

The Awakened: Book One

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*Carly, my love
You are my light and laughter
Without you this book wouldn't exist*

Foreword

By the Author

I began writing *The Awakened* in the winter of 1998. The company I worked for at the time closed down every year between Christmas and New Year's and I suddenly found myself without responsibility for a period of time. For years I'd been toying with a storyline in my mind—inventing characters and visualizing scenes—but had yet to venture beyond the confines of my imagination. As my body moved through the motions of a physically laborious job, my mind wandered, unengaged and unchallenged by my work. The characters became real to me as I spent countless hours experiencing their lives, living their passions and struggles. In the back of mind, I always thought that someday I'd write it all down.

And then *someday* happened. As the snow fell outside, I sat in front of a computer with a cup of steaming coffee and began typing the first scene that I had already witnessed a thousand times in my head. Every last movement and word of the characters, every detail of their environment I could see as if they were right in front of me. But I struggled, coming quickly to the realization that writing is much more difficult than imagining. There is no explanation in imagining. The scenes just play out and make sense because you are both the author and audience. But writing is altogether different. Writing means commitment. Writing means exposing yourself through words that someone else may read. And for an introvert like me, that was a scary concept. Still, I pushed through and after several days I had a very short stack of papers to show for my effort. It was more than I had ever written for a school assignment and it gave me a measure of satisfaction at getting something out of my head and down onto paper.

New Year's Day came and went and the pace of life sped up once more. Until one night, maybe a year and a half later, my wife asked, "What ever happened with that story you started writing?" We began talking and our conversation didn't stop for several hours. I told her about my characters, where they had come from and what they were going to face. I explained the geography of the Empire, the main plot and subplots. I even told her about the prequel to my

story and that one day I wanted to write that as well. When I finished, she was almost speechless. I say *almost* because she did say something very important, something that changed the trajectory of my thoughts and actions.

“You have to write your story—like right now! You can’t just keep it in your head! When you’re eighty years old and sitting in a rocking chair on our front porch, do you want to be the person who always thought about writing a book? Or do you want to be the person who did it?”

Hearing those words and seeing her excitement was like pouring gasoline on a fire. That was it. I was going to do it; I was going to write my story. From that night on, I committed to myself that I would write at least one night a week. Though a seemingly insignificant amount of effort, it was a major turning point for me. Writing was slow-going at first, but over time I saw improvement. I was gradually becoming able to express my thoughts without struggle. I no longer spent hours agonizing over a few sentences, but could write a couple pages in an evening.

This continued for years until, by an interesting coincidence, I finished my story roughly a week before my first child was born. As the sleepless nights began, I put my writing on the shelf and didn’t return to it until a year later. That’s when I realized that my story was far from complete. Though I had a few hundred pages, I realized it needed some resolution, and the characters and scenes I’d planned as sequels would need to be pulled in to accomplish it. This was daunting at first, as I realized that I wouldn’t be satisfied until I got the whole storyline down on paper. But as I started on part two, I quickly settled back into the routine of writing and found myself looking forward to it. It was like reading a good book, only much better because it was the book that I’d wanted to read but couldn’t find at any bookstore. All week I would plan out the scenes and work through the dialogue in my head, so that when I sat down to write I was able to write five pages on a good night.

Two years and a few hundred pages later, I reached a stopping point once again as my second child was being born. And like before, I took a break for about a year. But when the time came for me to start on part three, my passion and commitment were already growing at an exponential rate. Now I reserved two nights a week for writing. And when that wasn’t enough, I started getting up early on weekends to squeeze in a few hours before anyone in my house was awake. It didn’t take long before this behavior began to spill over into the weekdays also, as I looked for every available moment to continue my story. It was addicting. To make up something out of thin air and then watch it come to life. I finished writing part three of *The Awakened* in the fall of 2007. What had previously taken me years to complete with the first two parts, I accomplished in six short months. It was a major accomplishment for me and I found I could breathe a little easier having released the story and characters from the prison of my imagination.

But even as I took pleasure in the realization that I’d just accomplished what might otherwise have been a life-long unrealized dream, my imagination refused to be satisfied. Already I was thinking of a prequel. Like a monster that grows when you feed it, this was not just a book I’d written, but the start of an epic saga requiring several series of books to fully bring it to life.

So that is how *The Awakened* came to be. I hope you enjoy reading it as much as I enjoyed writing it. And if you find that the story finishes sooner than you want it to, don’t worry, there’s more to come—much more!

—Jason Tesar

The History and Prophecy

(a)... the angels which kept not their first estate, but left their own habitation... **wandering stars**, to whom is reserved the blackness of darkness forever.

(b) And it came to pass when the children of men had multiplied that in those days were born unto them beautiful and comely daughters. And the angels, the children of the heaven, saw and lusted after them...

(c) And they were in all two hundred; who descended.

(d) And all the others together with them took unto themselves wives, and each chose for himself one, and they began to go in unto them and to defile themselves with them...

(e)... taught men to make swords, and knives, and shields, and breastplates, and made known to them the metals of the earth and the art of working them...

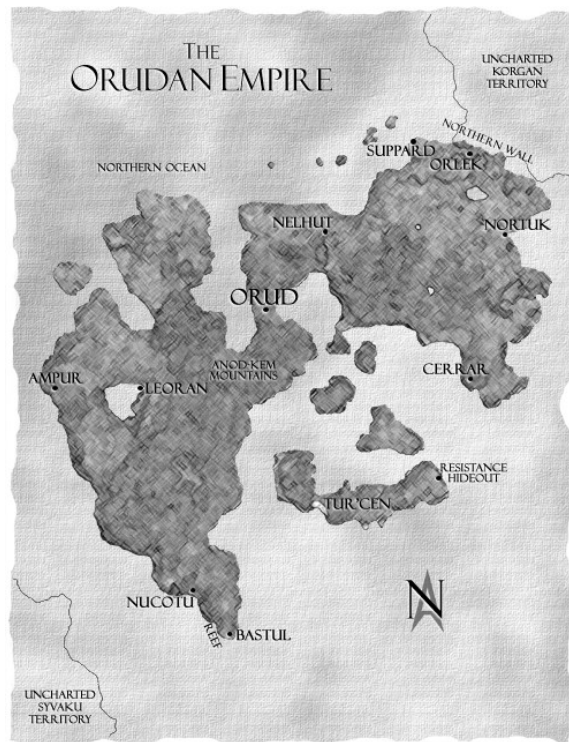
(f) There were giants in the earth in those days; and also after that, when the sons of God came in unto the daughters of men, and they bare children to them, the same became mighty men which were of old, men of renown.

(g)... whose height was three thousand ells, who consumed all the acquisitions of men. And when men could no longer sustain them, the giants turned against them and devoured mankind. And they began to sin against birds, and beasts, and reptiles, and fish, and to devour one another's flesh, and drink the blood...

(h)... and as men perished, they cried, and their cry went up to heaven...

(i) Therefore, I will raise up one from among those you despise. And I will **awaken** his eyes to the mysteries which I have hidden from men since the foundations of the world. His feet will I make to tread upon the paths of destruction and his hands to make war. He will uproot the seeds of corruption which you have sown throughout the earth. And then you will know that I am the Lord and my justice is everlasting.

The Book of Enoch 6:1-2(b), 6:6-8(c), 7:1(d), 7:2-6(g), 8:1(e), 8:3(h)
The Epistle of Jude 1:6, 1:13(a)
Genesis 6:4(f)
From the writings of Ebnisha(i)



Chapter 1

The young analyst glanced quickly around the room, his eyes darting between the flickering computer screens and scores of other technical personnel. His knee bounced with nervous energy, resonating with the frantic mood pulsing through the communications center. As he waited impatiently, he reached forward and grabbed his coffee mug and took a quick swig. It had gone cold. From a television on the wall to his right came the sound of yet another news reporter trying to present a different perspective on the same story that had dominated the media for more than a week.

“...as ocean levels continue to rise across the globe. This only adding fuel to the already heated environmental debate that is drawing new lines of separation between members on both sides of the aisle. But while some argue over the potential cause of this global catastrophe, others believe that the issues of greatest concern are the ghastly death toll and the millions of displaced people in nearly every country, seeking refuge by moving inland. Already, the burden of supporting these refugees is being seen...”

“What did you want?” sounded a coarse voice from behind.

The analyst jumped, spilling his coffee. He quickly wiped at his wrinkled slacks but the coffee had already soaked in. Giving up, he turned to address his superior. “Have you been watching any of this?”

“I’m well aware of what’s happening,” the older man said, his eyebrows wrinkling into a scowl. “It’s on every news station on the planet. But we still have jobs to do. And yours is to gather data on your target.”

“But that’s why I called you over here. They’re the ones that caused it!”

The older man’s once impatient body language softened. “Show me.”

“Ok—so, I was going over the surface contour data from the satellites when I noticed that the ocean levels were rising faster in the southern hemisphere. And that gave me the idea to run a simulation, comparing the current mapping data to the...”

“Skip to the point, Matthews!”

Setting down his mug, the analyst leaned forward and grabbed hold of the mouse. Frozen on one of the four screens at his workstation was a distorted satellite image. “This is their South American facility,” he mumbled to his superior without making eye contact. He pecked a key and un-paused the video footage, the distortion disappearing immediately.

“This is last week,” he said. “Watch the atrium roof.”

The older man stood with his arms folded, watching the screen.

In the midst of a lush jungle was a compound with high fences topped with razor wire. The interior of the compound had been cleared of all vegetation. At the north end sat an enormous rectangular building with a circular glass roof at its center. A six digit time display showed at the bottom right corner of the screen with the seconds ticking by.

At 10:06:54, the glass roof exploded upward, scattering shards of debris in every direction. A dark object materialized in the void where the roof had been. When it sprouted wings and began to rise in elevation, it became obvious that it was some sort of bird.

The analyst paused the footage and increased the magnification. “You see this rectangular box on the roof?” he said, pointing to the screen. “It’s an air-handler manufactured in Germany. I tracked down the schematics and got dimensions. It measures sixteen feet on its longest side, which...”

“...puts the wingspan at about thirty feet,” the older man interrupted. “What the hell are they doing down there?”

“...synthetic biology? Who knows?” replied the analyst, un-pausing the footage. “But watch this.”

When the time display read 10:07:22, a geyser of water came bursting through the hole in the roof. The analyst zoomed outward, showing the compound engulfed in water in a matter of seconds.

“The amount of water is just unreal. Check this out,” he said, typing in a new time signature. The footage jumped forward a few hours, showing the entire valley flooded.

“Where is all that water coming from?” the older man mumbled.

“I don’t know. It’s way too much to be an underground river or something. But it stopped,” the young man said simply. “Here, look at this.” He punched in a new date and the image switched to the present, showing a live feed. He clicked a few times with his mouse and zoomed in again.

“See? The water used to be surging all over this area like it was still coming up from underneath the building. But now the water’s calm...” The analyst trailed off as he noticed something new. “Hmm...,” he said, clicking the mouse to zoom in even further.

“That’s a dive team,” the older man said, leaning closer to the screen. “...five of them, and a boat.”

“...four,” the young man corrected.

“What?”

“There are only four divers. The fifth isn’t in a wet suit. See how he’s swimming away? It looks like they’re chasing him.”

“Go back!” the older man said. “Show me how he got in the water.”

The analyst quickly scrolled the footage backward until everyone disappeared, then played it again. "There's the dive team arriving. They're getting in the water," he mumbled as he carefully moved through the footage. "And there. The other guy just comes up out of the water a half hour later. And there's the dive team coming after him."

The older man squinted, then stood up straight and grabbed the analyst's phone from his desktop. He punched a button and waited for the call to be routed.

The analyst grinned. "Are we going to take him in?"

The older man nodded. "We have six teams in the area on standby. This could be a major breakthrough for us."

* * * *

The chopper skimmed low over the treetops, flying parallel to the undulations in the terrain. The large-leaved vegetation bent low from the downdraft. A hundred yards ahead was a gap in the otherwise thick jungle treeline. Seconds later, the helicopter passed over the clearing and a two-lane blacktop road that ran east and west. The chopper swung around to the east and descended into a nearby meadow. When it was still several feet from the ground, five men jumped out and landed in the knee-high grass, moving quickly toward the road. Their camouflaged clothing blended perfectly with the surroundings, as did the camouflaged tape wrapped around the automatic weapons slung across their backs.

The team leader took point and ran for the treeline on the opposite side of the road, while the others followed. Once inside the cover of the vegetation, the team changed direction and began to move west, keeping the road a few yards to their right.

They moved quickly and silently through the dense jungle for a hundred yards before the team leader held up his hand and brought them to a halt. He put a finger to the spiraled cord coming from his ear and listened, then motioned for the others to move toward the road. Two of his men continued another twenty feet up the road and laid out a spike strip before returning.

As soon as they were in position, the team leader could hear the distant roar of an engine. It grew slowly in volume until an uncovered green jeep came into view around a bend in the road. He summed up the situation with only a glance.

Two men in military fatigues. One driving, the other in the back pointing an automatic weapon at the third man...the prisoner.

The jeep was moving at roughly forty miles an hour when it hit the spike strip. A loud pop cut through the roar of the motor as the tires shredded instantly. The jeep skidded on the wet asphalt as the driver struggled to maintain control, coming to a stop directly in front of the men waiting in the trees.

The timing was perfect, exactly as planned. The team leader brought the stock of his silenced weapon to his cheek and peered through the scope. When the crosshairs were centered on the side of the driver's head he squeezed the trigger. The gun coughed a three-round burst and the driver's head pitched violently to the side, throwing him over the driver-side door.

The other soldier in the rear of the vehicle reacted quickly, jumping to a stance and spinning toward the trees, firing wildly into the jungle.

The group fired in unison, and the soldier in the jeep fell backward with several hits to his midsection. It was over just as suddenly as it had begun. The team moved out of the trees and fanned out, surrounding the vehicle.

"Come on out," the team leader said in the friendliest voice he could muster. But there was no reply. "Come on...you're safe now," he repeated. Slowly, he approached the back of the jeep and peered over the tailgate.

A man cowered in the back, keeping his head down.

“Can you understand me?” the leader asked, but the blank look in the other man’s eyes told him the answer. Instead, he waved for the captive to get out of the jeep.

Cautiously, the man rose up on his knees and looked around. He seemed to be assessing the situation. Finally, he got to his feet and moved to the back of the jeep.

The team leader moved back, allowing the man to crawl out of the vehicle, inspecting him as he waited. He appeared to be in his late thirties, with a muscular build and Mediterranean features. He was dressed like he had just walked off a movie set, wearing a black toga, short cropped pants, and leather sandals that laced up his calves. His chest was protected by some sort of primitive armor that looked like leather. *This guy’s definitely not a local.* “We’re going to the helicopter now,” he said, pointing over the man’s shoulder.

The man turned to watch the rest of the team make their way back along the road. He appeared reluctant, but finally started moving with the team leader following close behind. When they rounded a bend in the road, the captive turned around with a look of intense fear in his eyes.

“Afraid of flying?” he asked. “You’ll be fine.” The group leader pointed again, indicating that the man should follow the other soldiers who were already climbing into the chopper.

The captive appeared frightened of the machine, but eventually moved forward, limping on a badly injured foot. One of the crew members leaned out and offered him a hand, which he cautiously accepted.

When everyone was aboard and seated, the chopper lifted off the ground and began to move back in the direction from which they had come. The team leader looked over at the man and saw that his eyes were closed and his head was back against the seat. His skin looked pale and it was obvious that he was getting motion sick. He reached over and touched the man’s leg to get his attention.

When the man opened his eyes, the team leader pointed two fingers at his own eyes, then pointed out the window. “Keep your eyes open and watch the trees.”

The other man seemed to understand.

As everyone watched the passing jungle, the team leader inspected the strange man whose rescue was the objective for this mission. Whoever he was, he was definitely a long way from home.

Chapter 2

The sound of lapping waves was faint and peaceful, at first. But eventually it caused something in Bahari’s mind to take notice. He awoke with a jerk. He was sitting at the stern of his cargo ship and the rudder handle was an arm’s reach away, swaying back and forth in unison with the ocean swells. He grabbed the handle and steadied it, cursing himself for his carelessness.

He looked out across the deck of the ship, laden with cargo, and could not see much farther than the bow. A thick fog had rolled in while he slept, reducing visibility to almost nothing. The mainsail was full with a breeze coming from the northwest. Bahari took a deep breath and exhaled, trying to calm himself; sound was his only navigational tool now. Then he heard it again, the sound of waves breaking off the port bow. Leaning to the side, he pulled on the rudder until the boat slowly began to turn starboard and away from the shoreline. He had obviously

drifted off course while he slept and immediately felt guilty for endangering the lives of his crew who were asleep below deck.

That would be my luck! He envisioned the boat smashed into thousands of pieces, washing up onto the shoreline for miles. It sickened him to think of how hard he had worked to get where he was. One careless act could have ruined it all. But the feeling of guilt was quickly replaced by a sense of relief at waking up before anything went wrong.

Bahari kept his south-westerly course for almost an hour, listening intently for the sound of waves. When they had faded to almost nothing, he felt confident that he had reached a safe distance from shore and turned the boat back to the south, resuming his course for [Bastul](#). He could feel the pull of sleep dragging him down and knew that if he stayed in his seat he would only fall asleep again. After securing the rudder handle with a loop of rope and taking a drink from the waterskin stowed beneath his seat, he rose to his feet and walked across the deck, stretching his legs. His tunic was uncomfortably twisted and stuck to his body as if he had just come back from a swim in the ocean. He tried to peel it away from his skin and reposition it, but gave up after a while. He wished he could take it off altogether, but there were laws against that. Citizens of the Orudan Empire were not allowed to be seen wearing only a loincloth. Such dress was only appropriate for slaves, who must not feel a sense of camaraderie with their masters, even in something as seemingly insignificant as clothing.

...although, it would be much more comfortable, especially in this warm, humid air.

He meandered across the deck, walking around crates of fruit and olives, until he found himself standing at the bow of the ship. The fog was starting to thin.

Bahari sat down on a wooden crate and watched the water as it passed by in small ripples. Immediately, his thoughts drifted toward his financial troubles. The growing season had been rough this year, and it meant that he wouldn't be able to pay his debts unless he traveled to [Nucotu](#), where he could get more money for his cargo, and bring back some valuable items on the return trip. But the return trip had been grueling so far—two straight days without sleep.

That's the problem with this line of work—too much time to think and worry. Maybe I'll just have someone take over for me in the morning so I can get some sleep.

Over the next hour, the fog lifted completely and the moon began to carve out the texture of the ocean with its dull light. Bahari rose from his position at the bow and walked back toward the stern, trying to keep from staying in one place too long; the threat of sleep was still heavy on his mind. Suddenly, he stopped in his tracks. On the eastern horizon, a bank of low clouds was rolling away to the south, revealing nothing but ocean as far as the eye could see. There was no land in sight. He scanned the horizon, which was now clear for miles in every direction, but saw nothing. He started to panic as he retraced the night's events in his mind.

And then it hit him. "I missed the turn!" he said out loud. As soon as the thought came to him, everything made sense. Just after midnight he should have reached a section of the coastline that jogged sharply to the east. But he missed it and must have kept heading south, all the while moving farther away from the coast. When he awoke in the fog and heard the crashing waves, it was the western side of the [reef](#) which paralleled the coastline.

Bahari glanced over the port side of the boat and searched the water for some sign of confirmation that he was right. It only took a few minutes before he could make out a sandbar reflecting the moonlight from shallow water, only fifty yards away on the port side. He slumped down into his chair and buried his face in his hands. He was going to have to turn around and sail back to the northern tip of the [reef](#).

I've just lost a whole day of travel. I'm not going to make my deadline! How can I explain this to Quartus? He's going to think...

Bahari's thoughts trailed off as his eyes settled on something in the water to the south. A few hundred yards away, just off the starboard side of the bow was a void in the water that didn't reflect the moonlight. At first he thought it might be a sandbar or a small island of rock, but after a few seconds it became clear that the void was moving toward him.

He stooped and pulled out a small wooden box from underneath his bench seat. It contained a looking glass that he had purchased a few years ago. Lifting it to his eye, he scanned the water and found that the object was a ship, roughly the same size as his own. It was shaped strangely with a high bow and low, wide sails. Though it was difficult to tell at this distance, Bahari's ocean-going experience told him that it was moving much quicker than his own vessel.

But that doesn't make sense. It's heading almost straight into the wind.

It was obviously not an Orudan patrol, which Bahari could expect to encounter at regular intervals while sailing along the coast. This ship was bearing no flag or standard of any kind and—thanks to Bahari's carelessness—they were nowhere near the coast. He stomped his foot on the deck.

"Wake up," he yelled to the crew underneath.

There was no response.

He stomped again and repeated himself several times before he heard grumblings from his crew.

One of the men shouted a question in his native tongue.

"I'm turning the boat around. Get ready to row."

He set down the looking glass and untied the rudder handle. Grabbing it with both hands, he set his feet in a wide stance and pulled with all his weight. The ship pitched slightly as it swung sluggishly to the starboard side. The sails began to droop and eventually went slack altogether as the ship came about to the north.

Bahari stomped on the deck once again. "Row as hard as you can...we've got pirates behind us!"

Sixteen long oars slid out of the boat from oval slots along each side of the hull, their blades landing with a splash in the water. The boat began to lurch forward like a wounded animal struggling to regain its footing. Bahari ran across the deck and began to take in the sails and secure them to the mast. He shot a quick glance behind and was startled by how much distance the other boat had already covered. He couldn't understand how it could be moving so quickly into the wind. He hadn't seen any oars, but even if they were rowing, it was impossible to move that fast.

He secured the last of the sails and took his place back at the rudder. He doubted that the other boat was actually a pirate ship. The Orud patrol had cleared these waters of pirates years ago, but he couldn't think of anything better to say. And there was something menacing about the other ship that told him they were in danger.

All of a sudden, a scraping noise sounded from below and the boat began to lose speed. Bahari could hear the murmur of confusion from his crew as their rowing efforts were being hindered. He leaned on the rudder to move the ship away from the reef and instantly the scraping stopped. For a few minutes, the only sounds above the silence were the voices of his crew rowing in unison, bringing the ship back up to top speed. Bahari looked back and watched in amazement as the pursuing ship turned back toward their starboard side, cutting through the water with full sails.

Abruptly, a crunch reverberated through the hull and the ship ground to a halt on the [reef](#), pitching slightly to the port side. Bahari was thrown forward, landing awkwardly on the deck. He quickly grabbed the nearest crate and pulled himself back to his feet. The confused crew came up from below, cursing in their native language, wondering what was happening. But Bahari wasn't paying them any attention; he was staring with dismay at the silent form of their pursuer, which had already closed the distance and was heading straight for their stranded boat. Within a few seconds it became clear that the menacing ship wasn't going to stop.

"Grab on to something," he yelled, but before they were able to, the boat shuddered and rolled sharply to the starboard side, throwing everyone to the deck. The impact came sooner than Bahari expected and his confusion only worsened when he regained his footing and got his first good look at the other ship. He stared at a serpent's head carved into the high prow only a few feet away from the port side of Bahari's ship. The boat was a strange sight to behold; its mast and mainsail sat at a backward angle to the deck. The ship was completely black, including the sails and ropes. There was movement on deck, but the crew of the enemy boat was dressed in black as well, appearing as shifting shadows. The moonlight was insufficient for Bahari to see what the men were doing, but it took only a few seconds before grappling hooks came whistling over the railing to bite into the wooden deck. Bahari fought back the fear in his chest to voice his outrage at this attack.

"What is the meaning of this?" he shouted into the night, but his question went unanswered. "How dare you attack a citizen of the Empire!"

"Stay where you are or you will be shot." The clear, low voice was commanding, leaving the impression that its owner was used to being obeyed. The sound of running footsteps was followed shortly by a line of archers assembling along the starboard side of the enemy ship. Two men slid a plank across the short distance between the two boats, and the man who gave the order stepped from the shadows into the moonlight.

