew at the sight of a steam carriage under dock, the words 'Tell Industries' emblazoned across its boiler.

As they passed close to the train, a figure caught Locke's eye. At first the thief thought it a corpse, kneeling in the snow, back turned to them, but he realised that any corpse would be fast buried in snow. Creeping past, Locke lifted Fredrick into the cabin.

"Start shoveling coal in. Once full, light it." Locke whispered to the weak child, handing him a flintbox. Fredrick complied as best he could, using his hands to fill the firebox rather than the heavy shovel.

Curiosity was dangerous for a thief, yet so was a mystery, Locke thought. He crept past stranded boxes, hoping to see the figure from a better angle. With its head down and long straggled hair shielding its face Locke strained to see. He stepped closer, dagger clenched hard, trying to gauge why someone would be stranded in the mountains during the 'off' season while a steam carriage sat idle in its dock. At ten paces the figure tensed, as if hearing the catlike footsteps of the thief. It rose, standing full height and turned, looking into the thief's shocked face.

Before Locke stood a man, tall and fair, eyes glazed in a red sheen. Maggot-like parasites clung to the orifice that was once his mouth, now a cracked and swollen mess of a wound, blisters spreading from its point.

"Stop," Locke called, as the diseased man closed in with a stuttered gait. If the creature heard, it took no heed, lunging forth at Locke as best it could. Locke sidestepped, lifting his dagger up to meet the charge. The blade did little, scraping along the haunches without effect. The creature turned, spitting more parasites from its mouth. It reeled back for a moment, taking stock, before lurching forward with a violent convulsion. A stream of maggot creatures vomited from the monster, showering Locke.

The bugs wriggled on Locke who struck at his own body in revulsion, trying to free himself of them. From the corner of his eye he registered the lunging monster, this time not agile enough to escape. They bowled over in the snow, the beast man on top, pinning the exhausted thief to the ground. The maggot-like creatures sought out the pores on Locke's exposed skin, burrowing into the flesh there. More parasites tried to force themselves into Locke's mouth while others sought to enter through the nose.

Throughout a hard life of violence, pain and struggle, Locke had never experienced such agony. He wanted to scream, but the creatures working at his lips held him back. Within a moment the pain vanished, as the last parasites sought refuge within Locke. The creature on top of him stood, trundling away into a nearby mineshaft.

Locke lay in the snow, afraid to move. The agony of before had vanished and even memories of the pain seemed lacking. Yet the image was strong and haunting. Without knowing what had happened Locke struggled back to the train, noting Fredrick's concern when he approached.

"What happened?"

"Nothing," Locke lied.

"Your face. It's bleeding."

The thief touched his cheek, his gloved hand coming away stained. Too many concerns were building in his head. Locke only wanted to survive.

"I had to kill someone," he uttered.

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"Where are you going boy?" Pierce called, strutting through the stone courtyard. Damian peered over his shoulder, swearing to himself. He turned from his mare, her untied bridle coming loose.

"For a ride," Damian answered, noting the scowled looks on the two guards that flanked Pierce.

"I forbid it. For now you need to stay in the castle." Pierce was red faced, the brisk walk leaving him breathless.

Damian grimaced. He was expected to meet with Fredrick and Locke, their secret rendezvous point set outside Ironwood's walls.

"I won't be long," he lied, tugging at his ear in nervousness.

"You won't," Pierce agreed, ordering one of his men to re-stable the horse.

Damian stared down the large man, arms crossed and angry. Pierce had not drunk since the night before, his body sweating in the chill autumn morning.

"You can't order me about," Damian spat. "You're not my father."

Pierce smiled at him with cruel lips, stepping closer.

"Your father is rotting in the crypts... probably walking around down there. Did you want to join him?"

A twitch caught Damian's top lip as he struggled to restrain himself.

"That is enough Lord Pierce," Bryce called, returning from the stable, a second horse abandoned for the moment.

"What did you say?" Pierce growled.

"I said that is enough. You were not given this position to bully these children. Your duty is to serve them."

Pierce stood to his fullest height, breathing in hard.

"Who the fuck do you think you are?"

"Settle down Bryce," Damian yelled, rushing to stand before him.

"This fat bastard needs to learn humility my lord. Your father would never have stood for his mannerisms."

"I'm going to rip you in two," choked Pierce, struggling to pull his longsword from its frost sheath.

"Stop," Damian yelled.

"Stay out of the way my lord," Bryce admonished, his own blade in hand sliding free, the oiled weapon the sign of a dutiful soldier.

Bryce was smaller than the regent, more athletic and lean. Damian stood his ground. With a crack Pierce wrenched his sword out, his guards doing likewise. The big man frothed an order for them to stay put, before turning to advance on the pair. He closed the gap, pulling his weapon back. Bryce reacted fast, shouldering the boy out of harm's way just in time to catch the heavier blade with his own.