He was almost a full head taller than Bahari and emitted intimidation that was even visible in the body language of the men around him. Just like the other soldiers, the Commander was dressed completely in black. His long-sleeved tunic fell just above his thighs and was gathered at the waist by a leather belt which held a short sword at his left side. He wore black trousers that fell to his calves and boots that laced up his legs, just above the ankle. His chest was covered by a cuirass of boiled leather, with a cloak fastened at his shoulders and falling to the back of his legs. His manner of dress was strange to Bahari, whose only point of military reference was the Orudan soldiers in [Bastul](#). These men were definitely not Orudan soldiers.

Bahari looked over his shoulder and noticed that his crew had assembled in a huddled mass behind him, possibly expecting some measure of protection. He knew he was inadequate to protect them, but turned to give them the only thing he could—a word of encouragement. Before he was able to open his mouth, one of his men bolted across the ship, heading for the railing. He only made it a few steps before he pitched forward and fell to the deck with multiple arrows sprouting from his back.

"I will not tell you again," the Commander shouted.

Bahari turned back and watched as the Commander strode arrogantly across the plank, dropping onto the deck with a short hop. Six other soldiers followed him, dressed similarly, but wearing leather helmets and lacking cloaks. Their swords gleamed with reflected moonlight.

"Who is in charge here?" the Commander asked.

"I am," Bahari answered timidly. He made no effort to conceal himself, realizing that he was the only one on the ship that wasn't a dark-skinned slave.

The Commander walked over to Bahari. “Wrong,” he stated and grabbed him by the throat, pulling him close so that their faces were almost touching. “I am in charge.” He glanced over Bahari’s shoulder at the frightened crew. “Guard them,” he shouted.

Immediately, the soldiers surrounded the slaves.

The Commander pulled Bahari a few steps away from the commotion. “What are you doing in these waters?” he asked in a suddenly calm voice.

“I...uh,” Bahari stammered for a few seconds, trying to remember what he was doing out here. “I am a merchant. I am delivering a shipment to [Bastul](#) from [Nucotu](#).”

The Commander eyed him suspiciously for a while before deciding that his story was true. Then a smile slowly crept across his face. “Well, isn’t that unfortunate. You took a wrong turn and now it has cost all of you your lives.” Still holding Bahari by the throat, he turned to the men guarding Bahari’s crew. “Kill them,” he commanded.

Bahari began to struggle, but the Commander’s grip only tightened until it threatened to crush his windpipe. He could only watch helplessly as the soldiers began to hack their swords into the huddled group of slaves. One by one they began to drop to the deck, slipping on their own blood. One managed to break free of the soldiers and started to run, only to receive a slashing sword across his back. His feet immediately lost strength and he crumpled forward onto the deck.

Rage flooded Bahari’s mind, overpowering his fear. He lashed out at the Commander, punching his clenched fist toward the man’s face. The Commander reflexively flinched and Bahari’s knuckles glanced off the bottom of his chin and struck his throat with a hollow crunch.

Instantly, the grip on Bahari’s neck loosened and he was free from his captor.

The Commander stumbled back, grabbing his throat and fighting for breath.

Bahari saw his opportunity and took it. He lunged at the Commander, dropping his shoulder, and slammed into the tall man’s chest, driving him to the deck.

Panic seized Bahari’s mind and he started running, without a purpose other than to get away from this madness. He saw the opening in the deck near the bow that led down to crew’s quarters and altered his course slightly, heading for the door. As he ran, he felt a quick puff of air from a passing arrow brush across the bridge of his nose. Somewhere to his left, he heard the dull thud of another bolt as it struck the deck. The doorway was now only a few steps away and Bahari jumped, headfirst, toward the concealing darkness. Suddenly, his left leg exploded with pain. He pulled his hands toward his face and tightened his body into a ball to prepare for the impact. His jump was a little short and he landed painfully on his left shoulder at the top step, tumbling down the short flight of stairs.

Fighting the pain, Bahari rose out of the shallow water that had filled the lower level of the boat. Surging through the knee-deep flood, he hurried toward the stern of the ship where his quarters were located. Making his way around several crates that had worked loose of their ropes, he passed a section of the port hull where water gushed into the ship through a puncture wound left by a serpent-headed battering ram. Bahari stumbled on without slowing, realizing in an instant why the enemy ship was able to stop short of crashing into his freighter.

The sound of pursuing footsteps could be heard above him, moving in the direction of the stairs at the bow. Bahari reached the stern and stepped into his room, bolting the door shut for the first time that he could remember. Now that he was momentarily safe, Bahari reached down to the back of his left thigh and felt the shaft of an arrow protruding from his leg. He pulled gently, but stopped as waves of pain raced up his leg, making him feel suddenly nauseous.

All of a sudden, something crashed into the door and it bowed slightly inward. Outside the door, he could hear the voices of his pursuers who had found his hiding place. He quickly looked around for a weapon to defend himself, but instead noticed the porthole above his bed. It was just large enough to squeeze through, but he knew the arrow sticking out from his leg would cause a problem.

Again, a crash sounded at the door and the thick wood flexed, threatening to break but for the strength of the iron hinges bolted across its planks.

They'll break it eventually!

Bahari grabbed the shaft of the arrow as close to his leg as he dared touch, and broke it with a quick snap of the wrist. The feathered part of the arrow came off in his hand, leaving the rest of the shaft and the arrowhead in his leg. The sharp pain made his stomach turn.

Now there was shouting outside the door, followed by another loud crash.

Bahari tried to ignore the pain in his leg as he climbed onto his bed and leaned on the wall for balance. The porthole was now at eye-level and he pushed it open, catching a brief glimpse of the moonlight reflected on the ocean.

He gripped the sill of the porthole with both hands and jumped, relying mostly on the strength of his right leg, while pulling with his arms. Squeezing his upper body through the hole proved more difficult than he thought it would be. With the water in sight, he no longer thought about the men behind him. He simply leaned forward and let gravity pull the rest of his body out of the porthole.

It was a short fall into the water below, the world becoming suddenly silent. For a moment Bahari felt a small measure of peace. But it didn't last long as his need for air drove him back to the surface. Once more, his ears were assaulted by the sound of yelling and more running footsteps, which he hoped would conceal his escape.

Quietly, he moved to the hull of his ship to keep from being seen from above. His leg was throbbing now.

I have to think quickly. I have to hide...but where?

Treading water was getting difficult with his leg wound and he knew he couldn't keep it up for long.

Where can I hide that they won't look for me?

Then it came to him. *On their boat!* He knew it wasn't possible to board their ship without getting caught, but maybe he could hide along the hull.

He tried to calm his breathing, then sucked in a big gulp of air, diving beneath the surface. He kicked his one good leg and clawed with his hands along the underside of his boat. The sounds of the soldiers above were muffled and echoing as if he were listening from far away. He felt safer down here, detached from the horrible things that took place above him. When he reached the keel, he pushed off and swam with all of his might for the other boat. It took longer than he expected and he was out of breath by the time he reached it.

He knew that he couldn't surface between the boats without getting caught, so he dove deeper, trying to fight the panic of drowning as he struggled to get underneath the enemy boat. To his surprise, the hull of the ship was shallow and he soon found himself on the other side, heading for the surface. His lungs were burning now and he had to fight the urge to open his mouth and breathe in the water around him. Just as quickly as the thought came to him, his head broke free of the water on the port side of the enemy ship and he gasped for air as silently as he could.

Though still vulnerable, he was farther away from the commotion now and used the opportunity to search along the ship for somewhere to hide. The hull was completely smooth, just as he expected it to be, and he was unable to find a handhold. He made his way cautiously to the stern and found, to his relief, an alcove where the anchor was suspended from a chain that exited the hull of the ship. Bahari swam underneath the anchor, into the shadows of the alcove and gripped the anchor with both hands.

The passing seconds seemed like hours to him as he hung in the water, holding the rusting metal. Occasionally, scraps of coherent sentences floated to him from above deck.

“...leave him there. He’ll go down with the ship!”

Bahari hoped that the men outside the door to his room had given up on their chase. As long as they were unable to get into the room, they would think that he remained there for the safety that it offered. If they got into the room they would see the open window and know that he was outside the ship. Within a few minutes, he could hear the sound of marching footsteps getting louder as the soldiers left his boat and boarded their own.

The sky was beginning to lighten in the east, which was the only direction that Bahari could see past the anchor and the confines of the alcove. With miles of ocean surrounding him on every side, he started to wonder what he was going to do if the enemy stopped looking for him. Without warning, the ship lurched backwards, putting an end to his wondering as he struggled to hold on to the anchor. Then he heard the voices of men yelling in unison and the ship lurched again. He counted five such motions, accompanied by a shuddering vibration that moved through the hull of the ship each time. On the last attempt, they pulled the battering ram free of Bahari’s ship, allowing the weight of the water inside the hull to drag it down the side of the [reef](#). As the enemy ship turned back to the south, Bahari watched from his hiding spot as his cargo ship rolled to the port side and slipped beneath the surface. Everything he had worked for, everything that made his way of life possible came to an end in that moment. Within minutes, the boat was gone, with only an area of bubbles and floating debris to show where it had been.

Despair threatened to overtake him, but he fought it off, realizing the urgency of his situation. *What am I going to do now? I can’t hang on to this anchor forever. Even now, the jagged, rusted metal was biting into his hands. Even if he could hold on, he would be in greater danger once the ship reached its port. No, I’ve got to get free of this boat without them seeing me!* Suddenly, the ship began to turn around and as they came back to the sight of the attack, Bahari realized that they were looking for survivors.

Isn’t it enough that you attacked us and sank my ship? Is it really necessary to make sure that we’re all dead? Pirates would be satisfied with looting and sinking the ship. As soon as the thought came to his mind, Bahari was faced with the obvious conclusion. These were not pirates.

Who are these people? What are they doing out here? Are they looking for something, protecting something, hiding from something? It is an outrage that a citizen of the Empire would be attacked like this!

As they passed the attack area once more, Bahari hoped to come in contact with some debris that he could hide behind, but the ship stayed just barely out of the wreck area. Then as they moved further to the south, he noticed a barrel floating a few yards away. The sky was still mostly dark, offering a small measure of concealment and he knew that the opportunity would not present itself again. So, taking a deep breath, Bahari ducked under the water and pushed off of the boat. The saltwater stung his eyes and it was too dark to make out the barrel. He continued to kick his good leg and paddle with one arm while the other was outstretched, feeling

for the barrel. At first, he thought that he had passed it and started to panic, knowing that he couldn't go to the surface to look. But then his hand touched something firm. Swimming underneath it, he surfaced, taking caution to keep the floating barrel between him and the enemy ship. He waited, for what seemed like an eternity, before risking a peek from behind the barrel. When he did, he saw that the ship was only a dark silhouette on the brightening horizon. For the first time since the attack began, Bahari breathed a sigh of relief.

He floated in the water for a moment, clinging to the barrel, trying to come to grips with what had just happened. His most immediate threat was now sailing to the south, but in many ways, his current situation was worse. *Now what do I do? I'm floating in the middle of the ocean and I don't even know where I am or how to get to land!* He shook his head to clear his mind.

He had been heading south along the coast from [Nucotu](#) when he missed the turn and ended up on the west side of the [reef](#). As close as he could figure, he was still well north of the halfway point between the two cities and many miles west of the shore. *With a dangerous reef in between!* He would have several days' journey before he could reach the shore. *That's if the tides don't carry me past the southern tip!* For that amount of time, he would need food and water.

Then, as the sky continued to lighten in the east, a smile formed on Bahari's face. All around him, scattered in the dawn light, were crates of fruit drifting away from the sight of the attack. *If the gods are merciful, I should reach land within a few days. And then the Governor will know about this!*

Chapter 3

The rectangular peephole slid open, showing the eyes of an elderly woman, then shut suddenly. A few seconds later, the large door opened inward and the nurse of the temple of Adussk, the god of healing, bowed in reverence before the Governor of [Bastul](#).

Adair Lorus walked through the door and motioned for the woman to rise. Although it still made him uncomfortable, he had come to expect this reverent behavior from his subjects. Each of the royal guards at his flanks carried spears in their right hands and torches in their left, casting a flickering orange glow around the trio, barely fighting back the darkness of the night.

"I was told you have a man in your custody... a sick man."

"Yes, my lord," the old woman responded. "He has been here since yesterday morning, unconscious and silent until a few hours ago. But then he started moaning your name, so I sent for you. I hope I have not disturbed you," she stated quickly.

"Not at all. Thank you for notifying me. May I see him?" he asked, unnecessarily.

"...at once, my lord." The woman turned to Adair's right and began walking down a long hall. The dark green fabric of her veil and floor-length tunic billowed as she hurried through the dark passage, restricted only by the leather apron tied at her waist. The sound of their footsteps echoed off the stone floor as they passed numerous doorways and candles burning in sconces along the stone walls. The hall turned to the left and continued for another hundred feet before it ended at a door. The woman pulled a set of keys from her apron.

With a nod of confirmation, she unlocked the door and pushed it open. Adair walked slowly into the room, unsure of what he might find. The guards followed closely, their torches adding to the light from a small lamp hanging on the wall. The soft illumination showed a man lying on

top of the sheets, covered in bandages, and throwing his head back and forth. If he had been moaning before, he showed no signs of it now.

“Where did you find this man?”

“A soldier brought him to me. He said they found him on the western shore.”

Adair wrinkled his eyebrows as he walked over to the bed. “Is he awake?”

“No, my lord. It only appears that way because he moves so much.”

Adair stood over the bed with his hands clasped behind his back. It was plain to see that the man was badly injured. He had a large bandage around his left thigh and the skin on his face and arms was burned and peeling. His hair was gray, flecked with brown, and matted on his head. Adair looked at his face but didn't recognize him.

“No...” the man mumbled and then flinched as if dodging something.

Suddenly, a memory sprang into Adair's mind. He had dealt with this man before on the matter of neglecting to pay a shipping tax. Usually, any crime against the Empire, no matter how small, was punishable by death under Orudan law. Adair had shown mercy on the man and let him live. After that, the man tried to repay Adair's kindness by sending word of any criminal happenings around the city, as he became aware of them. Adair had to admit that this man had proven to be a useful informant on several occasions, but he hadn't heard anything from him in almost a year.

As the man's name came back to his memory, Adair said it aloud. “Bahari.”

“Do you know him, my lord?” the old woman asked.

“Yes,” Adair answered, wondering why Bahari would be moaning his name. “You said he was found on the western shore?”

“Yes, my lord. That's what the soldier told me. I've...” she started, but then trailed off.

Adair turned to her. “What is it, woman? If you know something, tell me at once!”

“I've seen this type of thing before,” she answered, her body language more timid than before. “A man gets in a drunken fight and finds himself washed up on the beach. I thought this was another such occurrence,” she said, her voice lowering to a whisper. “But when I cleaned the wound on his leg I pulled this out.”

Reaching into the pocket of her apron, she produced what appeared to be the dangerous half of an arrow. She handed it to Adair and he took it carefully.

The craftsmanship was better than what the Orud military used, but he couldn't place it.

“How was it positioned in his leg?”

“May I...?” the woman asked, motioning for the arrow.

“Please,” Adair said, handing it back to her.

“It entered from the back,” she said, holding it up to Bahari's leg. “But it wouldn't come out so I had to take it out from the front. It wasn't easy, but he didn't even seem to notice.”

Adair looked back at Bahari and shook his head. *What did you get yourself into this time?*

“I am leaving for a while, but I will be back,” he said to the woman. “While I am gone, keep his door locked and let no one else see him.”

“Yes, my lord,” she said with a nod.

Adair strode out of the room with the guards following closely. When he reached the front door, he called over his shoulder to the old woman who was struggling to keep up. “If he wakes up, try to find out what happened.”

* * * *

The sun had just peeked over the mountains to the east and the Bay of [Bastul](#) glittered with the first rays of the morning sunlight. Maeryn stood on the balcony of her bedroom with her

hands on the stone railing. Her night clothes and long blonde tresses swayed in the light breeze as she took a deep breath of the salty air and exhaled. Adair wasn't in bed when she woke and the sheets were cold. He had obviously left sometime during the night and it was bothering her. It wasn't as if this was the first time. Actually, it was a regular occurrence for someone of Adair's position. But Maeryn was finding it harder and harder to deal with his absences. *When you're the governor of [Bastul](#), everyone needs something from you.* She rubbed the sleep from her eyes and yawned, walking back into the bedroom.

The house was already alive with activity. The slaves had been awake for a couple hours and were scurrying around the house, busy with their duties. Maeryn pulled a fresh white tunic from her closet and slipped it over her head. The purple thread sewn into the hem dragged on the floor until she gathered the tunic at her waist and fastened it with a matching purple silk belt. She walked barefoot to her mirror set against the wall and sat down in the chair which faced it. Voices drifted to her from different parts of the house as she combed her hair, but she hardly heard them. She was unable to stop thinking about Adair and her thoughts turned from irritation at his increasing responsibilities to worry about his safety.

After combing out a night's worth of tangles, she wove her hair into a simple braid that hung down to the middle of her back, tying the ends of the thick locks with a narrow ribbon. On the table next to her comb were two elaborately decorated glass bottles of rose oil, a rare treat in her culture. Adair had purchased each of them on separate occasions from a merchant friend of his that passed through [Bastul](#) only a few times a year. She pulled the glass stopper from the older of the two bottles and applied a drop to each wrist and one on either side of her neck.

Now ready for the day, Maeryn left her bedroom and descended the stairs leading toward the center of the house, remembering Kael's excitement about a new project that he and Saba were going to start in the morning. As she reached the first floor, the garden courtyard came into view between white stone columns which supported the overhanging roof. She headed through the center two columns and down a circular set of stairs that led to the gravel floor. The bright morning sun reflected off the top of the house to her left, leaving the rest of the open area in morning shadows. By noon, the sun would be shining straight down into the garden and the many trees and flowers would bask in the warmth.

Just as she suspected, Kael and Saba were at the other end of the garden. As she approached, Saba stood from a kneeling position at the base of a small tree.

"Good morning, Maeryn," he said in a soft voice.

"Mother," exclaimed Kael, running toward her and throwing his arms around her waist.

Maeryn reached down and stroked Kael's shoulder-length blonde hair. His blue eyes were bright, especially when he was excited about something. Most boys his age would be embarrassed to hug their mothers. But not Kael; he was different—special. "Good morning, you two. And what are you working on now?" she asked.

Kael answered excitedly before Saba had a chance. "Saba is going to show me how to graft a branch onto this tree. They are different species, but he says they will grow together if we are very careful."

Maeryn smiled at his excitement, then looked to Saba. "Thank you," she whispered.

"My pleasure," he whispered back.

Saba was an old man, old and wise. He was tall, with silver hair that fell past his broad shoulders and a beard that was just as long. Between the beard and his thick eyebrows, most of his features were covered, except his straight, sharp nose and bright blue eyes.

Adair first met him seven years ago when he needed some information. Adair didn't tell her much, except that he was impressed with the man's wealth of knowledge. It seemed that they had just discussed what to do about Kael's education only weeks before and couldn't come to a decision. They both agreed that the usual Orud upbringing did not interest them. Most of the education revolved around the history of the Empire and the lineage of Emperors from the first to the most recent. Beyond that, the education was simply a preparation for becoming a soldier.

And then Saba came into their lives. He was knowledgeable about many different cultures, history, religions, economics, nature, and weather. Actually, Maeryn couldn't think of a single thing that Saba didn't know about. Not once had he ever responded to a question with "I don't know" as his answer. Yet, he wasn't arrogant in any way. In fact, he was one of the most humble people that either of them had ever met. That, combined with his patient and kind personality made him the perfect tutor for their son. Adair wasted no time approaching him on the matter, taking great care to emphasize the fact that the pay for tutoring the governor's son would be quite handsome. They made sure there was no way he would refuse. And he didn't.

That was seven years ago, when Kael was only three years old, and Saba had since become part of their family. Maeryn watched as he knelt down and talked to Kael. He was so patient and gentle, and Kael's eyes lit up with excitement every time Saba was near. The agreement had always been that he would tutor Kael in a variety of subjects for several hours each morning. The hours would get longer as Kael got older, but at the beginning, the tutoring was to end by midday so Kael would also have the time to play like every child should. The tutoring eventually evolved into something much less formal. The two became friends and did everything together. Whether play or work, every situation became a teaching experience and Kael thoroughly enjoyed every minute of it.

"Have you seen Adair this morning?"

Saba looked up and shook his head. "He was gone before I woke."

Maeryn smiled nervously.

"Have fun, you two," she replied, turning to leave.

As she reached the steps to the house she turned around to watch them from a distance. They were both kneeling by the tree, as Saba pointed at the peeling bark and explained some incredibly detailed information that would have bored her. But Kael was enthralled. As she watched, her thoughts returned to her husband and she wondered how long it would be until she would see him again.

Chapter 4

The carriage bounced and creaked in response to the stone road underneath, as Adair watched the scenery pass by the window. To the east, rolling meadows stretched from the road to the mountains, the land rising sharply as it drew close to the foothills. Occasionally, a tall row of trees would divide the land, designating a property boundary. To the west, the cobblestone road gave way to patches of grass, clinging stubbornly to the shoulder, which ended abruptly at a steep cliff. The ocean, which was hundreds of feet below only minutes ago, was getting closer now as the carriage descended into a valley. After a few minutes, the road ended at a sandy beach and the carriage came to a halt. Adair quickly opened the door and stepped out, happy to be rid of his method of transportation. He preferred to ride a horse, but because of his position, was expected to do otherwise for safety reasons.

A hundred yards away, at the opposite side of the beach was a wooden guard tower clinging to the side of the cliff like a vine in one of the surrounding vineyards. It reached from the beach floor, all the way to a lookout perched fifty feet above the top of the cliff. Two of the four soldiers that had been accompanying Adair rode up and began to dismount, intending to follow him inside.

“I’ll return shortly,” he said to them.

They each glanced at the other and then back to Adair, conceding with a nod. Adair turned away and walked toward the guard tower, leaving the men to keep charge of the carriage.

It took him several minutes to reach the lower entry. Two guards on either side of the door tipped their spears in salute. They were otherwise motionless, staring straight ahead without making eye contact. Adair never ceased to be impressed at the discipline of his soldiers, especially those who were stationed at posts far away from the scrutiny of the Governor. It was a small sign, but it confirmed his success at ruling the city. He smiled as he walked past the soldiers and through the stone archway. This room was one of many rooms making up the lower level, serving only as an entrance to the enormous staircase carved into the rock. Around the other side of the building, facing the ocean, were other rooms of supplies and stables for the mounted patrolmen who rode up and down the coast at scheduled intervals, but this one was completely empty. Adair waited for a few seconds, looking around at the construction of the room. He had been here many times, but had never paid much attention to the place beyond its practical uses. He glanced up to the ceiling and observed thick wooden beams that extended twenty feet over his head from their anchor point in the rock cliff, to where they were supported by slightly larger vertical beams buried in the sand. The room itself was nearly forty feet wide, but only half as deep.

To his left, a door opened and another soldier walked through. As soon as he noticed Adair, his casual demeanor disappeared. “Colonel, it is a pleasure to have your company.” The man bowed his head in respect. “How may I be of assistance?”

“I am here to see your Lieutenant.”

The soldier motioned to the stairs. “He is up above in the observatory; I will go fetch him for you.”

“No; that won’t be necessary. I don’t wish to keep him from his work; just take me to him.”

“Certainly,” the man bowed. “Please follow me.”

He led Adair up the stairs, which switched back and forth across the cliff face. The soldier climbed slowly out of courtesy for his superior. After five floors they reached the observatory, which stood even with the top of the cliff. The stairs ended at a spacious room with a balcony overlooking the ocean. From here, a ladder extended through the ceiling, leading to the upper lookout. The Lieutenant was standing at the railing of the balcony, looking north along the beach. He was dressed much the same as Adair, with a hammered metal cuirass and a short red cloak gathered at one shoulder by a silver torc. Though he was younger than Adair, he looked ten years older. His sand colored hair was starting to thin on the top and his weathered skin had seen too many years of sun. Adair walked up behind him, but the Lieutenant was deep in thought and didn’t notice.

“Lieutenant,” Adair said softly.

The man turned his head, startled. It took him only a second to realize who was standing before him and he quickly bowed. “My lord...what brings you from the city?” he asked, unable to hide his nervousness.

“I came to inquire about the man that you found on the beach yesterday.”

“Yes, my lord,” he replied.

“Tell me everything you know.”

“Well,” the man started, “I don’t know who he is, but I can show you where we found him.

“Please,” Adair said, his curiosity peaked.

The Lieutenant motioned for Adair to come farther out onto the balcony and pointed to a sandy finger of land to the north that jutted out from the rocks into the ocean. Adair judged it to be just over five miles away.

“He was found lying face-down in the sand on the other side of that point. It was yesterday morning,” he quickly added, getting ahead of himself. “When we came upon him, he was already unconscious. His tunic was torn in many places and he was badly burned by the sun.” The Captain looked out at the ocean as he remembered. “His hands and feet were cut and bruised all over. It happens when fishermen get tangled up with the reef. He also had a large wound, high up on his left leg. When he was first brought to me, I thought he was dead, but his breath could be felt under his nose. I had one of my men wash him and temporarily dress his wounds. But we were unable to get him to wake up for food or water, so I sent him to the city to be cared for.” The soldier stopped with a puzzled look on his face. “I’m sorry. I didn’t know he was important or I would have contacted you immediately.”

Adair dismissed the man’s comments, not wanting to get sidetracked by instructing the Lieutenant about how everyone was important in one way or another. “Did he speak at all when you had him in your custody?” Adair asked instead.

“No, my lord, he didn’t even move,” the Lieutenant answered.

Adair only nodded in reply.

The silence was clearly uncomfortable for the Lieutenant. “With all of the activity around here lately, my men have been volunteering to make patrols rather than waiting for me to order them,” he said, trying to make conversation.

“What do you mean?” Adair said in a stern voice, his gaze now leveled at the man.

“Oh, I beg your pardon, my lord. I didn’t mean to make light of his unfortunate circumstances,” the Captain quickly replied.

“No,” Adair clarified, waving his hand to the side. “What do you mean by *all of the activity*?”

“Oh!” the Lieutenant exclaimed, a look of relief washing over his face. “I just meant that you are the second person to come asking about the man today.”

Adair’s pulse quickened. “Who else have you talked to?” he asked, not bothering to hide his look of worry.

The Lieutenant, who was looking more nervous by the second, put his hand on his forehead as he tried to recall the details. “Some of my patrolmen came across a young man, maybe thirty years old, walking along the beach early this morning. He said he was looking for his brother... and that their boat had gone down. I told him where we sent the man and offered to have one of my men escort him, but he refused and ran away.”

“I need a horse,” Adair blurted out.

“I’m sorry...” the Lieutenant replied, not understanding what was happening.

“Quickly, I need a horse,” Adair repeated, much louder this time.

“You can take mine; he’s outside that door,” said the Lieutenant, pointing to a door by the stairs.

“Have someone notify my men down on the beach that I’ve gone back to the city.” Adair barely got the words out of his mouth before he reached the door. He threw all his weight at it

and it flung open, revealing the rolling hills at the top of the cliff. Squinting at the bright sunlight, he found the horse only a few steps away and ran to it, leaping into the saddle in one swift movement. He pulled hard on the reins, turning the horse around and kicked his heels, causing the beast to leap into motion.

"I'm sorry, my lord," the Lieutenant shouted, leaning out of the doorway. "I should have taken him myself."

Adair's heart was pounding as he raced southward along a narrow path which followed the top of the cliff. One specific part of the Lieutenant's story worried him the most. Adair made it a point to know everything about his informants. He knew that Bahari had a wife, but was positive that he didn't have any other relatives.

Adair's horse was running at a steady pace, despite the winding path. It was obviously used to the terrain from being part of a patrol unit. The path eventually curved to the west and descended steeply, connecting with the western road on which Adair had just traveled by carriage only half an hour ago. It was wider and paved with flat stones, being the main thoroughfare along the west coast. The pavestones which kept the sand from eroding into the ocean made travel by carriage easier, but slowed the progress of a horse. Adair steered the animal to the inside shoulder of the road, where its hooves would find traction in the bare sand. The horse was able to gain speed on the unobstructed road and within minutes he reached the outskirts of the city. Whereas the trip by carriage took him all morning, already he was riding past the vineyards and farmland that surrounded [Bastul](#). Slowly, the rural environment gave way to the urban, as houses and structures of various kinds became more frequent. Just before reaching the Market District, the road forked and Adair veered to the right, taking the road that paralleled the water and ran out to the peninsula, encircling the city.

The organization of the Market District, with its large buildings and regulated structure ended abruptly at the Housing District, which had fewer regulations and resulted in a haphazard look of odd sized and shaped dwellings, housing the bulk of the population of [Bastul](#). Adair counted streets as he passed them, turning left at the sixth one, heading across the peninsula toward the bay.

The temple of Adussk was located at the other end of the district, just before the docks. It sat on a man-made island in the center of the Nescus River, with arched bridges connecting it to either shore. Adair received stares of wonder from the citizens of [Bastul](#) as he steered the horse through the western gate and over the bridge. The horse skidded to a halt in the graveled courtyard in front of the building and Adair leaped off, running as soon as his feet touched the ground. His knees were stiff from the ride and he stumbled at first, but ignored the pain and headed up the front steps for the door. He was in too much of a hurry to knock, so he pushed the door open as soon as it was within reach. There was no one to greet him at the entry and he turned right, retracing his steps from the previous night. As he rounded the corner, he almost collided with the old nurse.

"My lord!" she screamed in shock.

"Give me the key to his room," he demanded, his voice sounding louder than he intended in the close quarters.

The lady struggled in her apron for the right key.

"Here's the one," she said as he snatched it from her hand and ran down the hallway.

Coming to the door of Bahari's room, Adair jammed the key into the lock and twisted it, expecting to hear a click. When nothing happened, he pushed on the door, but it didn't move. Without waiting for the woman, he jumped back a few steps and kicked at the door with all of

his weight. The lock broke and the door swung on its hinges, crashing into the wall with a loud thud. There, on top of the bed, lay Bahari, unflinching.

Adair rushed over to him, but it was obvious that he was too late. Bahari's skin was a pale blue beneath his sunburn. Adair bent down and put his ear to the man's mouth, listening for breath.

"What is the ma..." the old lady began as she entered the room, but trailed off as she caught sight of Bahari's dead body. "Oh my!" she exclaimed. "I just checked on him not more than twenty minutes ago."

Adair stood up and looked at the woman. "Has anyone been in here?"

"No, my lord... only me!"

"Did you give your keys to anyone after you checked on him?" he asked, trying to calm himself down.

"No, my lord. I always keep the keys right here," she replied with a pat to the front pocket of her apron.

Adair looked back to the body. As his mind raced to find a solution, something caught his eye. Other than being devoid of life, Bahari's body looked strange and Adair stepped back, trying to figure out what was wrong. He realized, after a few seconds of inspection, that there was something wrong about the way his head looked in relation to his body.

"His neck is broken," he said, more to himself than to the old woman. "That rules out death by natural causes." *One thing is sure—the people who caused Bahari to end up in this infirmary were dedicated enough to make sure that he didn't come out alive.* He looked back at the woman. "Someone was in here, and I want to know who."

"I swear, my lord. I checked on him just a short time ago and he was breathing. His fever had broken, and I went to prepare some broth for him to drink."

Adair tried to think his way through the problem, starting with the way in. He had to kick down the door, *so she didn't forget to lock it.* He looked around the room and his gaze settled on the window, which was the only other way into the room. It was small, but the shutters were open. He walked over to it and looked out, seeing that the ground was only a short jump away. *Someone would still be able to climb through if they were determined.*

He briefly considered jumping out of the window and searching for the person, but they would be impossible to track once outside of the temple grounds. The city was too big and the population too large. If someone wanted to hide in this city, there were plenty of places to do it.

"I'll need a moment alone with him," he told the woman, who now had tears in her eyes.

"Certainly, my lord," she replied with a sniffle and started to walk out.

"Oh, wait. I need to see the arrow that you pulled from his leg," he added. It was the only clue that he had to go on.

"Yes, my lord. I will get it for you," she said and left Adair alone with Bahari's body.

He sat down on the bed and grasped Bahari's cold hand. "The gods have not smiled on you today Bahari," he said aloud. Pausing to find the words, he continued. "I will find the one who did this and I will make it right. You needn't worry about your wife; she will be taken care of. I will see to that. May you find the peace in death that escaped you in life."

After a few minutes the old woman returned and handed the arrow to Adair. He fingered the tip of the arrowhead as a matter of habit, before turning the weapon over in his hands. The construction of it showed skill, but nothing unusual caught his attention.

"Thank you," he said to the woman, tucking the arrow in his belt.

"Shall I notify his family, my lord?"

“No, that won’t be necessary. I’ll take care of it,” replied Adair. He rose to his feet and excused himself, a feeling of defeat replacing his prior sense of urgency.

Chapter 5

The sun was touching the western horizon, turning the dark blue of the ocean a fiery orange as Adair entered the courtyard of his mansion situated in the hills overlooking [Bastul](#). All was quiet except for the voices of his son Kael and Ajani, the youngest of the slaves. Ajani was only slightly older than Kael, but much taller. The two were throwing makeshift spears at a nearby tree, and from the look of determination on their faces, it was a competition.

“Hello, boys,” Adair said as he walked up behind them.

“Hello, father,” Kael answered without looking. The boy was holding a spear above his shoulder, readying himself for his next throw.

“I don’t wish to disturb such a fierce competition, but I was hoping that you might know where I could find Saba?”

“He’s gone until tomorrow,” Kael answered.

Adair paused with his hand on his chin. “Well, please continue,” he told the boys with a wave of his hand and walked toward the main entrance of the house. To the right of the stairs, he found Maeryn sitting on a rock ledge which surrounded a broad-leafed tree. She was pruning a flowering bush with her back turned to him. Adair suddenly found a mischievous grin spreading across his face as he decided to sneak up behind her.

“Those flowers just don’t stand a chance at looking beautiful when you are next to them,” he whispered in her ear.

Maeryn jumped at the unexpected sound, spinning around.

Adair couldn’t help the huge smile of amusement that spread across his face.

Maeryn’s startled expression quickly melted. She sprang to her feet and threw her arms around him. “Where have you been? Is something the matter? You left so early!”

Adair rubbed his forehead. “There is always something the matter; never a moment’s rest for me.”

For an instant, a flicker of some emotion crossed Maeryn’s face. Adair had a talent for reading people. It was one of the skills that allowed him to rise so quickly through the ranks to his current position of authority. But sometimes his wife was a complete mystery to him. And now was one of those times. He knew he should ask her what was wrong, but it had been a long day and he wasn’t in the mood for an emotional conversation. “Kael said Saba will be gone until tomorrow?” he asked instead.

“Yes. He left just after dinner. I think he was going to visit a friend. Anyway, he said he should be back before sundown. Are you hungry? I could fix you something to eat.”

Adair smiled. “I’m starving. That would be great!” He knew Maeryn suspected that something was wrong but dinner would be a good distraction. Besides, he couldn’t tell Maeryn what had happened. Especially when he wasn’t sure exactly what had happened himself, or how dangerous the situation might be. Whoever attacked Bahari out at sea was thorough enough to search the beach for survivors, and it wasn’t safe to involve Maeryn at this point.

It was midnight, and there was a slight chill in the breeze coming off the ocean. Adair had been unable to fall asleep and had wasted away the last few hours watching the curtains at the balcony dance in the breeze. Only minutes ago, he decided that the arrowhead wasn’t going to

lead him anywhere. Saba was the only one who would be able to make some sense of it and turn it into a usable clue. Unable to bear the boredom any longer, Adair rose from his bed, dressed, and grabbed a cloak before heading toward the guest quarters in the east wing of the mansion. In Saba's room he found a scrap of parchment in one of the desk drawers and laid it on the desk next to a burning candle. Pulling a quill from its ink pot he began to write.

Saba,

Something terrible has happened to an acquaintance of mine. I am looking into the matter, but have been unsuccessful in finding any useful information to this point. The only clue that I have thus far is this arrowhead. I leave it in your possession to find out what you can about the people who made it. I have been unable to find any meaning in it and would, therefore, be grateful for any information that would aid me in my searching.

Gratefully,

Adair

After blowing on the ink to speed its drying, Adair rolled the parchment and tied it with a thread. He slid the arrowhead inside the tube of parchment and left the message on Saba's writing desk before blowing out the candle and leaving the room.

Even in the early morning hours, the streets of [Bastul](#) were busy, though to a lesser degree than during the day. The majority of the traffic belonged to merchants, wheeling their carts down to the docks to be ready for business as soon as the sun came up. Groups of men clustered in the shadows nursing bottles of wine, occasionally shouting at the passersby, offering some meaningless challenge before collapsing from the exertion of raising their voices.

Through it all, no one noticed the silent, cloaked figure that walked briskly through the alleys, keeping to the shadows so as not to attract attention. Adair was heading for the Shipping District, just as the merchants, but for an entirely different reason. He would have preferred to take a direct route, but thought it best to stay out of sight. It is not often that someone of his position goes skulking around in the early hours of the morning. *...or, rather it is not often noticed!*

Three blocks from the ocean, he came upon a series of small stone buildings that made up the majority of inns and pubs in the city. Adair peered around the corner and could see a few people hanging around in the street. They were either waiting to be the first customers of the day, or else, they were the last ones of the night. Adair glanced behind to make sure that nobody had followed him and when he was assured, ducked down the back alley. All of the business owner's living quarters faced away from the main street and toward the alley, so Adair walked softly until he found the building he was looking for.

He walked to the appropriate door and knocked softly. When no one answered, he tried again, a little louder this time. The thick wooden door finally opened just a crack, orange candle light spilling from the opening. Adair pulled back his hood just enough to reveal his face to the person inside and the door opened all the way. A short, fat man filled the doorway, waving his hand rapidly for Adair to come inside the house.

After closing the door, the man put a finger to his lips and turned to walk through a low doorway at the back of the house. Once inside the back room he shut this door behind them as well and offered Adair a seat at a small wooden table. The table wasn't the only thing that was small; in fact, it fit the rest of the room perfectly.

"What's the occasion?" the man asked, rubbing sleep from his eyes.

“Why don’t you offer me something to drink, Gursha?” Adair said as he took off his cloak and draped it over the chair before sitting down.

“Sorry,” the large man muttered, and walked out of the room.

While he waited, Adair studied his surroundings as a matter of habit. The table was obviously where Gursha ate his meals, but the walls were lined with shelves stuffed with an assortment of knick-knacks that didn’t appear to be kitchen related. Before he was able to come to any conclusions, Gursha returned, carrying a bottle of wine and two dirty glasses. He set them down on the table and slumped into his chair with a look of exhaustion. Adair waited for Gursha to pour him some wine, but the man was clearly flustered with this meeting and overlooked it completely. Adair wasn’t used to meeting his informants in their own homes, so he felt a little out of place, but obviously not as much as Gursha.

“Thanks,” Adair said, pouring himself a glass instead. “I can see that you don’t prefer to meet in your home, but I can assure you, it will be worth your time.”

A greedy smile spread itself across Gursha’s wide face and then quickly retreated, replaced by a forced look of seriousness. Usually, Adair didn’t have to pay any of his informants. There were other methods of extracting information from people. Some were happy to tell all just to escape the punishment that they justly deserved. Others found themselves in trouble so often that they would do just about anything to have friends in high places. Adair had found that Gursha was a unique case. He ran the pub next door and was a legitimate businessman. But there was a way to get to anyone, and Adair had a special way of knowing people better than they knew themselves. The truth was that the *Dockside* couldn’t survive on its own. Adair timed his meetings perfectly to coincide with Gursha’s financial troubles and was now in a position of providing the pub owner with a necessary second income, to which Gursha had become accustomed.

“Tell me what you know about a man named Bahari,” Adair said as he took a sip of wine, ignoring the stains on the side of his glass.

Gursha grunted and scratched his chin before his eyes lit up.

“A merchant. Hasn’t been doing well lately...specially this year with the bad growing season and all. He’s in pretty deep with Quartus. Last I heard...took a shipment to [Nucotu](#). Hopin’ to get paid better up there.”

Adair liked what he was hearing so far. “When is he due to return?”

“Should’ve been back a few days ago. Missed his deadline from what I hear.”

“And why do you think that is?” questioned Adair.

“Don’t know. Haven’t heard nothin’.” Gursha’s eyebrows wrinkled as he tried to think of where these questions were leading. “Didn’t have nothin’ to do with it,” he said defensively.

“With what?”

“Well,” he paused. “You say he’s missin’, maybe you think I did sumthin’.”

“I didn’t say he was missing,” Adair corrected. “You did.”

Gursha opened his mouth to defend himself, but promptly closed it when he realized that he had nothing to say. Adair was amused at how easy it was to get this man where he wanted him.

“Look,” Adair offered. “I know you wouldn’t be involved in anything like that. But I want to know, in your professional opinion, why would a man like Bahari not meet his deadline? And think carefully about your answer.”

Gursha looked down at the table while he considered the question. Adair knew that this man had all kinds of information in his head. Most of the time, he didn’t even realize it. You don’t run a local pub without coming in contact with all sorts of people who like to tell stories. But the

best way to get information from Gursha was to make him feel as though he is constantly on the verge of losing his precious second income. Fear tended to make this confused man think clearly.

Gursha finally started to speak. "He was doin' better 'till this year. Was close to having his debts paid off. Things turned bad. Maybe he ran away." He smiled as the words came out, pleased with his conclusion.

"However," Adair countered. "He's got a wife. And you just said he was close to paying off his debts. He wouldn't just leave with the prospect of getting paid more in [Nucotu](#)." This line of questioning was really irrelevant. What Adair needed to find out was where Bahari was when he was attacked, without revealing any information of his own.

Gursha returned to his thoughts with a look of determination on his face. Adair thought he looked like he needed a push in the right direction. "What are some other reasons that a man might disappear?"

"Two things," Gursha responded. "If he got in trouble..." His speech trailed off as the thought got away from him and then returned in another form. "He coulda been drunk, crashed his boat. Course, he wasn't a big drinker." He paused in mid-thought, still staring at the table. "If he was tryin' to get back on time...probably wouldn't stop to sleep. Coulda fell asleep and wrecked on the [reef](#), people do that all the time."

Adair's attention perked up at this news. "Why is that?"

"Well, if he was comin' from [Nucotu](#), he should've stopped early before passin' by the [reef](#). But if he was in a hurry, he coulda tried to go right ahead through the night."

Adair smiled as Gursha said these words and pulled a bag of coins out of his cloak, setting it on the table. Gursha was visibly relieved to hear the sound of coins clinking together. Obviously, he was worried that his information wasn't valuable to Adair.

"Do you have a map that I can look at?" asked Adair.

Gursha's chair creaked as he leaned back and grabbed a piece of parchment from the shelf, disturbing a layer of dust that seemed to have been accumulating for years. Everything was at arm's length in the tiny room. "Here you go," he said and laid the old map in front of Adair.

Adair unrolled it and set his glass in one corner to keep it from rolling back. After inspecting the portion of the map that showed the western shoreline of [Bastul](#), he stood up and lifted his glass, emptying it in one last gulp. He set the glass down and slid the map back across the table.

"Thank you Gursha. It's always a pleasure." Adair took the bag of coins off the table and tossed them to the fat man who was still sitting. Gursha snatched the bag from the air with an unexpected quickness.

Adair looked at the tavern owner and waited until he had full eye contact. "As always, I was never here, and we never talked about any of this."

"Talked about what?" said Gursha, his sense of humor the only thing about him that was finely tuned.

"Precisely," Adair said and couldn't help smiling.

Gursha grunted as he rose from his chair and showed Adair to the door. When Adair stepped outside, Gursha glanced nervously up and down the street before shutting and locking the door.

The early morning air was cool on Adair's face. The lurching of the ocean was mesmerizing and he realized how easy it would have been for Bahari to fall asleep trying to make it back to [Bastul](#) to meet his deadline. But the normal shipping routes between the coast and the [reef](#) were

used regularly and situations like Bahari's didn't occur often. Bahari was attacked by someone, but it probably didn't happen on the eastern side of the reef. Remembering Gursha's map, Adair wondered if Bahari might have fallen asleep, like Gursha suggested, and missed an important turn just before the northern tip of the reef began, causing him to sail down its western side. There were many strange stories about that part of the sea, folklore mostly, told by drunken fishermen who didn't have much credibility to begin with. However entertaining the stories of sea serpents might be, it was common knowledge to stay away from that side of the reef. It was also dangerous to sail in that water for no other reason than the sharp coral that could sink a boat in a matter of minutes.

The more he thought about it, the more it made sense. And that was where he was headed. He knew it was hopeless, but he had to follow through with checking out the area. After all, it was all he had to go on. Who knew how long it would take Saba to find out anything useful with the arrowhead, or if he ever would? By then the trail might be cold.

As soon as he left Gursha's house, Adair went straight to the docks and boarded a small but fast patrol boat, taking a few soldiers with him. If he did manage to run across the people that attacked Bahari, he would need to be able to maneuver quickly and it would help to have experienced soldiers with him. *I should be at home, in bed next to Maeryn!* But he knew that on nights like these, his mind would race and he would lie awake for hours only to watch the sun rise. This way, at least he was doing something about the situation.

After a few hours of heading north along the shore, the sun began to rise. It peeked over the mountains to the east, only a bright orange sliver at first. The ripples on the water picked up the color and suddenly the whole ocean seemed to glow around them. Within a few minutes, the sun had risen enough to be seen in its entirety above the mountains. The light quickly changed to a pale yellow which illuminated the whole sky and the orange glow disappeared.

As the morning drew on, Adair wondered about the consequences of leaving so suddenly. He had left a message for Thaddius to watch over things for a few days until he could return. But Thaddius wasn't a soldier, just an official elected to deal with the social issues that the governor didn't want to deal with, or else, wasn't able to because of a military absence. Adair held the position of Colonel in Orudan Military, but, as with all colonels, he also ruled over a city and was charged with its protection. Adair found the dual responsibilities taxing and leaned heavily on Thaddius to handle most of the decisions that were not specifically military in nature. He knew that the city would be in great hands for the duration of his short trip, but he was now starting to consider how dangerous this excursion might really be. *What if something happens out here and I'm unable to return to Maeryn and Kael?* It was too much to think about and he shook his head to make the thoughts go away.

"Colonel," one of the soldiers called to him from the main deck, breaking the silence. He walked quickly across the deck and climbed the short ladder to the navigational deck where Adair sat under a canopy. "Sir, if you don't mind me asking, what are we doing out here?"

The soldier was close to Adair's own average height with dark brown hair. He had a fierce look in his eyes and it was obvious that he was asking not out of a sense of fear for himself, only curiosity, but didn't want to offend his superior by questioning his reasons.

"I am investigating the death of an acquaintance. He was attacked out near the reef where we are headed."

After a moment of silence, one of the other soldiers spoke up. "What do you hope to find? If it was pirates, there won't be any sign of them by the time we get there."

Adair smiled. “This acquaintance had an arrow embedded in his leg. Our patrols haven’t seen any signs of pirates in years, but more importantly, pirates don’t use arrows. They are not trained in the military arts. Usually, they are commoners who rely on surprise to overtake their victims. These men were soldiers. And if they were not our own men, I would like to know what rogue soldiers are sailing through the waters of the Empire.”

The sun was directly overhead, beating down on the small crew when they reached the northern end of the reef. They were making excellent time and, as the swift boat made its way around the tip and began heading southwest, Adair’s senses began to tingle with anticipation. He wasn’t sure what he would find out here on the ocean, if anything. Part of him expected to sail around for hours, not seeing anything that would give him a clue as to what might have happened. Another part of him, the part that got excited in dangerous situations, expected to meet confrontation. He was prepared if that was to be the case.