Years of indulgence had damned Pierce, his impressive physique replaced by a lumbering hulk. He fought with pure anger, thrashing down and around hard with his sword, not giving the other man a chance to form an offence. They continued in a battle of endurance, Pierce resorting to a single overhead sweep, striking at the same point

in the neck. Bryce was forced back, mindful not to lose his footing on the icy stones.

Both men tired fast in the cold, one blocking, and the other striking. Damian yelled at Pierce's guard to stop the fight, summoning all his rights as lord for them to obey. They did not, backing the plan of their master. One tried to grab Damian, to stop him from interfering. The boy saw it and sunk back, creating distance. With his riding boots on he found better grip on the stone than those wearing iron boots, able to slip past the guard. Damian ran, leaving the fight behind.

Pierce's face had turned bright red, his blows coming slower. Bryce was tired too, the struggle of keeping his blade up waning. They sought respite, Pierce backing away to rest his arms. He did not fight again, signaling over his shoulder for his guard to advance. Bryce watched with worry as the men came on, their blades ready. He was no match for two fresh men and offered a resolution.

Pierce barked a laugh through gasps, smiling as two blades struck down. Bryce jumped to evade, one blade missing him, the other cracking a steel shoulder pad, crunching the bone below. He fell, sliding on the ice, and tried to raise his sword with one hand. The swords fell heavy, ringing out as they cut through parts of armour, hacking through chain.

Bryce did not scream, either too exhausted or proud, when they removed his sword arm, a series of gashes where the armour had hindered the blades. Pierce approached.

"A brave knight dies with a sword in his hand," he announced, kicking Bryce in the face, causing his head to buck back. "You will die like a coward."

Bryce did not look up, blinded by the force of the steel boot.

"Take him to the square. Let's put on a little show for our lord's son."

Bryce's limp body was dragged around the gardens to the courtyard, a series of practicing guards stepping aside for the spectacle. Bryce's plate was removed with pliers, the chain slipped over his lolling head. The cold had helped stem some blood from his arm so that only a light seep washed out.

"Damian Steward," Pierce cried out, his voice filling the courtyard. "Here lies your man, dropped and shamed, will you not come out and vouch for his life?"

Some guards smiled, others looked around without remark.

“Damian Steward, this man lies ready to die. Will you not stand out for him?”

Again a silent chill. Pierce let his impatience rule. Retaking his blade he stood behind Bryce, running the sword into the bare back. It cut in deep, running through the lung and leaving the other side. Bryce gurgled, choking on the surge of blood that entered his throat. Pierce kicked him in the spine, the two guards letting go, leaving the man to fall face down as the sword left the body.

“This is what you get for being a coward Steward,” Pierce thundered. “Come out now or your mother will be next.”

Pierce was set in rage, a fury of paranoia ticking over. He knew of the boy’s schemes, his agents reporting secret meetings between the child and criminal minds. Pierce wanted Damian locked away, to be kept under strict control.

No answer came to the threat. Pierce cleaned his blade on a guard’s cloak, storming into the citadel. He took three steps at a time, coming to Kayla’s room, followed by a swarm of curious men. The door was unlocked, Pierce seeing to smash it open anyway. Haylee lurched when she saw the blood spattered man enter, a murderous stare in his eyes.

“Where’s the boy?” He roared, deafening the girl.

She did not answer, trying to cower in the corner. Pierce kicked over a table riddled with medicines, the bottles cracking to the floor. He passed through the room, smashing open the balcony doors and yelling into the morning.

“Steward, come out here you little maggot.” Men looked up from the courtyard floors below, still stunned by the events. Pierce re-entered the room, returning to the balcony with the frail Kayla draped in his arms.

“Last chance Steward, come out.”

He was met only by the sobbing of Haylee inside the room, her pitiful cry lost in the sea of rage bubbling in his head. He swung around, generating momentum, before releasing the sick woman out into the courtyard. She travelled for a moment before falling hard, her thin body shattered by the stone below. No one rushed to her, leaving Kayla to lie in a twisted death pose.

Pierce returned to the room, ordering his men to lock down the citadel and search for the boy. He ordered Haylee into confinement, setting two guards to accompany her. When Silvia tried to intervene Pierce punched the woman in the stomach, his big mailed fist doubling

her over. Haylee was dragged off, distraught and struggling, trying to fight off the tight hands that squeezed her. Pierce turned to his personal guards, issuing orders.

“Organise the council to meet immediately,” he ordered one before turning to the other. “Lock down the citadel. No one comes in or out. When that’s done round up those guards most loyal to the Stewards. Place them under arrest for now. They will be dealt with in turn.”

Pierce sought the council chambers.