Much to his disappointment, the minutes turned into hours, and still there was no sign of what he was looking for, whatever that might be. He watched clouds roll in from the north, covering the sky in a thin veil of gray. The sun slowly crept west and eventually slipped behind the horizon, turning the sky from pale gray to a brilliant purple. Adair had just come to the decision that this trip was a failure and was about to give the order to turn the boat around when he noticed something out of the corner of his eye. He scanned the southern horizon, trying to find what had grabbed his attention, but now there was nothing except for a smooth ocean surface.

“Keep your eyes open for anything unusual,” he called to the men at the bow.

A few seconds later, he saw it again, but it was only visible when he didn’t look straight at it. It was a disturbance on the surface of the water; an area where the reflected light from the sunset danced a little differently than it did in the surrounding water. Being a reef area, there were shallow spots everywhere around them, but something was different about this. It wasn’t just a sandbar or a coral shelf.

“What is that?” one of the soldiers asked.

“I’m not sure, but head straight for it,” Adair answered, hoping that he’d gotten lucky.

Are my eyes deceiving me? It seemed as if something was there on the water, but he couldn’t make out any distinct shape. The men on his boat busied themselves with adjusting the sails to make the change in direction, trying to take full advantage of the wind coming from the west. As their sails bulged once again with air, something inside Adair told him that this was what he was looking for and with every second, he was getting closer.

He was just starting to detect a shape in the shimmering water when it began to change. A dark area began to grow on the eastern side of the shimmer. The darkness seemed to emerge from nowhere and finally detached itself, moving to the left.

A ship! Then another appeared on the right side of the shimmer. Suddenly, his eyes found their focus and it all made sense to him. The ships were emerging from behind a structure on the surface of the water. The pale light in the western sky was growing darker with every second, but now that Adair was able to make sense of what he was seeing, more and more details were becoming visible. It was a circular structure with polished metal walls that reflected the surrounding water, giving the illusion that nothing was there. The camouflaging effect was stunning and it wasn’t until the second ship emerged from behind the wall that Adair was able to understand what he was seeing.

The two black ships which had been moving in opposite directions away from the structure, turned north simultaneously, heading straight for Adair's small vessel. It only took a few seconds for everyone to realize that they were not equipped to handle this fight.

"Colonel?" one of his men asked, sensing danger.

"Head for the [reef](#). They won't follow us in there." *We're small enough to maneuver around obstacles and this boat doesn't run deep. If they try to follow us, they won't make it out alive.*

One of the men pushed on the rudder and the small boat carved a sharp turn to the port side and headed for the [reef](#). The others jumped into action, trimming the mainsail to keep the westerly wind. The larger boats moved from their intended flanking positions to a direct chase and they were closing in fast, but Adair already saw what he had come to find. These people were doing something out here that they wished to keep a secret. Judging by what they did to Bahari, they were willing to kill for it. But now Adair knew of their presence. He couldn't hide the smile on his face and soon, the other men were grinning as well, with admiration for their superior.

As soon as I get back to [Bastul](#), I'll bring the fleet back and find out what they're hiding.

As their small vessel entered the shallow water of the [reef](#) area, they slowed just enough to maneuver through the sharp coral, while still maintaining their lead. The pursuing boats, which dwarfed Adair's boat, came to a stop as they neared the [reef](#). Adair exhaled a deep breath, relieved to be a safe distance away and protected by the coral. Turning his attention back to the difficult task of navigation, he heard a sharp cracking noise from behind.

All the men turned to look back at the large black boats that had positioned themselves with their starboard sides facing the [reef](#). Their silhouettes were barely visible against the sky in the east. Halfway between them and their pursuers, something landed on the surface of the water. Adair squinted just as it skimmed past the prow, leaving a wake on the mottled ocean surface that quickly faded from view.

An unsettled feeling began to grow in his stomach and his heart began to race as he realized his pursuers had projectile capability. The sunset was almost gone now and within a few minutes, there would not be enough light to navigate the dangerous [reef](#). Just as the thought came to him, he noticed the water in front of the boat getting lighter.

"Hard starboard!" he yelled to the men as he pushed on the rudder.

The boat pitched and swerved to the right. Adair almost lost his footing, grabbing the railing for balance.

Another sharp crack sounded as the crew struggled to adjust the sails, hoping to maintain their momentum. Adair turned to see a splash on the rippled surface of the water as another projectile came skipping toward them. Judging by the angle, it was aimed more accurately than the first.

"Brace yourselves!" As the words left his mouth, the middle of their tiny boat erupted in a shower of saltwater and splinters. The jolt knocked Adair off his feet and he rolled across the deck as the boat pitched to the port side and began to fill with water. He clawed at the wood decking to get a handhold, when his eyes settled on the body of one of his crew only a few yards away. The man's midsection was almost completely missing. It looked as though the projectile went straight through him as well as their boat.

Adair pulled himself to his feet and scanned the boat, trying to get a sense of the damage. Water poured across the deck and the weight was rolling the ship back to its starboard side. The

remaining soldiers jumped overboard, abandoning the ship which was nearly ripped in half and sinking fast.

Adair ran to the nearest port railing and dove over the side. The other men were already a short distance away and splashing so loud that Adair could follow them by sound alone. He began to swim east with a steady pace that he could maintain for a long time. *At this point, the most important thing is to keep moving.* It took only minutes to catch up to the others. They had slowed considerably after using up their energy with panicked strokes. As Adair closed in on the men, he risked a look behind, but the light was gone from the western sky and nothing could be seen. Even their sinking boat was only a slightly darker blot on the water.

Shouting voices came across the water from the direction of the enemy ships and Adair's heart dropped. He had hoped they would be satisfied with sinking his ship, but it sounded as though he and his men were being pursued.

"Ahh!" one of his men grunted.

We've reached the coral. "Try to stay on the surface as much as possible. The water is shallow, but we should still be able to get over it if we're careful." Adair tried his best to sound confident for the men, but he was out of his realm of experience. He really wasn't sure how close the coral grew to the surface, but it sounded good, and at this moment, keeping the men from despair was important.

Adair flipped over on his back and began to swim with a backstroke, keeping his body on the surface. Then he noticed an orange light hovering over the water behind them. *A lantern!* The flickering glow illuminated what appeared to be six men rowing and several others standing. Whatever hope Adair had of escaping these men, it had just ended. The rowboat was much too fast for panicked swimmers. *We're not going to make it.*

"We've got to split up," he called to the others. No one acknowledged him. He repeated his words a little louder, but all they could hear was their own splashing. Adair decided not to risk yelling any louder to the men and veered to the left, taking his own advice instead. He quickly lost sight and sound of the other men, but the orange light continued to move forward. Adair adjusted his own course even more to stay out of the light, turning directly to the north.

"Stop where you are!" The words came across the water to him and for a brief second, he thought he had been sighted. Then he heard shouts, followed by complete silence.

I've just lost my crew!

He quickened his pace and continued to swim north. The minutes passed slowly and Adair began to grow tired. After fighting fatigue for as long as he could, he slowed to an easier pace. The glow of the lantern had disappeared. He wasn't sure how long he had been swimming, but he knew that he couldn't keep this up forever. Gradually, the sky lightened and he turned to see the moon rising over the eastern horizon. As it climbed higher in the sky, the concealing darkness vanished.

The orange light of the lantern reappeared a moment later. It was only fifty yards away and it looked like they had already spotted him. The rowboat moved swiftly, coming alongside of Adair as he floated in the water. The men standing in the center of the boat were holding bows, stretched taut with arrows ready.

"Climb aboard," came a raspy voice.

Adair knew it was pointless to resist, though his mind still raced to find a way to escape. Against his instincts and years of training, he swam over to the boat and grabbed the extended hand of one of the rowers.

"That's it, nice and easy," the man with the lantern spoke again.

The rower pulled and Adair slid into the boat, rolling over the side and slumping onto his back with exhaustion. The bottom of the boat had a musty smell like it hadn't touched fresh air in a long time.

The man with the lantern stepped forward and held the lamp over Adair's limp body. "I already know from your late friends that you are the Captain."

Captain? Adair was relieved that his men hadn't told the whole truth. Although the position of Captain evidently gave him some measure of safety, being a Colonel and the Governor of [Bastul](#) was something that should stay hidden.

"Yes, that is true," he replied, sitting up and wiping the saltwater from his eyes. "What do you..."

Out of the corner of his eye, Adair caught a sudden movement. He didn't even have time to flinch before something hard slammed into the back of his skull and everything went black.

Chapter 6

Adair was vaguely aware of being dragged across a smooth floor. He felt the sensation of his legs, from the knees down, sliding on a hard surface. He could hear the footsteps of the men that were on either side of him, half carrying him by the shoulders of his tunic. The fabric was cutting into his skin. There was an elapsed period of time between this realization and when he regained his vision. As soon as he opened his eyes, the sight of his own reflection in the marble, four inches away from his nose, caused a shooting pain in his head. He quickly shut his eyes, but his temples pounded, making it difficult to concentrate on anything but the pain. He tried not to make any sound or movement as he winced. The pain gradually lessened into a dull ache, emanating from the base of his skull, spreading down his neck and into his shoulders. He decided to risk opening his eyes again and found his vision to be blurry. Even through the blur, the sight of the intricate black marble veined with silver streaks passing beneath him was too much. His head began to spin. He shut his eyes and darkness returned, a welcome retreat for his overwhelmed vision.

"Is this the one?" The voice seemed loud in the surrounding silence. The two men had stopped dragging him and were talking with a third man. There was a pause before the reply, probably for some gesture that Adair couldn't see.

"He made it close to the outer wall. We almost didn't know he was there until it was too late." Adair was listening intently for any information he could glean from this. He could feel a slight tug on his right shoulder and his captor continued. "He started to run through the [reef](#), but we got him." There was another pause and Adair wished he could watch this conversation from somewhere other than where he was now. There was much to learn, even from people's body language.

"Take him to the end, last cell on the left," said the third man.

Good, only one guard so far. He took note of this as a matter of habit, knowing that any information of his surroundings would be useful at some point.

Without another word, the two soldiers continued to drag Adair down the hall. He knew that they were going to put him in a cell, probably to be questioned. There was no other reason to keep him alive. *But then my chance to escape is gone.* The thought of trying to get away from these two soldiers and the guard they just passed made Adair feel queasy. He knew under normal circumstances that these two men would be no match for him, but the third man, coupled with the probability of blacking out from the exertion, made the situation very dangerous. But he

had no other options. As these thoughts were sluggishly making their way through his head, he felt the soldiers drag him around a sharp corner, turning to the left. Once out of site from the guard behind them, Adair seized the opportunity.

The men were carrying swords at their right sides; the scabbard of the man on the left had been knocking into his arm the whole time. He listened to their steps to get the timing and suddenly reached both arms around the back of the soldiers' legs.

The two men tripped over their own feet, sprawling onto the floor in front of them and losing their grip on their prisoner.

Adair pulled his feet underneath him and pounced on the back of the soldier to his right, pinning him to the ground. He reached down to the man's waist and grabbed the hilt of his sword, attempting to rip it from the scabbard. It stuck at first, the awkward angle not allowing it to come free.

The soldier on the left was quicker than Adair had anticipated, already gaining his footing and pulling his own sword free.

Adair somersaulted forward over the soldier beneath him while keeping his grip on the sword. It came free and Adair rolled to his feet on the other side with the sword in his hand.

The other soldier wasted no time and attacked immediately. Lunging forward, he swung his sword at gut level with a backhanded slash.

Adair back-stepped the passing blade and thrust his sword into the man's chest.

The soldier dropped immediately to his knees.

Adair wrenched the sword out, spinning around to find the other man on his hands and knees. Before he could get to his feet, Adair drove his sword between the man's shoulder blades and the soldier collapsed on the floor.

Adair's head was spinning, but he gritted his teeth and tried to ignore the growing nausea. Darting back to the corner of the hallway, he laid in wait for the guard who was sure to have heard all the commotion.

Mere seconds elapsed before the guard came running around the corner.

Adair swung his sword in a level arc and caught the soldier in the face, stopping his upper body momentum while his legs continued forward and swung out from underneath him.

Adair dragged the bodies into one of the nearby cells and piled two of them in the corner. He stripped off the clothes of the third man and changed into them, using his own to wipe up the mess in the hallway. His head was still spinning a little, but he was feeling better with every breath. The guard had been armed with a spear, but Adair decided to keep his newly acquired sword instead, to complete his disguise. The attire of these soldiers was much different from his own military dress, with leather sandals that crisscrossed up his lower leg, coming almost to his knee. The guard's tunic had long sleeves and only reached to Adair's waist, where a pair of calf-long trousers completed the uniform. The sword was similar to standard Orudan issue, only a few inches longer and slightly narrower.

Who are these people? Everything about them seemed relatively normal; nothing was foreign or outlandish except their secretive presence on the ocean. They weren't part of any group that he knew of, but their skin and features suggested they were from this part of the world. *Does the Emperor know about them?* Just as the thought came to him, he dismissed it. The Empire was the most advanced military in the world and they owed that to two reasons—organization and communication. If the Emperor had any operations so near to [Bastul](#), or even knew of something, Adair would be the first one to know. For the meantime, Adair brushed the thoughts aside and concentrated on finding a way out of this place.

Disguised as one of the enemy, Adair strode confidently down the hallway, turning to the right and heading in the direction from which he had been dragged. As he walked, he tried to take note of any details that might later prove useful. Flames burned in sconces at eye-level along both walls, dimly lighting the hallway. The floor was made of a smooth black marble, highly polished, and it reflected what light the torches cast. The walls were made of a more ordinary stone, duller than the floor, but still black. Adair couldn't find any seams where the stones were joined together. It was as if the whole hallway had been carved out of one giant rock.

He found the place where the guard had stood only a moment ago, a low archway at the end of the hall that opened into a wider and taller area with doorways on the left and right. Another low archway was set into the wall on the opposite side, making this chamber a four-way junction. Adair tried to remember from which direction he had been dragged, but couldn't recall turning around any corners. Then again, he had only just regained consciousness at this point. He decided to go with his instinct and chose the archway across the chamber. It was a hallway, exactly like the one he just left. As he walked, it occurred to him that he must be somewhere inside the walled structure he saw on the ocean.

At the end of the hall was a set of stairs leading up. He climbed carefully with one hand on the hilt of his sword, ready for someone to appear at any moment. The stairs spiraled in a tight radius and after a few minutes, he began to wonder how far the steps would go. With each passing second, his sense of direction was more and more confounded. He thought this place to be a building inside the wall, but it was far too large. With all of the stairs he had climbed, this building would have reached high into the air, clearly visible above the wall that surrounded this place. When he was out on the ocean, just before turning into the reef, he was able to get a good look at the outer wall. Despite its camouflaging properties, he estimated it to be only forty or fifty feet tall, and he was positive that he had already climbed much higher than that.

He trudged on for several more minutes before hearing a change in the sound of the stairwell. His footsteps were starting to echo and he could tell that there was a larger area up above. He moved cautiously up the spiraled stairs as the passage widened, ending at a doorway. It was a low arch without a door just like all the others he had seen, but beyond the doorway was what interested him.

Though his view was limited, he could see what appeared to be a cavern, a hundred feet long with a low ceiling. He could also make out row upon row of barrels and crates lining the left side. A sharp clanking noise drew his attention to the right, but he had to move a few steps forward to get a better view. There, in the soft orange glow of a furnace, were a handful of blacksmiths pounding red hot metal with hammers. One of the men plunged the metal into a bucket and a hiss of steam rose above his head. He tossed the metal into a box set on wheels and another man pushed the cart away. Adair moved closer to the archway and scanned the cavern. There were dozens of groups like the first one, all making what appeared to be weapons.

They're building an arsenal!

Before he had a chance to dwell on the shocking discovery, his attention was drawn to something glittering on the far side of the cavern. It took him a little while to realize that it was reflected moonlight on the ocean, seen through an enormous doorway on the other side of the cavern. Just outside of the opening were several ships moored to a dock, but it was too dark to make out anything else.

Suddenly, the sound of voices came to him, much closer than the metalworkers. They were just outside of the doorway to the right, and they were approaching. Adair turned and fled down

the stairs, struggling to keep from tripping as he skipped over several steps with each stride. He reached the bottom of the long, winding staircase in just a few minutes and stopped, trying to calm his heartbeat and listen for signs of pursuit. A moment later, the sound of unhurried footsteps drifted to him and it was apparent that the men were coming down the staircase. He had only an instant to think of what to do before they would reach the bottom. He glanced at the other doorways around him. The one straight ahead would lead him back to the jail cells. He wasn't sure about the other two passages, but either one might be an escape route.

If I run, the men coming down the stairs will be alarmed by the disappearance of the guard. If I stay and pose as the guard, they might pass by and not notice. But in order to maintain secrecy in a place such as this, all of the soldiers would probably know each other well enough to recognize a stranger. They would never buy his impersonation. The footsteps in the stairwell were getting louder and time was running out. Adair chose the doorway across from him, running down the hall and turning the corner.

Along the left side of the hall were the barred cells where he hid the bodies of the soldiers. He ducked into the first one and hid in the corner where the shadows would conceal him. He hoped that the men wouldn't even come down this passage. Perhaps they would take one of the other doors. But to his disappointment, he heard them coming. Now all he could do was wait for the men to pass by and sneak out of this passage when they were gone. *By the sound of the footsteps, there are four or five of them. Much smarter to run and hide than fight.*

A moment later Adair watched as four men passed by his cell without even a glance in his direction. He waited until they got farther down the hallway and then he slipped quietly out of the cell, turning back toward the staircase.

"Get back to your post!" one of the men yelled to him from behind.

Adair raised a hand in acknowledgment without turning and continued around the corner. He heard one of the men laugh and hoped that he wasn't really alarmed. As Adair neared the guard post, two more soldiers appeared from the bottom of the stairwell in the opposite hallway, apparently following the same route as the first four. Adair immediately stopped in his tracks and stood at attention against the wall. If the soldiers were suspicious, they didn't let on. Adair's heart was racing as he prepared himself for conflict, which seemed only an arm's reach away.

Then it happened.

A yell came from down the hallway where the first four soldiers had gone.

They found the bodies!

The second group of soldiers stopped walking and pulled their swords from their scabbards, looking at Adair with suspicion.

The first group came back around the corner.

Adair now had enemy soldiers in front and behind him, and two doorways for escape.

"Get him!" they yelled, pointing at Adair.

Adair sprang from his position and ran for the nearest door, entering a dark hallway with six men in pursuit. The hallway went on in a straight line for a short time before any other passages became visible. At the first sight of a doorway Adair risked a glance behind him to find that he had gained a considerable distance on his pursuers. He passed by the first door and dodged through the second one on the left and kept running. To his surprise, it was another hallway with a large doorway at the other end. As he ran he noticed that there were more passages on either side of this hallway as well. He quickly opted for one of the smaller doorways on the right, thinking that it would not be his first choice if he were chasing someone. Each doorway led to

another passage with more choices. He kept running, trying to pick a random route to avoid being caught. After a few minutes, he stopped and tried to listen over his own heartbeat.

Silence. Have I lost them?

With at least a few calm minutes ahead of him, Adair considered his situation. He knew there was no hope of escaping this place by way of the cavern at the top of the stairs; there were too many people. He had to find another way. *In a place like this, there has to be more than one!*

Without the sounds of pursuit, he cautiously pressed on to locate another exit. He moved from the dark room that had been his hiding place and began walking tentatively down the hall. It was eerily silent and Adair drew his sword to be ready for any more surprises.

As time passed he found himself in a hall that appeared to be a main artery inside this maze of tunnels. It was at least thirty feet wide and the ceiling sixty-five feet high. Adair glanced down the length of the hall in both directions and noticed that it curved until it disappeared from sight. This was just the sort of thing he was looking for. If it was a main thoroughfare, it would likely lead to an exit. The only problem was the increased probability of meeting more soldiers along the way. But Adair decided to take his chances. He turned to the right and kept to the outside of the curve, which allowed him the best view of what was ahead.

The minutes passed without any change in the scenery. Adair had just begun to wonder if this hall would go on forever, when he noted a change in the air. The passage seemed cooler and the torches on the wall flickered more than before.

Fresh air. He scanned the walls and ceiling for proof of what he hoped for. Directly above him on the wall, only a few feet from the ceiling, was an opening. It was hard to make out at first with all the shadows cast by the torches. Adair's heart sank when he became sure that this was where the air was coming from. It was more than forty feet above him and there was no way to climb to it on these slick walls. He would just have to find another way out.

He continued down the hall hearing nothing but his own footsteps. A minute later he noticed another hole in the wall to his left. It too was out of reach, but a little lower than the first. It was still too far above the ground to climb to, but there was a pattern developing, and Adair liked the look of it. He sheathed his sword, jogging down the passage a little quicker than before and found another opening in the wall just where he expected it to be. This one was only thirty feet off the ground.

Anticipation propelled him forward at a run, down the curving passage, watching one after another of these holes in the wall spiral closer and closer to his reach. Suddenly his excitement came to a halt. The hallway ended at an arched doorway like so many others he had seen in this labyrinth. He walked a short way into the smaller passage but there was no hole where he expected it to be. He backed up to the last opening he passed and found that it was about ten feet off the ground, maybe more. Adair couldn't remember any time in his life when he needed to be able to jump this high and seriously doubted that he could.

He backed away from the opening and tried to get a better look at it. It appeared to be just a ventilation hole drilled into the side of the wall and seemed large enough for a man to fit through, but there was no telling where it led. As Adair tried to figure out how he was going to get up to the hole, a faint sound came to his ears. He turned his head to listen and could barely make out footsteps. He glanced left and right, but he couldn't see anything in the hall. The way sound bounced off the walls in this passage made it difficult to tell from which direction the footsteps were coming.

He tried not to panic.

He looked to the opening and took a few steps back, trying to find the best position for the difficult jump. When it felt right, he lunged into motion, jumping as high as he could. When he reached the wall, his fingers slapped against the stone several inches below the hole. The rest of his body crashed into the wall before he slid down to the floor.

The hilt of the sword around his waist clanged loudly on the stone floor and he winced at the sharp noise.

The approaching footsteps were getting louder and now he could hear voices as well.

He didn't have much time and needed to make a decision. He could either keep the sword—his only means of protection—and fight his way out, or he would have to get rid of it in order to reach the opening, which might not even be an escape. If he decided to fight, he might do well for a while, but he knew there was no way one man could survive against many trained soldiers.

His fingers quickly went to his belt and began to unfasten it. He took off the sword and scabbard and threw them to his right, as far down the hallway as he could. The belt landed on the stone floor with a clang and skidded to a stop. The sound of approaching footsteps quickened to a running pace and Adair judged the group to be five or more people. Hopefully the belt would lead them away, unless they were coming from that direction, in which case it would only serve to give away the fact that he was in the general vicinity.

Again Adair took a running start and jumped. This time his fingertips grasped the ledge of the opening and hung for a second, but he lost his grip and slid down the wall.

He backed up again and could see the lengthened shadows of running men along the wall, cast by the torches they were carrying. *This is my last chance!* He only had enough time for one more jump and then the soldiers would have him. He sprinted forward stepping into a crouch and sprang off of his left leg, extending it as far as possible while reaching up the wall with his right hand. The ledge came into reach and he grabbed as hard as he could. His fingertips tried to dig into the stone but his grip was fragile. Adair quickly swung his left hand up to the ledge and was able to get a solid grip with both hands and pulled his upper body over the ledge and into the opening. The round hole was just wide enough for his shoulders to pass through. He could see that it continued straight for about twenty feet where a soft light spilled in. Adair didn't know what was on the other side, but at this point, he didn't care. The cramped space wouldn't allow for him to swing a leg up so he reached further into the hole to find another grip. There was nothing but smooth stone. Adair tried desperately to pull his lower body into the passage but his sweating palms couldn't find traction.

"There he is," yelled someone from the hallway below.

Adair couldn't hold back the panic. He was defenseless with his lower body completely exposed. He wriggled from side to side while boosting his upper body on his elbows and slowly began to gain the leverage he needed. But it was all happening too slowly. With one more pull he managed to get his legs into the passage. At the same moment he felt something slam into his right foot followed quickly by the sound of metal glancing off the stone. By reflex he jerked his foot further into the tunnel, but it was too late. A searing pain spread through his foot and leg. He knew he was injured, but he kept crawling, trying to get free of his pursuers.

He reached out with one hand against the stone beneath him and pulled, while simultaneously pushing forward with his knees. He felt like a worm trapped inside a piece of fruit that was about to be consumed. As he approached the end of the tunnel, his surroundings became brighter and the air clearer. His head exited the passage into open air. Craning his neck to look above him, he could see stars shining brightly in the night sky overhead.

Turning to look down, he saw what looked like an enormous well. It was at least seventy-five feet across and had a spiraling staircase carved into the stone along the inside. He looked across and saw other ventilation shafts just like his own, drilled into the stone at regular intervals, eight feet above the stairs. Looking down to the stairs below, he knew that it would be a painful jump from this height, but an instant death if he overshot the stairs and slipped into the darkness below. The staircase had no railing, only steps that dropped off the edge into nothingness. His options were limited and he was in danger of death regardless of whether he went forward or backwards.

It was difficult and painful to turn himself around in the tight passage, but once he changed his direction, he was able to slide backwards out of the tunnel, letting his legs dangle while holding onto the ledge. As gravity began to pull his body out of the tunnel, he realized that his grip was compromised by the slick coating of blood coming from his foot. A feeling of panic surged within him as he realized the peril of his situation.

In a last second attempt to keep himself from falling over the side of the stairs, Adair pushed his feet out a few inches away from the wall and let go, leaning in toward the face of the stone as he fell. His feet hit the ground, sending a wave of pain from his right foot up into his leg. His position caused him to fall forward into the sheer face of the stone and roll down a few stairs before coming to a halt. His foot was throbbing intensely, but he tried to put it out of his mind until he was safe.

Even though the moon was not visible, its light illuminated the opposite side of the well. Adair stood in the shadowed half and looked up to the rim that was almost two hundred feet above. Knowing that the soldiers would inform everyone else of his whereabouts, it was only a matter of time before they closed in on him. He needed to get to the top of this chasm and out of sight as quickly as possible. He began to painfully limp up the spiraling stairs, hurrying almost to a run when he came to the illuminated side of the well.

It seemed like an eternity before he reached the top. Fortunately, the stairs ended in the shadows. Adair crouched down to keep his head from being visible above the rim, while crawling up the last few steps. He waited for a brief moment to listen for any movement nearby. When he was satisfied that it was safe, he peeked over the rim. What he saw amazed him.

He was perched atop a small [island](#) of stone that gently sloped fifty feet down to the ocean surface. Docks sprouted from the island like spokes from a wheel. Several hundred feet away from the shore of the island was the inside of the circular [wall](#) that surrounded this secluded place. The inside of the wall was made up of hundreds of covered ports. Some were empty and some contained ships. It was too dark to tell for sure, but Adair knew that if even half of the ports were filled, this place contained a fleet that would rival the Empire itself.

One area of the waterway between the wall and the island was teeming with ferries, offloading crates of goods from one of the ships and transporting them to the island. Adair looked back down the stairs and realized that all this time spent running down hallways and hiding from his captors, he had been beneath the ocean. Even as the realization came to him, he denied the possibility of it. *Who could make such a place?*

“Stop right there.”

Adair spun around to see two men standing on the opposite rim of the chasm. They both held torches and immediately separated, running around opposite sides of the well. Adair stood and ran up the last few steps, not wanting to get trapped inside the chasm. The stairs ended at a pathway which circled the rim. Other narrow footpaths radiated out from the main path to end at stairways heading down the outside of the hill. He took only a few steps before seeing another

pair of men coming up the nearest set of stairs at a full run. Adair paused for a brief moment, unsure of whether he should fight past these men to escape, or run back down the stairs where immediate safety was available. He instinctively chose the latter and rushed back down the stairs into the well.

What have I done? Even through the unbearable pain shooting into his leg, Adair knew that he made the wrong decision. There was nowhere for him to go now but down. He might be able to keep ahead of them, but what would that gain him? They had him trapped now and he was finally starting to feel afraid of not making it out alive.

He ran down the winding staircase as fast as his injured foot would allow him, keeping to the inside of the treacherous steps. Suddenly, a torch landed on the stairs in front of him, sending a shower of sparks into the air before falling over the edge and disappearing into the darkness. Adair didn't even pause to see how close they were or who had thrown the torch; his instinct for survival drove him downward.

Gradually the light of the moon disappeared altogether and Adair ran in complete darkness, dragging his hand along the rock face to maintain a sense of proximity to the edge. After what seemed like an hour, Adair noticed a dull orange glow coming from the center of the darkness below. It was just enough light to illuminate his surroundings. His breath was ragged and his right leg was nearly useless. He slowed his pace and looked up behind him. Far away he could see the bouncing torches of his pursuers. They must have slowed long ago, realizing that his capture was inevitable.

Adair pressed on and within minutes he reached the bottom of the staircase. It ended at a tunnel which led away into the side of the rock face. The tunnel was completely dark and Adair had to move by feel once again. After a slow hundred yards, the passage began to slope downward and veer to the right. The slope gradually steepened until Adair almost tripped down another set of stairs. It was a strange sensation to be underneath the ocean and he marveled at how much work must have gone into building this place, aside from the fact that it seemed physically impossible.

Slowly, the tunnel began to lighten with the same orange glow. His pace quickened in the soft light, as he no longer needed to feel his way through the passage. After several more minutes of descending the curving steps, the tunnel opened up into an enormous cavern, hundreds of yards wide and equally as tall. Torches burned along the wall, casting an eerie light throughout what looked like a gigantic temple to some unknown god.

Or gods, Adair thought as he noticed great stone statues, at least a hundred feet tall, lining the perimeter of the cavern. Each one was shaped almost like a man, but their features were stretched vertically, with great wings that extended to either side of the statue. The tips of the wings touched the tips of the next statue, so that the whole cavern was encircled by them. Adair continued out of the mouth of the tunnel and ran down the remaining steps, which were carved into the wall of the cavern like the chasm above him. When he reached the floor of the cavern, his feet crunched into pure sand, like the shores of [Bastul](#).

He looked down to take in this unexpected sight and noticed the bloody mess of his right foot. The severed sole of his sandal dragged uselessly across the sand, held to his leg by a thin strip of twisted leather. His foot had gone numb. Across the cavern was a lake whose water was still and smooth as glass. At the center of the lake was a stone dais, thirty feet across and only inches above the level of the water. Narrow footbridges of stone extended from the dais on opposite sides, arching over the water and ending at the sandy perimeter of the lake.

On the other side of the cavern was a large arched doorway. It appeared to be the only other way out of this place. A quick look around told Adair that it would be quicker to head straight over the dais via the footbridge than it would be to skirt the lake. Once his goal was set, he quickened his pace to a run.

The sand slowed his progress and sapped his already depleted energy. By the time he made it to the start of the footbridge, his pursuers spilled out of the tunnel behind him and onto the staircase. Adair ran with all his might up the narrow bridge, trying to keep his footing on the polished stone. His lead on the soldiers had lessened considerably and he feared that he would lose this race. His only hope now was to make it through the archway at the other side of the cavern and hopefully find a narrow corridor where he could defend himself against one man at a time. Even then, they would eventually wear him down.

Slowing little by little with every painful step, he looked across the cavern at the archway and tried to fix his will on getting through that doorway. Just as he took his first step on the dais, the dark hole of the archway began to change. There was movement inside it and Adair suspected that he had failed. When row upon row of soldiers filed out of the archway, Adair felt all hope drain from his body, like the wind being taken from the sails of a boat.

He stopped running and unexpectedly lost his footing on the slick surface. His left foot shot out from underneath him and he landed painfully on his elbow before sliding to a stop. Knowing that the chase was over, he lay back on the stone and stared up at the ceiling.

It only made the situation worse when he saw stars overhead. The ceiling above him had a huge hole right through the middle of it. It took a second before he saw the spiraling stairs and recognized it as the chasm with which he was already acquainted. He could see freedom right above him, but there was no way to reach it. He lifted his head to get a view of his odds at the last moments of his life. Altogether, there were about fifty archers and foot soldiers surrounding the lake. It was over.

Adair looked around and realized he was sitting roughly in the center of the stone dais. Its surface was polished like marble, and seemed to glow with a silver light. Just beneath the surface, as if encased in ice, was a strange pattern of concentric circles like the rings of a tree that had been frozen, then shattered. He ran his hand over the smooth surface and marveled at its translucency. Even more strange was that it was perfectly clean. Adair ran his finger over the surface and rubbed it with his thumb. *Not even a speck of dust.*

It's beautiful. It looked like an altar. I guess it's a fitting place to die.

He struggled to his feet as the soldiers advanced up the bridges on either side of him. They were within shooting range now and it was only a matter of seconds before he would see death. His thoughts turned to his family. *Maeryn, with her beautiful blonde hair and gorgeous smile. Kael, with that inquisitive look in his eyes.* Tears began to stream down his face as he realized that he would never see them again in this life.

He looked back to the soldiers marching toward him and noticed that they looked wavy and distorted as if he was seeing them through poorly crafted glass. He rubbed the tears from his eyes and looked again, but his vision didn't change. Adair looked down at his feet and saw his own reflection on the dais spiraling inward. He suddenly felt very heavy as if he had consumed too much wine. He looked up again at the soldiers and saw that they were retreating with looks of astonishment on their faces. Their images continued to distort and pull inward toward Adair as he felt the weight of the world pressing in on him. Suddenly, a burst of blue light flashed in his eyes, sending a jolt of pain through his head. It was the last thing he saw before he lost consciousness.

Chapter 7

The panel of men staring at Maeryn would have been intimidating, if she were the type of woman to be easily intimidated. But she wasn't. Though she was doing her best to appear that way and the men were buying it.

"Tell us the story again, from the beginning," muttered one of the interrogators.

"I already told you," she began, using the same emotionally stretched voice that she had used from the onset of this interrogation. "I woke up in the early morning and he was gone..." She trailed off as tears began to well-up in her eyes. She covered her face with her hands to show that this was all too much for her. The emotion she felt was real enough, but if Adair wanted the council to know what he was doing, he would have told them. He was definitely in some kind of trouble and she wasn't going to be punished for it. After all, she was ignorant really. Adair hadn't told her anything, probably to protect her. But he did seem different before he disappeared—distant, thinking to himself more than usual. Of course she didn't include any of this information in her story. These men weren't trying to help Adair; they were hoping to catch a deserter. The Empire had no tolerance for anyone who was not wholly devoted to it.

"I'm sorry," she continued after pulling herself together. "It's just...he is always being called out in the middle of the night for one reason or another. His position is very demanding. It's as though the city couldn't function without him."

"On the contrary," stated the man seated at the center of the table. "The city will function without him. In fact, it is the judgment of this council that all possessions and responsibilities of your husband will be given over to an appointed steward for a period of one week."

The statement hit Maeryn like a wave, forcing the breath from her lungs. Under Orudan law a man's possessions included his wife and children. The interrogator was trying to scare her into giving them information. It was working. She started to cry for real this time.

The interrogator's voice rose so as to be heard clearly above her sobbing. He wasn't about to repeat himself. "If your husband does not return in a week, then the appointed steward will gain ownership of those possessions and responsibilities."

In the silence that followed, the words began to sink in. Maeryn continued to cry outwardly to show the interrogator that he had made his point, while inwardly she wept at the thought of Adair being replaced so quickly. *How could they treat us like this, after all he sacrificed for them?*

"Please find him," she pleaded.

"That is all," stated the interrogator and the whole panel of men rose to leave the room.

As they filed out the door, Thaddius separated from the group and came over to Maeryn. He waited until they were alone before speaking. "Adair left a message with one of my servants that he would be gone for more than a day. He wouldn't have done that if he was deserting. I tried to tell them, but they wouldn't listen. I'm sorry."

Maeryn simply nodded in response, wiping the tears from her face.

Thaddius slowly backed up, then turned and followed after the other members of the council.

Maeryn counted to ten before she stopped crying. *I think they were convinced*, she assured herself with a smile of satisfaction. *Men like that have no idea what to do with an emotional woman. They only know how to fight wars and give orders.*

The following day, Maeryn stood on the balcony outside of her bedroom. The sun was well above the horizon and the city glittered with the yellow light reflecting off the surface of the water. She watched a procession of wagons and marching soldiers wind through the streets of the city. Red banners at the front and rear of the procession waved in the breeze, the gold eagle emblem of the Orudan Empire sparkling as it caught the sunlight.

“You’re not in charge yet,” she said to the man inside the covered carriage half a mile away. “You’re only a steward!”

The citizens of [Bastul](#) lined the streets, waving their hands at his carriage as it passed them. She was disgusted by him already. *You would think the Emperor himself had come to visit us.* Adair never flaunted his power; he didn’t need to. People tended to respect him because of his character first, and his power second. *Unlike this man, who is obviously trying to make up for something he lacks!*

The procession continued along the cobblestone road leading up to the mansion that Maeryn had called home for many years. The pace was slowed considerably when the road became a series of switchbacks as it climbed the hill. When the procession finally reached the top and entered the courtyard, Maeryn decided to go downstairs and meet this prideful man who thought he could take over for Adair.

Exiting the house, Maeryn walked through the garden situated between the guest wing and slaves’ quarters of the mansion. Adair had the garden built as a gift to Maeryn, following the customs of her ancestors. Trimmed trees and shrubs dotted the landscape, separated by rings of brightly colored flowers. The north end of this secluded paradise was open to the hilltop courtyard, containing stables, soldiers’ housing, and various other structures, all surrounded by a pale stone wall.

She stopped at the entrance to the garden and waited at the top of a short flight of steps that descended to the gravel courtyard. The last of the rearguard were just entering through the north gate when, farther to her left, a guard reached up and opened the door to the most expensive looking carriage of the whole procession. Maeryn was glad that she had sent Kael away at first light to spend the week with Saba. Until she knew what kind of man this steward was, it was better to keep her son away from him.

The man who climbed out of the carriage blinked at the harsh morning light as if he had just awoken. He was a tall man, taller than Adair, but much thinner. His jawline was narrow and coupled with his protruding nose, made him look like a rodent. He was dressed as every other Orud male of importance; he wore a pure white tunic underneath a metal cuirass. The sculpted abdomen and chest muscles of the cuirass looked out of place on his narrow frame. Over his clothing he wore a red cloak fastened at the left shoulder with a golden torc. He appeared uncomfortable in this elaborate style of dress. *So you have no prior experience!*

He smiled when he looked in Maeryn’s direction and spoke loud enough for everyone in the courtyard to hear him. “Hello. You must be Maeryn.” He spread his arms wide and lifted them up to the sky, keeping his gaze fixed on her. “Now this is a mansion fit for an emperor.”

After his brilliant observation, he strode confidently over to the garden’s entrance and climbed the stairs, stopping when he reached Maeryn. His height was imposing and he knew it. He stood uncomfortably close, by social standards, looking down on her. “I am Lemus,” he stated with a smile that was too big. “You may show me around my new home.”

“You’re to be a steward only,” Maeryn corrected, “until my husband returns.”

The tall man glanced quickly around the courtyard to see if anyone had overheard. Suddenly, he bent down until his mouth was close to Maeryn’s ear and she flinched in response.

When he spoke his voice was a whisper. “If you ever speak to me in that tone again I’ll have that disrespectful tongue of yours cut out of your mouth. If the coward ever does turn up, he won’t be allowed to return to his former position.” When he straightened up to his full height, he still had a smile on his face. He gestured past Maeryn toward the garden. “You lead the way.”

The days dragged on and Maeryn’s anxiety increased. Her once optimistic attitude about Adair’s absence was being steadily worn down with every passing moment. It wasn’t unusual for Adair to be gone for long periods of time, but this was starting to scare her. It only complicated her emotions to be sharing a house with Lemus. The more time she spent with him, the surer she became of his mental instability. He had the look of a starved and unpredictable animal. After showing him around the mansion and answering hundreds of his questions, Maeryn tried her best to avoid him, spending most of her time on the balcony staring at the city below. On days when Lemus stayed close to the house, she would go with one of the slaves into the city and help shop for food and other supplies.

As the morning sun rose over the bay, Maeryn watched from her balcony as she always did. Clouds had rolled in during the night and the sun was struggling to warm the air through the gray blanket. The skies over [Bastul](#) only lightened to a hazy purple. It made everything look drab which seemed fitting to Maeryn. It had been weeks now, but Adair had not returned. She feared the worst, that he was dead. Nothing except death would have kept him away for so long. Tears began to well up in her eyes and blurred her view of the city below. There was bitterness growing inside her. To be honest, it had been there for some time. It was the Empire and its stranglehold on their lives that angered her.

When she first met Adair, he had taken refuge in her parent’s barn, having been wounded in a battle that took place a short distance from her home in the north. She nursed him back to health with her mother’s help and in time, got to know Adair. The two of them fell in love and when it was time for Adair to leave, Maeryn’s father begged him to take Maeryn. It wasn’t a difficult decision for either of them; Maeryn was the most beautiful woman Adair had ever seen, Adair was a kind and respectable man who offered a life apart from the harsh conditions in which Maeryn had been raised.

But Adair was a soldier, and she knew what kind of life came with marrying a soldier, though Adair’s love blinded her from that reality for a long time. He was a man of genuine character. The confusing part was how he could be so kind and still function as a soldier. Didn’t soldiers need to be rough and crude by nature in order to do what was required of them? When they were first married she used to worry about his safety for that same reason. However, it wasn’t long before Adair’s reputation on the battlefield made its way to her ears. Everyone said he had a way with people. He was a born leader. People listened to him out of respect, without having to be ordered. He inspired others by being ferocious in the face of enemies and he instinctively knew where and how to move on the battlefield. Slowly, his reputation earned him higher and higher positions of authority. Eventually he was granted the position of Colonel and with it, governorship of [Bastul](#). But somehow, the enormous responsibility became a weight around his neck. And it wasn’t just Adair; Maeryn felt it as well. They started to feel trapped. Now Adair was gone. The probability of his death caused a loneliness in Maeryn’s heart that went deeper than anything she had experienced before. She was bitter that their lives always had to be in accordance with the goals of the Empire. *The good of the nation always outweighs the good of individuals.* She was tired of living a life dictated by others.

“It’s beautiful, isn’t it?”

The voice behind her was startling.

“The Southern Jewel is what they call it in [Orud](#).” Lemus was staring past her and looking at the city which surrounded the bay and sprawled into the foothills of the mountain-range to the east. If he realized he had startled her, he wasn’t showing it. He seemed to be reveling in his newfound power.

Maeryn wasn’t sure how to respond and only managed to nod and smile.

“Now what do you have to cry about?” he asked in an almost believably caring tone, noticing the tears on her face.

She just looked at him and couldn’t manage to find any words. If he was dense enough not to realize, then he could go on wondering for all she cared.

He walked over to the railing and stood next to her. “I think I’ve been pretty generous so far,” he stated calmly. “You’ve had several days to yourself. I don’t know of many men who would wait that long for a new wife.”

Maeryn’s heart began to race at the sound of his lusting voice. She knew what it meant to have another man assume all of Adair’s responsibilities. She knew that her body would soon belong to Lemus as well, but the transfer of authority hadn’t been made official yet. It was clear that Lemus didn’t care.

“I need more time, please,” she whispered as she turned and walked into the bedroom.

Lemus’ footsteps came quickly behind her and she ran for the bedroom door in a panic. She only made it a few steps before Lemus caught hold of her braided hair, snapping her head backward with searing pain.

“I wasn’t asking,” he said with gritted teeth in her ear.

She scrambled to get away but he was too strong, using his full weight on her back to force her to the ground. She wanted to scream, but she knew that there wasn’t anyone to come to her aid. The only souls in the house were slaves who wouldn’t think of interfering. She was helpless and the only thing she could do was lie still.

She wasn’t sure how long she lay on the floor after it was over. Her hot face was pressed against the cool stone floor. Her eyes traced a crack in the stone as it meandered from underneath her nose to a point in the middle of the room where it fragmented into a dozen other cracks. She never noticed little things like that before. Probably because she was always distracted by how good her life used to be.

Maeryn struggled to her feet, moving slowly at first. Her body ached and her scalp was tender from Lemus pulling on her hair. As she stood in her bedroom she noticed the wet area on the stone floor where her face had been only a moment ago. It was proof that she had been crying, but right now, she couldn’t feel any emotion.

She watched her feet move in small steps toward the door of her bedroom and figured they must know better than she where to go. She felt detached, as if the whole thing were a story told by a friend that was now beginning to fade from memory. Maeryn’s feet continued to move and when they stopped, she found herself in the garden. A slight wind had picked up and the air was a little cooler than normal. The clouds were gone, but the sky was still hazy as if some invisible force was trying to dampen the sunshine.

She sat down on a low stone wall that ringed a flower bed, and winced at the pain it caused. She watched as the leaves danced in the breeze and wondered what it would be like to be a flower; no one to please, no one to bother you. All you would have to do is stand in the sun with your friends and be beautiful. People would admire you for what you were and they would feed you and take care of you. Without warning, a wave of sorrow overwhelmed her and the tears began to fall.

The following day, while watching the city from her balcony, Maeryn saw Kael and Saba walking up the cobblestone road. She couldn't contain her excitement, turning to run back inside the house. After two steps, she stopped and doubled over in pain. Her excitement had gotten the better of her and she cursed her own stupidity. Her body hadn't healed enough for her to run and she waited until the pain in her abdomen faded, leaving only a dull ache between her legs. By the time she got to the garden, the two were just entering the courtyard through the north gate. Maeryn walked down the steps and crossed the bare expanse between them, the gravel crunching softly underneath her sandaled feet.

Saba stepped to the side and watched as Maeryn bent down to embrace her son, moving carefully.

"Oh I've missed you," she said, kissing Kael on the forehead.

He showed no signs of embarrassment, as others of his age might have. He just smiled and hugged her back.

Maeryn stood up, rubbing tears from her eyes, trying to regain her composure.

Saba made eye contact and gave her a questioning look.

Maeryn returned his gaze and placed her hand on Saba's arm. "Well," she managed. "I guess it's time for you to meet him," she said, giving Saba a wrinkled eyebrow as an answer. Taking Kael by the hand, she led them across the courtyard, toward the house.

Before they reached the garden steps, Lemus stepped out from behind the slave quarters and leaned against the building, exuding the arrogance that Maeryn had come to expect from him. "Come introduce yourselves," he ordered.

Saba slowed his pace as if he knew, just by looking, what type of man this was.

Lemus straightened himself and came out onto the steps, stopping just before the bottom. His face was beaming with forced happiness and he appeared to wait patiently while the three crossed the courtyard and stopped at the bottom of the steps.

Lemus towered above Maeryn and Kael with the added height of the steps upon which he was standing, but was still only level with Saba. It was obvious that he was uncomfortable with this arrangement; it defeated the whole purpose of standing where he was.

"I am Saba," stated the old man, looking directly into Lemus' eyes. After a few seconds of silence, it was apparent that Kael didn't feel like introducing himself. "And this is Kael," he added.

Lemus looked down at the child and waited for him to say something. When nothing happened, he bent down and waved a hand in front of Kael's face.

Kael did nothing but blink.

"Is your child deaf?"

Maeryn decided not to acknowledge the question.

"Or just a half-wit perhaps," Lemus continued with a sneer.

Saba decided to comment on the observation. "It is difficult for a child to know what to say when confronted with a man of such power and majesty as yourself." The statement was obviously sarcastic to those who knew Saba, but the serious way he delivered it confused Lemus, who took a moment to decide whether or not he agreed.

"Very well then," he replied. "Come inside; you must tell me what you've been up to." The four walked through the garden and into the house together but Lemus led the way and missed the smiles shared between the others.

Chapter 8

The next day, Maeryn pulled a chair out onto the balcony that had become her refuge. There was something soothing about watching the ocean glitter in the sunlight. Lemus left for the city just after sunrise and she hadn't seen him since. She felt safer when he was gone. He was so unpredictable. She tried to shake the thoughts out of her head and think about more positive things, but it was difficult. She kept thinking about Adair and why he had abandoned his family.

He didn't abandon you, or anybody else for that matter! That's not the kind of person he is.

She was worn out by the emotional drain of wavering between bitterness about her situation and worrying about the safety of Adair. She closed her eyes to picture Adair's face. It came instantly. His deep brown eyes, strong jaw, his dark hair...

Abruptly, the sound of screaming jolted her from her thoughts and the vision of Adair vanished. She listened for a second and realized that it was coming from the courtyard on the other side of the house. Maeryn jumped to her feet, and hurried through her bedroom and down the stairs, following the screams. She knew somehow it was related to Lemus.

* * * *

When he heard the screaming, Kael was watching a grasshopper cling to a blade of grass on the side of the cobblestone road, just outside of the wall which surrounded the hilltop estate. He knew it was Ajani as soon as he heard it. Though the slave boy hadn't ever screamed about anything as far as Kael could remember, he knew his voice well. Kael immediately rose to his feet and ran between two guards who were standing at attention on either side of the entrance into the courtyard. Once inside, Kael darted across the gravel landscape and headed for the garden. He took the short flight of stairs at the entrance in two leaps and skidded to a halt. What he saw on the other side of the garden made his body go weak with fear.

Lemus was crouched over the crumpled body of Ajani who was lying on his side, trying to shield his face. The screaming had stopped but the dull thud of Lemus' fists pounding the body of the child underneath him was even worse.

"I'll teach you to talk back to me," grunted Lemus between excited breaths.

"Stop it," screamed Kael, but Lemus didn't listen. He just kept hitting Ajani who had stopped moving. "Stop it," he yelled again in the loudest voice he could manage, but Lemus didn't even seem to know he was there.

The paralyzing effects of fear quickly gave way to empowering feelings of anger. *I have to stop him!* He ran back down the steps and turned right, reaching the supply shed in seconds. He threw open the doors and stepped inside, looking for anything that could be used as a weapon. Seeing a pitchfork leaning against the wall, he grabbed it and ran back toward Ajani as quickly as his little feet would carry him.

When Kael reached Ajani, there was an eerie silence. Lemus was standing with his head pointed toward the sky, facing away from Kael. His arms hung limp at his sides, blood dripping from his knuckles. Ajani was covered in blood and lay on the ground unmoving.

Rage welled up inside Kael and he ran at Lemus, holding the pitchfork in front of him.

Lemus continued to stare at the sky until the last second when he turned and jumped to the side.

One tine of the pitchfork punctured his right thigh and he yelped as Kael kept charging, driving it into his leg. When it hit something hard, Kael let go and took a few steps back, realizing what he had just done.

Lemus yelled at the top of his lungs as he grabbed the gardening tool and angrily ripped it from his leg. Without pausing, he gripped the shaft with both hands and lurched forward, swinging the handle at Kael.

Kael wasn't fast enough to dodge it but put his hands up to guard himself. The thick wooden handle crashed into his forearm and then his face, breaking through the useless defense. Kael felt his head thrown to one side and his feet lifted off the ground before his whole body hit the dirt.

* * * *

Maeryn screamed as she saw Kael's tiny body thrown to the ground. "What are you doing?"

Lemus turned toward her and then looked to the guards just coming in through the gate. He ignored her as if she hadn't said anything at all. "Put that brat in restraints," he ordered the guards.

The two soldiers ran to Kael's limp body and each grabbed an arm.

Maeryn came down the steps from the house. "Don't you dare touch him," she shouted. "Stay back or you'll be put to death as well."

Maeryn stopped dead in her tracks and turned to Lemus, who was now standing with a bloody pitchfork in his hand, looking as though he was waiting for an opportunity to use it. It took her a second to realize what he had said. "...as well?"

"Any attack on an Orudan soldier is punishable by death." He threw the pitchfork across the garden and it clanged off the stone building.

It was only then that she realized what had happened. She saw the body of Ajani lying in the dirt, the blood running down Lemus' leg, the pitchfork, and her son being dragged away.

"But he's just a child," she pleaded, tears now running down her face.

Lemus repeated himself. "ANY attack is punishable by death." It was a law well known throughout the Orudan Empire, but no one had ever heard of it being applied to a child. Of course, no child had ever attacked an Orudan soldier.

"But..." she began, not really knowing how to argue the matter.

Lemus pointed his finger at her and spoke loudly over the sound of her voice. "You are both under my custody and therefore my property. If you wish to join your son in death, by all means, keep talking."

"NO!" Maeryn screamed with everything that was in her. She felt panic take over her mind and body, telling her to run after Kael. He needed her protection, but she knew that Lemus would kill her. She began to shake with frustration, overwhelmed with emotions that she couldn't act on. The internal conflict was too much and she felt her knees start to wobble.

Another pair of guards entered the courtyard. "Go fetch me a doctor," Lemus said to one of the men. "And you, give me a hand." The other soldier quickly ran to his aid, throwing his arm around his superior and helping him limp his way out of the garden.

Maeryn's knees gave out and she collapsed in the dirt. Her sobbing drowned out everything around her.

She lay in the garden for some time, in a trance, vaguely aware of what was going on around her. Someone must have taken Ajani away because he was gone by the time she gained enough strength to lift her head. She remembered one of the slaves offering to help her and she shooed him away, but she didn't remember how long ago that had been.

Maeryn feebly climbed to her feet. The drag marks from Kael's feet ran next to her and she traced the path with her eyes. They led toward the courtyard and disappeared around the slave quarters.

She started moving. Her eyes were still crying, but she was disconnected from them. When she came to her senses, she found herself in the kitchen. At some point she must have decided to kill him. She was holding a butcher knife and wasn't sure exactly how it came to be in her hand. It felt comforting there, resting heavily in her clenched fist. She felt powerful, unlike the past couple of weeks. She looked at the long blade and the idea to kill him made sense. *Adair is dead. Kael will be executed. I've lost everything now! If Lemus ever intends to get rid of me, I should at least take him with me. I won't be able to do it during the day. He's too strong for that. No, I'll wait until he sleeps.* Of course, she would be executed as soon as they found out who did it, but it seemed a fitting end to everything that had occurred in the last few weeks.

"There are better ways to get back at him, Miss."

Maeryn turned around to find Zula standing in the corner of the kitchen. This slave woman was in charge of the whole house and had been with their family for several years. Maeryn hadn't heard ten words from her in the entire time she worked for them and it was strange to hear her speak now.

"What?"

"I know what you feel, Miss. If you kill this man, you will be put to death. That would not be enough punishment for what he has done."

"You don't understand," Maeryn countered, trying to sound as authoritative as possible. As soon as she said it, she regretted her words. Although she wasn't his mother, Zula had raised Ajani from a baby.

"I understand better than you, Miss," the dark skinned woman shot back. "I have seen more trials in my life than you will ever see, even if you were to live ten lifetimes." As Zula spoke, her intense dark eyes fought back the tears that had every right to spill down her face. There was an incredible strength in her that Maeryn had never noticed before, but when she spoke again, her words were softer. "You are a strong woman who has lived an easy life. But that has changed. You will see how the rest of the world lives now." She paused. "There are better ways to get back at a man, especially one of such power." Zula turned around and started to walk out of the kitchen.

"He's going to kill him," Maeryn cried after the slave woman. Tears began to run down her face again and she suddenly felt embarrassed for crying in front of a woman who had seen so much heartache. "Did you see what he did to Ajani?"

"Yes, ma'am, I did," the dark-skinned woman said flatly, turning back to Maeryn.

Maeryn wiped the tears from her eyes. "How can you just stand there as if nothing happened?"

"...because it is useless to do anything about it, and I have had much practice pretending nothing has happened."

A moment of silence followed as Maeryn considered Zula's words.

"Before your husband, I had another master. He was a cruel man." She paused, unable to speak what she was thinking. Tears rolled down her cheeks, but her eyes never faltered. "There were many things he did to me, and the others. There was nothing we could do. That was my whole life until I met your husband. After a while, you learn to hold it in."

"But why should I hold it in?"

When Zula continued, her voice was almost a whisper. "Because it's a gift. It'll make you stronger than you ever thought possible. It'll make you smarter. It'll build inside you until the moment comes when you find a way to make him suffer in such a way that it repays all of the things he's done to you."

It was clear that she was speaking directly out of her past. Maeryn was at once intrigued and scared.

"You are a strong woman, Miss," Zula said, her voice now sounding normal. "Don't let him break you." Zula turned and walked away, the conversation ending just as abruptly as it had begun.

Maeryn was speechless. Not only had Zula spoken as eloquently as any educated woman, but it was unheard of for a slave to speak so boldly to her master. She risked her own safety in order to share the honest truth. It was a much-needed message. *And she's right. It's not enough to kill him while he sleeps, especially when I would forfeit my own life in the process. No! There is more that can be done. I won't give Lemus the power to destroy my life.*

Chapter 9

Saba walked quickly down the dark hallway toward Lemus' study. The guard standing at attention outside the door straightened up as Saba neared. It seemed strange that the usual faces were not seen anymore in the mansion, having been replaced immediately as Lemus took control. But that was the least of Saba's worries on this night.

"I need to speak with him," he told the guard.

The man nodded and opened the door behind him, disappearing momentarily. His muffled voice could be heard through the door. There was a pause before he came back and tilted his head toward the room. Saba pushed the door open and strode into the room, his temper already rising.

Lemus sat at his desk, the glow of candlelight illuminating piles of parchment in front of him. Some were stacked in neat piles while others were spread out haphazardly, like a strong wind had blown through the room. He lazily lifted his head as Saba entered and motioned for Saba to come closer. "Come in. I've been meaning to have a few words with you."

Saba walked to the front of the desk, ignoring the few empty chairs along the wall. "I want to talk with you about Kael."

"Yes. I'm sure you do. My guards at the jail tell me that you have been over there, bothering them constantly to let the boy go." Lemus sat back in his chair.

"Yes. Of course I have. How could I do anything different?"

Lemus smiled at this. "Well, I have a few ideas. To start with, you will stay away from the jail. The boy attacked me and his actions were punishable by death. He has already been executed, so you are wasting your time. I understand that you were his tutor?"

"...am his tutor," Saba corrected.

Lemus laughed. "If you are indeed smart enough to call yourself anyone's tutor, then you should know that when someone is dead, it is no longer appropriate to speak of them in the present."

Saba gave no reaction to the man's reply.

"Well, isn't that interesting, a teacher with nothing to say? That's good. Finally you are starting to get the hang of this." Lemus paused while he scooted his chair back and stood up to look Saba in the eyes. "I do have something to say to you, however. Your room has been

emptied and its contents packed in boxes. I have provided a cart and a mule to carry your belongings. You will find everything waiting for you in the courtyard. I suggest that you take advantage of my generosity and leave the city tonight. I understand that you have many connections in the surrounding territory; I'm sure that you will find a place to stay."

"You have no right," Saba began, his voice suddenly rising above the normal conversational tone. "This has been my home and these people my family before anyone had ever heard of you..."

"I have every right," Lemus shot back, interrupting. "This is my home now and I do not wish to take care of old men who have the ability to take care of themselves. But more importantly, I no longer require the services of a tutor."

Saba opened his mouth to say more, but Lemus kept talking.

"If you have heard nothing of what I have said this night, hear this. My soldiers have orders to kill you on sight, if you are ever found in this city again. Take your belongings and leave. This is your last chance."

Saba stood motionless for a moment, looking into the eyes of Lemus. He had so many things to say, but none of them would accomplish anything except to risk his own life. After a few seconds, he spun on his heels and stormed out of the room. As he walked down the hallway, he overheard Lemus' voice.

"No more visitors."

"Yes, my lord," the guard replied.

* * * *

Kael found himself lying face-down on the floor of a small, dimly lit room. It was a stone floor with layers of dust covering everything except a few scuffed footprints and a small area in front of his face, cleared by his breath. Out of the corner of his eyes he could see that the walls and the ceiling were the same color as the floor and he assumed that they too were stone. At the other end of the room, he could barely make out dark vertical stripes that had the look of iron bars.

He lifted his head to get a better look at the room, but his vision began to swim and he suddenly felt nauseous. Putting his head back down on the dirty floor, he took deep breaths and waited for the nausea to pass. The floor felt cold against his hot face, which seemed to pulse with its own heartbeat. After his stomach settled, Kael managed to lift a hand to the side of his head where Lemus struck him. It felt swollen. The tips of his fingers passed over crusted areas of dried blood. The skin was bruised and sensitive to the touch.

Kael closed his eyes and rested his weary body, letting his ears explore the surroundings that his eyes were not yet able to. After a while he could make out the sound of water dripping. Someone coughed and it sounded far away. Suddenly, he heard a loud creak and a metal clang like a door closing.

Footsteps could be heard, faintly at first, but growing louder with every step. Eventually they stopped in front of the metal bars of his cell. Kael opened his eyes and squinted to see who it was, but his vision was blurry; he couldn't focus on anything beyond the metal bars. He blinked a few times, but it didn't seem to help much. He dared not lift his head again, so he waited to see what would happen.

The squeal of metal upon metal sounded harsh against the silence. Whoever it was had opened the door and stepped into his cell, leaving the door open behind him. The blurry shape moved slowly forward and Kael looked up without lifting his head. The person began to take shape and definition as it got closer, revealing the man's features and the bandage around his leg.

“Are you surprised to see me?” asked the man.

Kael didn't answer.

“Oh, it wasn't quite as bad as it looked. You, on the other hand, don't seem to be doing so well.”

The sounds of Lemus' voice hurt Kael's ears, which felt hot and tender. He tried to ignore both the man's loud voice and the intended message of his words. Suddenly, there was a flicker of blurred movement and Kael felt Lemus' foot crash into his stomach, throwing him against the back wall. All of the air shot out of his lungs and he started to panic, fighting for a breath. Just when he thought he couldn't go any longer without air, his lungs started to work again, accepting only small breaths at a time.

Lemus stood in the middle of the room, unmoving.

Kael pushed himself up into a sitting position to be ready for another attack. He still felt a little nauseous, but the fear was causing it to wear off quickly.

Lemus didn't advance, but stayed in the middle of the room and crossed his arms.

“That's better,” he said, as if Kael had been wrong to be lying down before. “You know, your father wasn't perfect either.” He trailed off, trying to choose the right words.

“Did you know...did he ever tell you what he did with criminals? I'll bet he didn't. It's actually quite admirable.” Lemus took a few steps forward and crouched down in front of Kael.

“Your father knew that everyone had a use to the Empire, even criminals. Usually they could be bribed in some way, or turned into informants, but sometimes that wouldn't work. So your father would put them in jail, keep them without food or water for days, until it was time. Then a jailer would come in, put a black bag over their head and lead them into the execution room. There they were given the opportunity to confess all their wrongdoings or be tortured and if they withheld nothing, they would be released. But they weren't released. After the torturing, the executioner would come out and...” Lemus dragged a thumb across his neck. The stubble under his chin made a loud scratching noise in the small room.

Kael showed no expression toward Lemus' story and it angered the tall man.

“It is a practice I intend to continue and I am pleased that you have chosen to participate.”

A large smile spread across his face. He was trying to scare Kael, but it wasn't working. Lemus rose to his feet, wincing slightly in the process and turned around. Kael noticed his limp just as his features began to blur into a vaguely man-shaped blotch in his vision. The loud metal clang of the door signaled the end of the one-sided conversation.

The next few days were much the same as the first—at least it seemed like days, though it was impossible to tell without seeing the sunlight. Everything looked just the same to him. The same stone walls, the same flickering torchlight from down the hallway. Hunger gnawed at him like an insect buzzing in his ear. He was uncomfortable no matter what he did. Sitting, standing, pacing the floor; nothing seemed to help.

Mother's probably worried. I wonder if she even knows I'm here. Poor Ajani. He wasn't moving and I can't remember anything after Lemus hit me. Kael still remembered the first time he saw a dead rat. It was just lying there on its side, its mouth open, like it died in pain. He remembered the nightmares he used to have and how he would cry when he thought about how it used to be a live animal, and now it was just a lump of dead flesh. I hope Ajani's not dead! And Father too. I hope he's alive, out there somewhere on a secret mission that he has to do by himself. It was lonely in the cell. I wish Saba was here with me. He always makes things fun and interesting.

The creaking sound of a metal door interrupted his thoughts.

It must be morning. There was always more movement and sounds right after Kael woke up, only this time, he hadn't slept.

He heard footsteps coming down the hallway and the sound made his heart quicken. He wasn't sure why he was scared, maybe they were finally bringing some food. Lemus was probably just trying to scare him for a few days, letting him think about what he had done.

The footsteps were getting louder and Kael instinctively backed away from the bars. A large man appeared in front of his cell. He was a jailer and it looked to Kael as if this man hadn't seen the light of day in several years. He was fat, with pale skin and uneven stubble that made him look like he was dead. Kael had never seen a dead person before, but he imagined that they would look like this. The man pulled a ring of keys from his belt and began to unlock the cell door. Kael watched for several seconds before he noticed the piece of black fabric hanging from the jailer's belt. *A hood!*

All at once, Lemus' story came back to him. He was coming to take Kael to the torture chamber. Kael backed away, but there was nowhere to go.

The jailer hooked the key ring back on his belt and pushed open the door, stepping into the cell. With one hand held out to the side of his overweight body to prevent the prisoner from escaping, he pulled out the black hood.

Kael saw an opening and ran toward the man, ducking under his legs.

The jailer was quicker than he looked. He pulled his legs together just in time to catch Kael by the waist. Kael tried to kick and wiggle his way out from the man's legs, but the jailer dropped to the ground, pinning him in place. It felt like a horse had fallen on top of him. There was nothing he could do but wait and try to keep breathing. The man slipped the hood over Kael's head, then pulled his arms behind him and tied them with rope.

Then the man stood up and lifted Kael to his feet, shoving him down the hallway. Kael stumbled along, not knowing which direction to go. The sour smell of the hood made his head spin and combined with the inability to see, Kael lost all sense of direction. The jailer's heavy hand grabbed hold of his shoulder and pushed him along.

They walked in this manner for a short while before the jailer pulled Kael to a stop. The jingling of keys could be heard as the man searched for the one to open the door that must be in front of them.

Kael could barely make out the orange glow of torches through the thick hood. He waited until the man let go of his shoulder, then jumped away and ran down what he thought was the hallway. He followed the line of the torches, keeping in between where he thought they were. The laugh of the jailer was loud and unexpected. Suddenly he hit a wall with full speed where one should not have been and slumped to the floor. His head was ringing and he fought to stay conscious as the smell of the hood over his head made him want to vomit.

The jailer caught up with Kael and pulled him to his feet again.

It's useless. There's no way to escape.

The jailer shoved him through the door that was now unlocked and immediately Kael felt a difference in the air. They were outside. The crunch of gravel under his feet was the only sound as the jailer pushed Kael's shoulder, keeping him moving forward. After a short distance, they stopped again.

"Put him in the back," someone said.

Then, Kael was lifted off the ground and into the back of a covered wagon. A harsh clank sounded as the iron gate was shut and locked. *Is this the executioner? Is he taking me away?*

Outside the wagon, someone mumbled something.

“He’ll have a witness,” the jailer replied. His voice was hushed, but Kael could still make out his words.

“I don’t like this,” the other man said.

“Just stick to the plan and keep your mouth shut.”

The carriage began to move. Kael waited nervously, completely confused. He expected to be taken to the executioner’s chamber to have his head cut off, but something else was happening.

After a few minutes, the wagon stopped again and Kael was taken out and walked across a wooden dock. He could hear the lapping of the water underneath him and the creak of the timbers that supported their weight. They changed direction a few times, then walked across a plank and onto the deck of a ship. His footsteps sounded more hollow than before, and the ship moved with the gentle motion of the water.

Kael was taken below deck and stopped in front of an open door. Suddenly, the hood was pulled from his head and he was shoved from behind. With his hands still tied behind him, he fell to the floor in the middle of a small room. The door slammed behind him. Kael lifted his head and saw that his room was completely bare. No furniture and no windows except for a small peep hole in the middle of the door. It was another jail cell.

The ship began to move and Kael crawled to the corner of the room, leaning against the wall for support.

Where are they taking me?

* * * *

The sound of retching echoed down the hallway and Zula quickened her pace toward the noise. Patches of sunlight dappled the steps leading up to the master’s chambers and Zula rushed past, wondering what horrible thing was happening now. At the top of the stairs, she pushed open the bedroom doors and turned toward the bathing room, relieved that Lemus had left the house early in the morning. There, hunched over in the corner, was Maeryn, unaware that anyone else was in the room.

It took Zula only a second to realize what was happening. “Whose child is it in your womb?”

Maeryn lifted her head, startled, but didn’t turn to face the slave woman. “What are you talking about?” she mumbled, still facing the wall.

“Don’t bother trying to hide it from me,” countered Zula. “It is going to be obvious in a few months anyway.”

Maeryn turned around. Her eyes were red with tears and her skin was a few shades paler than usual. “It’s Adair’s.”

“Are you sure?” the slave woman asked, not wholly believing her answer.

“Yes I’m sure.” Maeryn stared at the ground and began to cry again.

Zula resisted the urge to hug the other woman. Maeryn would need to toughen up quickly if she hoped to survive now, although, it was becoming obvious that she didn’t care either way.

“You’re worried about the safety of this child because of what happened to Kael.”

Maeryn replied only with a nod.

“How will my new master know that it is not his child?”

Zula’s question hung in the air as Maeryn considered the words. After a long silence, she lifted her head. “You’re right. He would have no idea that it’s not his child.” The tears had stopped, replaced by a gleam of hope in her eyes.

Zula pushed on, hoping to further encourage the lady. “It would be the safest way to bring this child into the world. Men like him think nothing of hurting other people, but are protective of their own children.”

Maeryn’s face turned from one of anguish to one of restrained happiness in a matter of seconds. “Thank you.”

“M’lady, might I make a suggestion?” the dark-skinned woman asked, fully intending to give her opinion anyway. When Maeryn didn’t object, she continued. “Your life may have changed for the worse, but you have many opportunities around you. You must choose to see them.”

Maeryn nodded her head, considering the words.

Even Zula had to admit the oddity of giving advice to her master, but something told her that this woman was different. This woman would listen and not be offended.

“Zula, would you please fetch me some water to clean this up?”

“I’ll clean it, Miss.”

“No. I couldn’t let you do that,” Maeryn objected, repulsed by the thought.

“I don’t mind. You need to get some rest.” Zula turned around and walked away, not leaving any more room for discussion.

Chapter 10

The passage aboard the prison ship had taken days. *How many? It must be five or six.* Kael was never allowed out of his cell, so he couldn’t be sure. But now it was evening. The stars were out as they led him from the docks into a stone fortress in the side of a mountain. There was no hood over his head this time as the Orud soldiers prodded him down a hallway. On both sides were cells. Some were empty, but most contained at least one person, huddled in the corner. They quickly left the cells behind and continued down a corridor that seemed to stretch on forever. Kael shuddered at the thought of going so deep into the mountain.

Finally, at the end of the hall were two torches flanking an iron gate. One guard lowered his spear toward Kael’s chest, while the other pulled out a knife and grabbed hold of his tunic.

“What are you doing?”

“Shut up,” the guard said.

He began to cut Kael’s tunic from his body, while Kael held as still as he could, helpless with his hands tied behind his back. When the tunic was gone, the guard grabbed Kael’s loincloth and cut one side, nicking the skin.

Kael flinched, then felt a trickle of blood move down his thigh.

“Hold still,” the guard snapped.

Tears of shame began to roll down his face and he shut his eyes to make them stop. He was completely naked now.

“Go,” the soldier ordered.

Kael slowly walked through the unlocked gate, fearing what he would find inside. As his eyes adjusted to the dark, the harsh sound of the slamming gate rang out among the stone walls and floor, making him jump. In the darkness he could see movement. There were other people in the cell, lots of them. And the cell was big. But it was too dark to see clearly.

Moving to his right, Kael felt for the wall, then slid down and huddled on the floor. He pulled his knees up to his chin and waited. For what, he didn’t know. He wasn’t about to sleep, so he just stared into the darkness and waited.

Hours later, a guard lit torches along a hallway outside the chamber opposite from Kael. With the illumination, Kael could begin to make out the features of his surroundings. It was a circular chamber, a hundred feet across. The only way in or out was the gate that Kael came through, behind and to his left. On the opposite wall were three barred windows showing a view of the hallway outside their cell. It was like a pen used to corral animals. Only there were no animals. There were children, dozens of them, all boys like himself. None of them had clothing.

Kael shifted his weight and a fist-sized chunk of rock fell from the wall behind his shoulder. He reached out and grabbed the jagged shard and placed it back in the void it left. Then he paused. *I wonder if there's a way out of this place.* Scanning the walls, his eyes settled on the barred windows. He wondered how far apart each bar was and if he might be able to squeeze through.

And Kael wasn't the only one. Just as the thought occurred to him, a boy climbed up into one of the windows and reached his arm through the bars. A small group quickly formed around the boy, cheering him on. He was small, smaller than Kael, but it was obvious that he wouldn't fit through. His shoulder and chest could fit, but the bars were too close together to allow his head to get through.

Kael stood up and started to walk over, then stopped abruptly as he saw something dark sprout from between the boy's shoulder blades. Some in the group let out screams of shock, and scattered like rats. The boy fell backward off the window ledge and landed hard on the stone floor. His lifeless body lay perfectly still with a spear thrust through his chest.

"Stay back from the windows," a guard yelled from somewhere in the hallway.

Kael instantly lost his breath and slumped to the ground. His heart raced with fear, but he couldn't take his eyes off the boy. His motionless body lay on the ground, his mouth open in a grimace of pain. Where a living being used to be, there was now only dead flesh. *Just like a rat!* He started to cry and covered his face with his hands so that the others wouldn't see him.

The day dragged on, if it was in fact daytime. Kael kept to himself, as did most of the other children. The dead boy's body still lay under the window; no one had come to take it away. Kael overheard some of the boys talking about food. Usually they were given something to eat in the middle of the day, but that didn't happen this day. When nightfall came, signaled by the guard extinguishing the torches in the hallway, the air grew cold and Kael found himself shivering. *It's never this cold in Bastul. Where have they taken me? And what kind of jail is this?* As the temperature continued to drop, he huddled against the wall and wrapped his arms around his legs in an attempt to keep warm. It worked for a while, but then the shivering returned. He tried sleeping, but was too uncomfortable. His stomach began to growl. The minutes crept by slowly and Kael couldn't help himself as he started to cry again.

Shortly after the guard came to light the torches, the air grew warmer. Kael stayed huddled against the wall and slept for a few minutes, enjoying the relief from the cold. When he awoke, he could see that most of the other boys were clustered in groups now, except for a few others scattered around the chamber that were still asleep. But after a few minutes, he noticed that they weren't sleeping. Their skin looked pale and they weren't moving. *They froze to death!* Kael suddenly felt nauseous and his stomach heaved, but there was nothing to vomit.

By midday, the hunger pains in Kael's stomach returned, and with them, a growing anger. *We're all starving to death. How can they treat children like this?* A sudden squeal and the sound of the opening gate brought Kael out of his thoughts and turned everyone's attention to the one side of the room.

Running through the opening came a wild boar, grunting in agitation. It ran forward about ten feet and stopped, looking around at its new surroundings.

Kael immediately backed away, knowing that boars were extremely dangerous.

The other boys did the same, all except one. He had dark hair and scars on his back like he had endured many beatings. He walked forward cautiously, with his hands held out to either side.

The boar turned its head to look, then shifted its weight nervously. As the boy approached, it grew more agitated, grunting and turning toward the threat.

The boy continued to come forward, slowly making his way to the animal.

The boar charged forward, squealing as it ran.

The boy turned to run just as the wild beast made contact with his legs. He tripped and fell to the ground.

The boar was on him in an instant, biting mercilessly amid screams of pain and desperation.

Another boy ran forward and kicked the boar in the side of the abdomen, but the animal easily absorbed the blow and turned to attack him as well.

The rest of the boys, including Kael, backed away from the savage struggle. After a few minutes, it was over. The screaming had stopped and the air was still. The boar was breathing heavily, blood dripping from its sharp tusks. The two bodies of the boys lay on the floor, their skin lacerated beyond recognition.

Kael clenched his fists in rage. They were without food. They were naked and left to freeze in the night. And now, they were trapped in a cage with a dangerous animal. It was all too much!

A few of the boys broke away from the group and started moving slowly toward the boar. That's when it dawned on Kael. *We can eat it! If we can kill it.*

"We have to do this together," one of the boys said, "or we'll just end up like the others."

Kael searched the crowd and found the one who had spoken the first intelligible words since their captivity. He was short, with sandy colored hair. He looked to be about twelve, just a couple years older than Kael.

"We need to surround it and attack at the same time," he told the small group that was now forming around him. Roughly half of the remaining boys were joining in, while the other half backed away, scared by the prospect of death.

Kael walked over. If there was going to be a meal, he was going to make sure that he was included. As he approached, the other boys began to spread out and move in the general direction of the boar. There were thirteen including Kael. They started slowly, getting into position so that they formed a circle around the animal. Then, they began to close in and make the circle tighter.

"Tighten up over there," the boy instructed. "He's going to run as soon as he gets nervous. Don't let him out of the circle."

When they were within ten feet, the boar bolted and tried to run between two boys who dropped on the animal's back. The circle closed in quickly and fell on the animal, but not before it turned on the first two boys. After a few seconds of struggle, one of them fell to the ground, bleeding from the stomach and screaming.

The rest of the group pounced on the animal and beat it furiously with their fists, but it didn't seem to make a difference. Someone else tripped and the boar was on him in an instant.

Kael reached in and grabbed hold of the animal's neck, attempting to pull it off the boy. But the boar turned quickly and punctured his left forearm with its tusk. Kael stumbled back a few

steps, squeezing his arm as the blood flowed down to his hand. Anger boiled inside him. *I have to kill it. I have to eat. I can't die here.* Then a thought came to him.

He ran over to the section of wall where he had spent the first night. Feeling along the stone blocks, his hand settled on the loose chunk that had fallen out. He pulled the jagged rock out of the wall and turned it over in his hands so that the sharpest point faced outward. Then he ran back and jumped over the crowd, landing on the animal's back. Grabbing a fistful of coarse hair to keep from being thrown off, Kael brought the rock down as hard as he could on the animal's head. It flinched and let out a squeal—its first sign of weakness.

Kael held on with all his might and continued to beat on the animal's skull while the other boys punched with their fists and kicked with their feet. After a few seconds, the animal fell over on its side. Kael fell to the ground with it, but kept hammering with the rock until his arms and face were covered in its blood. The group slowly backed away when they realized that the animal was dead.

When he knew that he was finally out of danger, Kael slumped to the floor in exhaustion. His left arm was numb from the puncture wound. He let go of the bloody rock and as it fell to the ground, he saw that two of the fingers on his right hand were broken and sticking out at odd angles.

There was no wood to make a fire, so the boys tore at the flesh of the boar like ravenous wolves. They had all gone without food for so long that taste meant nothing. They were going to die if they didn't eat the raw meat. By the time the guard came to light the torches, two others died from their injuries. But despite the growing numbers of human bodies now littering the chamber, Kael slept a little better, without the gnawing hunger pains. His small group also huddled close together for warmth. It was strange at first, being naked. But they all knew that survival was more important than their pride.

For the next few days, Kael's group continued to eat off the animal carcass, while the others began to die off from starvation and exposure to the cold night air. Every morning they woke to find a few more bodies on the floor. Kael thought that they should give some food to the others, but he didn't say anything. They had risked their lives to kill the boar while the others stood back in fear. The consensus among his group was that they had earned it.

Kael's face exploded with pain. He flinched and rolled to the side, stopping in a crouching position. It was dark. *Is it night? Was I sleeping? What's happening?* In the darkness, he could just barely see that the others were attacking as a group. The carcass of the boar was being dragged away. And the boy who had punched him lunged forward again.

Kael thrashed from side to side as the boy, who was much bigger, grabbed hold of his wrists and wrestled him to the ground. He pinned Kael on his back and began to drive a knee into his side. With each blow, Kael felt a shooting pain through his ribs and the air pounded from his lungs. In a moment of panic, he lifted his head and lashed out with his teeth, catching the larger boy in the neck. When Kael realized where his mouth was, he bit hard with his teeth and immediately felt blood fill his mouth. The boy screamed and thrashed violently, but Kael just bit harder until the flesh came off in his mouth.

The boy released his grip on Kael's wrists and slumped over, convulsing for a few seconds before going still. Kael pushed him off and struggled to his feet. The fight was over, and most of his group had survived. The others were all dead. It had been a fight for survival. But that fact didn't make Kael feel any better. He knew he had just killed someone and the thought made him feel more horrible than he'd ever felt. He leaned over and tried to spit the blood out of his

mouth, but the taste wouldn't go away. His stomach heaved and he vomited on the cold stone floor. When he finished, he walked away from everyone and slumped down against the wall. He started to cry again and didn't stop until he fell asleep.

"How many?"

"All of them."

Kael woke at the sound of the voices which echoed through the chamber.

"I'll pay you a fair price," someone said.

The voices were coming from outside the gate where the boar had been let in. But then the conversation was over and the only thing that could be heard was the sound of retreating footsteps.

Kael wondered what the exchange of words meant. The only interaction with whoever was on the other side of the wall had been negative. *The boy they killed. The boar. What's it going to be this time?*

After what seemed like half an hour, the iron gate opened. Growing up in the port city of [Bastul](#), Kael had seen many foreigners from different parts of the surrounding territories, but never anyone who looked like the man walking through the gate.

His skin was pale, but with a yellowish tint. His black hair was pulled back into a single braid that ran all the way down to his waist. His oversized clothing consisted of what looked like a skirt that reached down to sandaled feet, with a jacket that covered his arms. The deep blue fabric shimmered in the torchlight, like the most expensive kind that his mother used to buy in [Bastul](#). In his hands, the man carried several small loaves of bread. And behind him, five other men followed who looked just like him, but dressed in long robes of a dull brown color. Each of these men also carried bread and folded clothing as well.

The strange man walked over to Kael's group.

The boys shrank against the wall.

"My sons," he spoke softly. "Do not be afraid. They cannot hurt you any longer. You are mine now and I will protect you." As he spoke, the man leaned down and began to hand out the loaves of bread, one by one, to each of the boys.

When Kael accepted his loaf, he looked into the dark, slanted eyes and saw compassion.

"After you've eaten, please clothe yourselves. We will make a journey to my home where you will be my guests."

Kael accepted the folded brown clothes and sandals from one of the other men, and dressed quickly. He was relieved to be able to cover himself. And for the first time in many days, he felt some measure of relief.

Chapter 11

Saba had been lying low for a while, staying with a friend who lived just outside of the city limits. He had been trying to keep busy with other things, but it wasn't working well. How could he leave Maeryn alone with that murderer? She wasn't safe and he felt it was his duty to keep an eye on her, which was why he found himself walking along the busy streets of [Bastul](#). He was trying to keep close to the most crowded areas, working his way up the hill toward his former home, hoping to blend in and thereby escape the eyes of the soldiers patrolling the city.

The market district was teeming with merchants hawking their goods. Saba had to run off a particular child who wouldn't take "no" for an answer. He was trying to sell a few small fish

that he said he had just caught in the bay. It was obvious that the child was working for someone else, probably only receiving a small percentage, if anything, for the sale of the fish. Eventually the child returned, following at a distance. Saba moved out of the main flow of people and over to a cart of figs. The fig merchant scurried quickly around the cart to meet this new customer.

“Fine day, isn’t it?” he said, in a shrill voice, easily piercing the cacophony of noises from the surrounding crowds.

“Yes, it is. I’ll have one please.”

“...only one? Why, a man of your size could not be filled by such a small...”

“I’ll have one,” he stated firmly, not wishing to barter.

“Fine...fine. Here you go. It just seems a shame for a man like you...”

Saba dropped a coin on the cart and took the fig, leaving before the man finished his sentence. He walked back into the crowd and continued along the street, waiting for the boy to approach him again. He wasn’t about to buy the fish when the money would be taken from the boy anyway, but the child could eat a fig and his master wouldn’t even know. After a few minutes, Saba felt a tug on the back of his sleeve. He spun around quickly, already knowing what he would say to the child.

But instead of the boy, Saba found a group of soldiers with their spears lowered, spreading out to prepare for a confrontation. The one who had tugged on his tunic stood close, his spear raised in confidence that the situation would be resolved verbally.

“Sergeant,” Saba said, not at all surprised by the situation.

“Come with me,” the soldier commanded.

Saba was escorted to an alley between two rows of merchant shops. There were eleven soldiers in all, including the sergeant. Five guarded the front of the alley and five guarded the back. The leader stayed close to Saba and spoke in a hushed voice.

“I have orders to kill you on sight.” He looked up and down the alley to make sure that no one was listening. “Since you are a friend of Adair’s, I will only ignore my orders once and I do so at my own peril. Leave this city or I will be forced to kill you.”

Saba nodded. “Thank you, Sir, for your kindness. I will do as you say.”

“You’d better,” the soldier warned. As he walked out to the street the others fell in behind him.

Saba waited awhile in the alley to catch his breath. There was just no way to keep in contact with Maeryn and the guard was very clear about what would happen if he tried. He had no choice but to leave. Someday, perhaps, he would return.

Maeryn will have to fend for herself. As the thought came to him, it was accompanied by doubt. He knew it would not be easy for her.

* * * *

Kael’s body recoiled, anticipating danger. His breaths were shallow and rapid, his eyes darting back and forth, searching for the threat. Suddenly, he remembered where he was and a wave of relief washed over him. *I was just dreaming. Safe now.*

The boys had traveled with the kind stranger and his men for a few days by ocean and land. Upon arriving at his mountain-top estate, they were fed, bathed, and their wounds dressed. Kael looked down to the bandage on his left forearm and the splint that kept his broken fingers from moving. With the other hand, he rubbed the stubble on his head where his hair used to be. The wound from Lemus had also been cleaned and dressed.

It had been late in the evening when they arrived, so he didn’t get a good look at his surroundings. But it was light outside now. His room was larger even than the one he had in

[Bastul](#). Gray stone walls surrounded a polished wood floor. Across the room to his right, was a giant wooden door standing eight feet tall. It was constructed of thick wooden planks, held together by ornate black hinges which spanned the width of the door and bolted to the frame. The only other objects in the room were a small table of rough-hewn timber in the corner, and a chest at the foot of the bed. Along the left wall was a window large enough for him to fit the table through. It was covered by thick wooden shutters that blocked almost all of the light, except for a tiny amount that seeped through the sides next to the wall.

A whistling sounded as a breeze was trying to force itself through the edges of the shutters. Leaving his bed, he walked to the window and opened the shutters. He was at least twenty feet off the ground, staring down at a gently rolling meadow with a high stone wall a hundred yards away. Beyond the wall, tufts of long pale grass protruded from clumps of snow that clung to the side of rocks and shadowy areas created by the setting sun. Kael had never seen snow before, though Saba had explained it to him. To the right, the meadow slowly rose until it blocked the horizon, leaving only a clear blue sky above. To his left, over the rooftops of several square buildings and one large circular structure, a wall of enormous mountains capped with white snow covered the horizon. *Where am I?* The mountains that he knew of, the ones north of [Bastul](#), were not this big and never had snow on them.

When he walked back to the bed, he noticed a neatly folded pile of clothing on the chest. On top was a tunic, which he quickly picked up, expecting to slip it over his head. But when he unfolded it, he was confused about how it was supposed to be worn. There were long sleeves, which were unusual for Kael, but at least he knew where to put his arms. The material was a dull brown color, but soft and slick, like it had been polished. He slid his arms into the appropriate places and paused, trying to decide what to do next. The front of the tunic was open, like a coat, with two flaps of fabric hanging in front of him. He wasn't sure how to proceed, but it was obvious that he needed more clothing; the tunic only hung down to his waist. He grabbed the other item of clothing and unfolded it.

"Pants," he said out loud.

The only reason he knew what they were was because his father had recently explained them to him. The soldiers in the Northern Territory wore these as the weather got colder. He slipped them on and fastened them at the waist, using the ties sewn into the front. He was not accustomed to wearing anything on his legs, but was grateful in light of the crisp chill in the air.

A knock sounded at his door. His heart quickened a little as he walked over and pulled on the handle. It didn't budge and the metallic sound of a lock being opened made him jump. Kael stepped back and the door opened to reveal a short man that looked like one of the servants. His skin had a yellow tint and his eyes were wide-set. Kael assumed that his hair was black, but could only look at his eyebrows for proof; his head was also shaved. Kael wondered if his own head was shaved for some purpose other than to treat his head wound.

When the man spoke, it was in a language foreign to Kael, but the inflection told him that it was a question. Kael shook his head to show that he didn't understand. The man looked at the floor for a moment before speaking again.

"Awake?" he asked in a strange accent.

Kael thought the answer was obvious, but nodded his head anyway.

"You dress...come with me," he continued, pointing at the flaps of fabric hanging from Kael's tunic.

Kael looked down at himself and then back to the man. "I don't know how...it's different than..."

Before he could finish his statement, the man stepped into the room and grabbed Kael's tunic. He wrapped the flap on Kael's right side across his body and secured it with ties on the inside of the left flap. He repeated the process with the other side, securing it to ties on the outside of his tunic. Kael watched, confused until the man was finished.

With that completed, the stranger walked over to the foot of Kael's bed and picked up the footwear off the floor. He placed them in Kael's hands and lifted his robe, showing Kael his own feet. These sandals were not really sandals at all. They completely covered the feet, but didn't extend to the lower part of the leg. They had laces, but instead of wrapping around the legs, they slid through holes and criss-crossed on top of the feet. It took a moment, but Kael eventually got the hang of it. The man waited patiently until Kael was finished.

Suddenly, he bent down and patted Kael's foot. "Shoe," the man said. He stood back up and nodded his head. "Shoe," he said again and pointed at Kael's feet.

"Shoe" Kael repeated, receiving a smile from the man.

"Come," he said, motioning for Kael to follow him as he left the room.

The tall doorframe opened into a long hallway that reminded him of the one in his home. The man turned to the left and walked down the hallway and Kael quickly fell into step behind him. Their footsteps plodded softly on the wooden plank floor, with the slight hollow sound of being above the ground. As they walked, Kael noticed that everything about this place was foreign. Not only were the ceilings constructed differently, but the stone walls were a dark gray color and seemed to be fitted together without mortar. Everything in [Bastul](#) was built from a white stone and covered with plaster on the inside.

"Where am I?"

The man slowed his pace and looked back over his shoulder, then shook his head.

Doesn't he know? Or maybe he can't say.

"Far away," the man replied and continued walking as if the answer was sufficient.

"Where are we going?"

"They tell me—wake child, bring him here."

The hallway ended at a landing overlooking a cylindrical room with stairs curving down to the next floor in both directions. The man chose the right-hand stairs and quickened his pace down to the lower level. Kael had to jog to keep up with him. The pair moved so quickly that Kael scarcely had time to notice the large iron sconces along the wall, illuminating the room as well as a discolored area of the stone wall where something had hung for a long period of time. There were no decorations.

It looks abandoned.

When they reached the bottom, the man slowed his pace to a walk and turned to the left, entering another hallway that led underneath the one outside Kael's room, heading in the opposite direction. The hall terminated at a large rectangular doorway, similar to what Kael was used to seeing at his home. It led to a spacious circular room lit with many torches. A crackling noise drew Kael's attention to the right where he saw a stone fireplace that jutted out from the wall. He could feel the heat on his face, even though it was twenty feet away. The walls of the room were stone, like the rest of the building. He looked up at the ceiling and saw that it was vaulted toward the center of the room. Thick beams radiated from the highest point, angling down to where they were embedded in holes at the top of the wall. Doors were placed at regular intervals around the circular wall, mirroring the hub and spoke construction of the ceiling.

At the center of the room was a long, wooden table set with an assortment of foods. There were plates of steaming meats arranged in groups of colors from dark to pale brown. In addition,

there were plates of cheeses, fruits, vegetables, and an assortment of breads. Two large pitchers sat at one end of the table, and though Kael couldn't see inside of them, the cups arranged around the pitchers told him that they contained the beverages. The whole room was filled with a mixture of aromas from the feast before his eyes. It was so much to take in all at once, that it took Kael a few seconds to notice that most of the other boys were already seated at the table.

Kael counted eleven chairs, eight of which were filled. Each boy's head was shaved, just like Kael's. Filling the ninth chair at the head of the table was the kind stranger who rescued them. That left two open chairs and Kael assumed that one was for him.

"Please have a seat," spoke the man at the head of the table who had now risen from his chair.

As Kael took his seat, he saw another robed man entering the room from the same place he had entered, followed by the boy who had been their leader during the attack on the boar. He seemed even more stunned than Kael by the surroundings. He was ushered to the table as well and when they had both taken their seats, the man at the head of the table pushed in his chair and remained standing.

"Now that you are all here, let us begin."

Suddenly, a door on the other side of the room opened and several men in robes came out. They surrounded the table and began to serve the food onto plates and pass them out, as if they had been waiting for a signal. As they worked, the man at the head of the table continued to speak.

"My name is Ukiru and I have a few things to say before we share our first meal together. The ten of you have been rescued from certain death. When I found you, you were naked, starving, and killing each other just to stay alive. This is no way for a person to live. But just as you were rescued, you were also redeemed for a purpose. You see, the world has cast you out like refuse. But I believe that you have a great deal of worth. Each one of you had a different beginning, but that is no longer relevant. Your former life was a breath away from ending. And that is how you should think of it. Dead! What is important now is that your lives are not your own. You have been rescued and given a wondrous gift, a new beginning."

His speech halted momentarily as he began to walk around the table. He was shorter than most men Kael had met and had a steady, careful gait, like the acrobats who used to perform in [Bastul](#) during the festivals.

"I worship a god who is powerful beyond any human comprehension. He used to rule this world until its inhabitants stopped worshiping him and became distracted with other, less-important things. So, he left this world and its people to their own devices for a time. This was many, many years ago. But the time is coming soon when he will return and claim this world once again. He will drive out all those who oppose him and those that worship other gods, bringing justice to this unjust world."

Kael looked around the table and could sense that the other boys were just as confused as he was. In [Bastul](#), talk of such things usually involved many gods. Most families had several gods in particular that they worshiped and prayed to throughout the day. One time, Saba told him of a group of people far to the east who believed in one god who created everything. But he was still confused. *What does this have to do with us?*

After making several passes around the room, the man had reached the head of the table again and paused behind his chair. "I know that this sounds strange. And right now you are probably wondering why you are here and what all of this has to do with you."

A few of the boys nodded their heads in confirmation, but Kael didn't move. It seemed like the man had just read his mind.

"I will try to be as plain as possible. A short while ago, the god whom we worship spoke to our High Priest."

Several murmurs could be heard around the room from the robed attendants.

"The High Priest told me that the time of our god's return is short at hand. He appointed me to a task. From the farthest reaches of the Orud Empire, choose ten children, boys. Choose from among those who have been cast out by the world, and bring them to this place to be raised in the order of an ancient and forgotten priesthood, the priesthood of the All Powerful. Once you reach the age of adulthood, you will present yourselves as gifts to our god, warrior-priests. He will then return and you will become his instruments of justice to reclaim his kingdom. And so I searched, and that is when I found you, caged like animals. There were only ten of you left and I believe the All Powerful himself preserved you for this task."

At this, the boys shifted in their seats.

Ukiru raised a hand in protest. "Now I know what you are thinking. This all sounds so strange and is too great a responsibility for mere children. I will not lie to you. It is perhaps the greatest responsibility that has ever been entrusted to mankind. But I will be honest with you. I am jealous of you all. It is a responsibility that I would have for myself. But I will have to be content with being your instructor. I assure you this will not be as difficult as it seems to you now. You will all be given the finest education. Your training as priests will be balanced with your training as warriors. You will make a steady transition from the boys you are now to the men you will become—the most powerful men this world has ever seen."

"What if we don't want to?" came a voice from across the table. It was the child who had led the attack on the boar.

"There is always one who must question," replied the man, with a smile. "But it is a good question. Why would you not want to do this? You will be fed and clothed. You will do more, see more, and learn more than any other child in this world. It will also be a lot of fun. And when it comes time for you to present yourself to the All Powerful, you will know that you are the most fortunate person in all the world."

"They can't keep me here," the boy said to himself, his voice almost a whisper.

"My dear son, there is nowhere for you to go. Even if you did try to leave, you are weeks away from the nearest city and you would starve before you reached it, that is, if you didn't freeze to death first. But of course, I could not let that happen. And I hope that you will come to love your new home."

Kael wished the boy would stay silent. He didn't see any reason to argue with the man. Although he missed his home and family, Kael figured that this was much better than the fate that awaited them in prison. He, for one, felt fortunate already.

"Now that I have told you why you are here, I welcome you and consider it an honor to be entrusted with your safety. Let us eat, and afterward I will show you around your new home. There will be no further introductions tonight; we will get to that tomorrow morning. For now, enjoy the feast."

The food was delicious, but Kael found it difficult to eat very much. Several of the other boys didn't have as much trouble, however, and refilled their plates more than once. For the duration of the meal, the robed attendants stood around the perimeter of the room with their hands behind their backs. When one of the children cleared their plate or finished the last sip of water or tea, the attendants quickly came forward to offer more.

When everyone had eaten as much as they could, Ukiru rose to his feet and announced that it was time to show them around their new home. Some of the other boys stood up as well and Kael followed their leading. As soon as the chairs were empty, the men around the room began to clear the table. Ukiru beckoned for everyone to gather around him so that he could begin the tour. When the group was assembled, Ukiru pointed at the door through which Kael had entered the room.

“I assume that you are already familiar with your living quarters? All of you boys have separate rooms on the upper level of this hall.” Turning to the right, he walked to the next door along the wall, which was bigger than any other in the room. He slid back a large bolt and pushed open the door. “This is the main entrance.”

Kael tried to see out the door, but most of the view was blocked by the other boys standing in the way. He moved around to get a better look and saw tapered stone columns along a stone path which began at the door and extended through a courtyard area before reaching an open gate. Beyond that, the path continued for a short distance before curving out of sight.

Ukiru shepherded the boys back inside and shut the door, sliding the bolt into place once again. “This next door,” he continued, “leads to the other living quarters; it is where the rest of us sleep. The hall itself looks identical to yours.”

The next item along the wall was a huge square pillar which mirrored the one on the opposite side of the room, only this one didn’t have a fireplace built into it. The next door led to what Ukiru called *the lawn*, but said that he would show it to them later on. The next door led to the kitchen, but that was made obvious by the robed men entering and exiting with piles of plates and eating utensils.

Ukiru walked to the final door around this circular room, positioned to the left of the fireplace. He indicated that the group should follow him before opening the door and walking through it. Kael followed the line of boys and found himself outside, under a covered walkway. Large round beams were set into the ground on either side of the walkway, supporting an elaborate roof much like the one in the dining room. Each support beam had a torch mounted to it. Ukiru led the group down the path where it turned left in front of a square building with one door. On either side of the door, running the entire length of the building were windows shaped like the door turned on its side. Ukiru walked over to the door, unlatched it, and pushed it open. He waited until all of the boys were inside of the first room before explaining.

“This is our classroom, where our studies will take place. Each morning you will assemble here for instruction in a number of subjects.”

The room was shallow but wide, with a number of chairs and desks arranged in a semicircle, all facing toward the back wall. As he spoke, Ukiru wove through the line of desks and made his way to the back of the room, opening one of two doors along the back wall. The boys followed him into a room filled with books. Some were arranged in piles on tables, others were set on end inside of shelves.

“This is our library. We have assembled together all of the writings that will be needed for our instruction, as well as many others that you may find informative.”

Ukiru walked back through the classroom and out the front door, waiting under the covered walkway for the children to file out of the building. When they were ready, he continued along the path to where it ended at a huge circular building with a conical roof, raised at the center and gently sloping to the perimeter. The path stopped at two wide doors which Ukiru slid to each side.

“We call this place *the arena*. It is where most of your weapons and combat training will take place.”

Kael was stunned at the size of the building. It was hundreds of feet across and he couldn't imagine why all of this space would be necessary. It looked like a barn. At the center of the room was a bundle of support columns stretching up to the ceiling. The room was divided into pie shaped sections that radiated from this point. The section where they were standing was completely bare, with a soft, sand-covered floor. Some of the other sections had raised floors, while others had wooden structures either hanging from the ceiling or sprouting from the ground. It all seemed confusing to Kael, but he was sure that it would be properly explained at some point.

The boys followed Ukiru to the left as he walked around the perimeter of the building and through another set of wide doors. The smell of livestock reached Kael's nose and it was obvious where they were headed, even before Ukiru began to explain the stables.

“Some of your training will occur on horseback and as you can see, we have plenty for everyone.”

As they moved down the center aisle, horses shifted uneasily in their stalls on either side. The aisle eventually became an intersection, with one path leading straight ahead and another leading between two stalls on the left side of the room. Ukiru chose the left path and slid open another set of wide doors. A robed man waited on the other side of the door.

Turning around to address the group, Ukiru spread his hands wide. “This is *the lawn*, where our outdoor training will take place.”

It was an enormous grass-covered field, hundreds of yards across. The large field was lined with iron torches at the perimeter, huge structures that were set into the ground like trees.

As they made their way across the field, Kael was amazed at the softness of the grass. He even stopped and bent down, running his palms across the lush blades. The way that it was carefully maintained reminded him of his mother's garden in the courtyard back home. When he looked up again, the group was already across the lawn and heading for a path on the other side. Kael had to run to catch up.

At the edge of the lawn was a gravel path that wound its way through low walls of sculpted shrubs. Ukiru was in the process of explaining something to the group when Kael reached them.

“...they take care of all of this. In fact, there are many places throughout the monastery where the monks have created tranquil surroundings for meditation.”

It sounded to Kael like Ukiru was answering someone's question. After glancing around, he saw what must have prompted it. On one side of the path, the shrubbery opened to form a circle, twenty feet across. Boulders were placed randomly throughout the meditation spot, with rings drawn into the sand around each one, as if the sand were actually water. In the center of the circle was a short platform of polished wood.

Ukiru led the group farther along the path until they reached another small circular building with vaguely square structures sprouting from its sides. As they entered the building Kael realized that it was the dining hall where the tour had started.

“This concludes the tour and our time together today. While you were away, your rooms were prepared for you. Your servant will help you get acquainted with your new home. He will be your escort for the remainder of the week and answer any questions that you may have. I will see you all tomorrow morning in the arena where your training as warrior-priests begins. Rest well; you will need your energy.” With that, Ukiru walked across the room and through the doorway to his living quarters, his blue robes fluttering as he walked.

Chapter 12

Kael awoke before the sun and dressed himself with the clothing he found in the chest at the end of his bed. Just as he finished lacing his shoes, a knock came at his door and he opened it to find his servant standing in the hall.

“It is time,” he said, in his strange accent.

Kael left his room and followed the man down the hallway. “What’s your name?” Kael asked when they reached the stairs.

“No name. Only, one who serves All Powerful.”

“Why don’t you have a name?”

“Cannot talk of this,” he said, shaking his head and quickening his pace down the stairs.

Kael wrinkled his eyebrows, then watched his feet as they took the stairs at a rapid pace to keep up with the servant. “Well, my name is Kael.”

They retraced their steps from the night before, taking them down to the dining hall and out a door on the right side of the room. The sky was growing brighter in the east as the pair moved down the covered walkway toward the arena. The air was incredibly cold and Kael crossed his arms in front of his chest in an attempt to keep in his body heat. As soon as they entered the arena, the air was warm and Kael got the shivers as his body readjusted to the new temperature. He was only the third boy there. The other two were looking out the windows lining the far wall. In the few minutes it had taken to walk to this building, the sun had just started to peek above the horizon. The view was majestic, overlooking a valley of rolling hills, turned a pale yellow from the cold air. The sky was awash with orange and pink light reflecting off the thin wisps of high clouds hanging in the air.

Kael expected to see Ukiru, but he was not in the building. The servant led Kael over to the far side of the room where the others were standing. The floor of this pie shaped section of the arena was a raised platform covered in canvas. Ten square mats were arranged on the floor in a double line and Kael could only assume that they would be part of the morning’s event.

“He will be here soon,” the monk announced. “I will go now.”

The other boys turned around from the windows and Kael suddenly felt awkward being in this strange place without an escort. Even though he was supposed to think of it as his new home, he still felt like a visitor. One of the boys walked toward Kael with a smile on his face.

“My name is Coen,” he said with an outstretched hand.

Kael was so surprised by his joyful manner that he almost forgot to respond. “I’m Kael,” was all he said, shaking the boy’s hand. Then the thought occurred to him that in all their time together in that prison, no one had introduced themselves. They hardly talked at all. It was like they had turned into animals while trying to survive.

Things are different now.

Coen was short, like Kael, though a few years older. His shaved head was just starting to grow thin black hair. He had a large nose and full lips that almost looked like a girl.

“That’s Berit over there,” he said, pointing at the other boy who was still standing at the window. Berit waved and turned back to looking at the sunrise.

“He’s a little shy. So where are you from?”

Kael was just about to answer when he was interrupted by some of the other boys entering the building, their attendants turning and leaving just as promptly as Kael’s had done.

“Do you like it here?” Coen continued.

“Uh...I...I don’t know yet,” Kael stumbled. *This kid sure likes to talk. At least he’s nice though. I’d hate it if he were mean and talkative.*

The rest of the boys came in seconds later, some in groups, some alone. None were as talkative as Coen. Berit continued to stare out at the valley, which was now a series of rolling shadows carved out by a blinding orange rising sun. Two of the other boys talked quietly with each other, but mostly, the room was silent.

Suddenly, Kael noticed that Ukiru was standing by the wall, only a few feet away. Somehow he had slipped in without anyone noticing. “I trust that you all slept well last night. This morning we will start with introductions. Everyone pick a mat and stand in the center of it. I want you to state your first name only, loud enough for everyone to hear. We’ll start with you,” he said, pointing to the boy who occupied the leftmost mat at the front of the room.

The boy shifted his stance, uneasy at the unwanted attention. “Donagh,” he mumbled. His accent was thick and guttural sounding. He was tall and appeared muscular, even beneath the thick clothing that each boy was wearing. Kael couldn’t tell if his hair was brown or black.

Ukiru nodded in response and shifted his gaze to the second boy in the front row. Berit seemed even more nervous than Donagh, but it showed in a different way. His scalp and face turned a bright red beneath his sand-colored eyebrows. “Berit,” he stated in a pinched voice.

“Horace,” the next boy offered, merrily. He was of average height, but a little thick through the midsection. He also had sand-colored stubble just starting to grow on his odd shaped head and skin that turned red easily, though the redness seemed to be concentrated on his bulb-shaped nose.

Coen was next in line and announced his name without any signs of nervousness. He was clearly comfortable in front of people. Kael on the other hand was dreading his turn. Not for any reason, particularly. It just made him uncomfortable that it would soon be his turn.

“Narian,” came the deep voice from the last boy in the row. He was just as tall as Donagh, though his features weren’t as dark and his smiling face made him look friendly.

Instead of choosing Kael, who was standing behind Narian, Ukiru pointed back across the room to the boy at the other end of the row.

“Arden,” the boy said, in a loud and clear voice. He, too, had an accent and Kael wondered how they had all ended up in the same jail together. Arden was only a little taller than Kael, with a protruding nose that was even larger than Coen’s.

The next boy waited until Ukiru pointed at him before speaking his name. “Soren.” This was the boy who had become their group leader while in the prison. Kael could tell he didn’t like following rules.

“Rainer,” said the next boy. The only thing that Kael noticed about him was that he looked younger than all the rest of the children in the room.

“Jorn,” stated the boy standing next to Kael. He was the shortest one in the room and also the pudgiest. The tiny hairs on his scalp were thick and black, and it reminded Kael of his father’s beard.

Finally it was Kael’s turn. He felt his face turn red and his voice tightened a little as he spoke his name. Suddenly, his turn was over and he felt a sense of relief.

Ukiru nodded and began to pace across the floor. “Thank you all. Now, I only asked for your first name because I do not care to which family you belong. I do not care what country you were born in. All those things are dead now, just as your former life is dead. We will only know each other by the names that were spoken here today. That is all that matters.”

Kael could see that a few of the boys were finding it hard to concentrate on Ukiru's words. The view of the rising sun behind him was distracting.

Ukiru noticed and immediately walked back to the front of the room to regain his audience. "Every morning we will meet here at sunrise and begin the day with some exercises. I will instruct you until you memorize each step and position. These exercises will help you gain balance, coordination, and flexibility at first. Eventually, when they are committed to memory, you will find that these movements also help to clear your mind of distractions. A clear mind is essential to hear the voice of the All Powerful. In time, these exercises will become a meditation." He now had the attention of everyone in the room.

"Place your feet together and stand straight," he said, demonstrating the stance. "Pull your shoulders back and look straight ahead. Put your hands together in front of your chest and close your eyes. I want you all to remain quiet, so quiet that you can hear yourself breathe, so quiet that you are able to hear your own heart beating."

Kael had his eyes closed, but could hear a few of the boys snickering. It felt a little strange to be standing in a room full of strangers with his eyes closed. But even though it was awkward, he must have been more comfortable than some of the other boys, who were whispering to each other.

Oh well. Just try to ignore them.

"Breathe in deeply and hold your breath for a moment," said Ukiru, sounding a little irritated with the uncooperative children. "Now let it out and continue to breathe deeply, concentrating on the sound of your heart."

Kael kept his eyes closed and tried to follow the instructions. He could hear his heart beat and felt a sense of peace and comfort at the sound of Ukiru's voice.

"Now open your eyes. Move your left foot out to the side and stand like this," he demonstrated. "Extend both of your arms out from your body and hold this position."

Kael followed Ukiru's mesmerizing voice, as he led them through many different poses and stretches. Most of the time was peaceful, barring the occasional suppressed laugh from one of the other boys. Kael's limbs were a little shaky with fatigue, though none of the exercises were difficult for him. He used to spend many hours at a time climbing trees and balancing on the branches. Such feats of daring bravery were part of his ongoing competition with Ajani. *I wonder if Ajani is still alive.* He had stopped screaming long before Kael was able to stop Lemus from beating him. He couldn't remember anything after Lemus hit him with the handle of the pitchfork. He felt tears begin to form in his eyes and shook his head to stop them. *I can't cry here.*

"Now place your feet together again and stand up straight. Put your hands together in front of your chest and close your eyes."

They ended up in the same position in which they started. Kael found himself breathing heavily, despite the ease with which he moved through the exercises. When he opened his eyes on Ukiru's command, he felt invigorated. Horace and Donagh were trying not to laugh at some private joke they shared.

"Very good. Perhaps tomorrow we will not be as distracted." Ukiru's gaze landed on Horace and Donagh who quickly became serious. "Before we have the morning meal, your servants will show you to the washroom. We will assemble in the dining hall in fifteen minutes." After Ukiru left the room, Donagh and Horace finished laughing at their joke. All of the boys filed out of the arena, following their servants down the covered walkway.

The washroom was located on the first level, off the hallway between the dining hall and the sleeping quarters. There were several stalls of toilets off to the right side of the room, as well as a circular fountain in the center for washing face and hands. Kael didn't need to relieve himself, so he walked over to the fountain. Water gurgled from a short pedestal in the middle, spilling over the side where it filled the basin. He leaned over and noticed holes on the inside of the basin, a few inches from the rim. The water level was slightly above the bottom of these holes, causing the water to drain out just as fresh water from the pedestal replaced it. He dipped his hands in the water and was surprised to find it warm. It felt soothing and he immediately splashed some on his face and rubbed the sleep from his eyes. Jorn was the next one to come to the fountain and was surprised at the temperature of the water as well. Just as the boys began to talk about it, a voice came from the hallway.

"You're curious about the water?" Ukiru stepped from the hallway into the washroom.

"Yes," both boys answered at the same time.

"This monastery was built hundreds of years ago in this location for just that reason. All around us, the land is alive with heat. In some places, steam comes from holes in the earth. Our predecessors channeled that heated air and brought it to these buildings. There are vents throughout these rooms and even in your bedrooms where the heated air comes through to fight back the chill of the winter months. One area, which you will see later this evening, has steaming water coming from the ground, which was made into a bath."

The rest of the boys were finished and had started to gather around the fountain to hear Ukiru. "Finish washing; the meal is ready," he said and left just as suddenly as he arrived.

Kael was already finished and followed Ukiru back to the dining hall. When they arrived the table was already set with food. Each place at the table was set with a cup of tea and a steaming bowl of a thick grayish substance. Kael sat down at the same place he sat the previous night. One by one, the rest of the boys came into the room and followed his example. Horace and Donagh sat together and started to grab for their food before everyone was seated.

"Wait," said Ukiru. "We will have a moment of silence to thank the All Powerful for providing this meal and all the things that surround us. Ukiru closed his eyes and most of the other children did as well. Kael looked around at each face until he stopped at Soren, who winked at him and smiled, refusing to close his eyes. Eventually Ukiru opened his eyes and cleared his throat. "Let us eat," he announced and proceeded to lift the steaming bowl to his lips.

The gray substance in the bowl appeared to be mashed oats and grains. Kael thought it tasted bland, but was thankful to have something in his stomach. He hadn't yet gained all his strength back from his time in prison.

After breakfast, Ukiru rose from the table and led the boys out of the room. They walked as a group down the covered walkway and entered the square building that Ukiru said would serve as their classroom. The desks and chairs were still arranged just as they had been the previous day. Ukiru motioned for everyone to take a seat before he addressed them.

"This is the study," he began. "Every morning after breakfast, we will meet in this room. Here you will learn everything from history and astronomy to arithmetic and the arts of war. Some subjects, of course, will require you to have obtained a certain amount of knowledge beforehand. So we will start with reading, writing and speaking. These three skills form the basis of all knowledge. How can we learn or communicate what we have learned if we cannot read, write, or speak?"

"But we already know how to speak," answered Horace.

"Ah yes! But to speak and to communicate are altogether different, aren't they?"

Horace squinted.

Ukuru quickly spoke a sentence in a foreign language.

All of the boys looked at each other in confusion.

“You see... I have spoken, but I have not communicated to you what I wished to communicate. What I said was—cry in the classroom so that you may laugh on the battlefield,” he repeated. “It is a saying where I come from. It means that if you train hard in the arts of war, so hard that all your tears are shed in the classroom, then when it comes time to go into battle, you will be fearless in the face of your enemy. You will laugh at how easy it is compared to your training.”

Ukuru turned toward Horace. “You see, speaking is not the same as communicating. Once you have mastered these three skills, you will have the foundation that will be needed in the future. Some of you have already had a great deal of instruction, while others have had none. Nevertheless, we will all start at the same place and we will learn together.”

As the sun peaked in the sky, the boys’ stomachs began to growl. Everyone filed out of the study room and returned to the dining hall where another meal had been prepared. Breads, cheeses, and meats adorned the table, accompanied by a large pitcher of water. The boys ate greedily as they all seemed to be adjusting to their new surroundings with ease.

After the midday meal, the boys were dismissed for a period of one hour. Ukuru told them that they were free to do anything while their food settled in their stomachs, but they must assemble in the arena afterwards. Donagh and Horace went back to their rooms to sleep, while Berit left in the direction of the library. Kael left the dining hall in search of the meditation area by the lawn. When he got there, Coen was already seated in the middle of the rock garden.

“You can sit next to me,” he offered with a smile.

“No thank you,” Kael replied. “He said there were other spots around here; I think I will go look for another one.”

Kael turned around and started walking back to the dining hall when he noticed a narrow path to his right. Part of his free time was gone already, so he decided to tour the place by himself and get a better feel for his surroundings. He took the path and found that it curved around the main building through a thick stand of trees and stopped in the front courtyard. A wider stone path ran from the front of the building through the courtyard and out the front gate. Kael followed it and found himself outside of the stone wall which surrounded all of the buildings.

A dirt path broke off from the main thoroughfare and ran to the south. It wasn’t a constructed path like the others around the monastery; it was simply an area where repeated foot traffic had worn away the ground cover. Kael took the path and followed it as it swung to the east for a while, running parallel to a ridge that obscured his view of the horizon. Eventually, the path turned south again and began to climb the steep ridge. Kael thought that his time was probably getting short, but now he was curious to see what was beyond the ridge. It took him a few minutes to reach the top of the path and he was breathing heavily by the time he made it.

To the south, as far as the eye could see, the ocean glittered in the midday sun. Kael was surprised by the sight, expecting to see only land and perhaps a few mountains. The path descended from the top of the ridge to a rocky area which marked the edge of a cliff. Kael stood on the rocks and looked down at the water, hundreds of feet below. Until this moment, he wasn’t aware of how much he missed the ocean. He would have to come back to this place when he would have more time to enjoy it. Reluctantly, he turned around and followed the path back to the monastery. He tried to walk quickly, even running in places, until he came to the arena.

He was almost sure that he had been gone more than an hour, but when he entered the building, there were only a few monks waiting. Within minutes, Ukiru walked into the building, talking with Narian and Rainer. A few minutes later, Coen walked in and came straight over to Kael.

“Did you find your meditation spot?” he asked as soon as he was within earshot.

“Yes,” Kael answered with a smile.

One by one, the others came into the building. When all were present, Ukiru directed the group over to a section of the arena with a polished wooden floor. “Each day after the midday meal and your time of rest, you will all come to this building. Here you will be trained in the practices of war. As priests of the All Powerful, you will be persecuted and attacked for your positions of authority. You must all learn to protect yourselves against those that would wish to harm you and rebel against our god. These practices are an ancient art, recorded thousands of years ago and handed down from generation to generation among his faithful servants. As the classroom learning will shape your mind, these practices will shape your body so that your whole being will be a perfectly tuned instrument for the All Powerful.”

Kael drew in a deep breath and shifted his weight in anticipation. After a morning of sitting in chairs and listening to Ukiru speak, he was ready to stretch his muscles and use his body instead of his mind.

“Everyone gather around me in a circle.”

The boys drew near and Kael could tell by their expressions that they were also excited about the opportunity to train as warriors. When all of the children had gathered around, Ukiru continued speaking.

“All of the stances and positions that you learn during the morning’s meditation will be applied to the afternoon lessons. Each position is either an attack or defense posture that will be the basis of your training as a warrior.”

As the afternoon advanced into evening, Ukiru explained each stance and its use in warfare. All of the positions, whether attack or defense, were modeled after some animal which demonstrated an ability in nature to defend itself against or advance upon an enemy. All of the boys seemed to prefer the afternoon to the morning, except for Berit, who kept quiet the whole day and didn’t show a preference for anything in particular.

When the sun began to slip below the mountains to the west, Ukiru ended their activities and led them back to the dining hall where, once again, the table was set with a meal. The boys ate quickly to replenish the strength expended during the afternoon. Already, some of them were making friends, joking and laughing during the meal. Kael didn’t talk to anyone, but sat back and watched the way people interacted with each other. His thoughts drifted back to [Bastul](#) where his mother and Saba lived. He hoped that they were well and worried for their safety, having to live with such an evil man as Lemus. Most of all, he wondered where his father was and if he had returned while Kael was away.

When the evening meal concluded, each one of the boys was escorted to his room for the remainder of the night. When Kael got to his room, he immediately crawled into bed and pulled the covers up to his chin. Voices drifted to him from down the hall and Kael realized that not everybody was exhausted. *Oh well. I’ll be well rested in the morning and they won’t be able to keep their eyes open.*

Chapter 13

Kael arrived at *the arena* after Coen and Berit, but only had time to say a quick “hello” before the other boys arrived. Ukiru wasted no time and immediately began the morning’s exercises. Just as Kael suspected, Donagh, Horace, and Rainer looked as though they hadn’t slept at all. During one of the seated positions, Horace actually fell asleep, much to the amusement of the entire group. Ukiru, however, took exception and considered the lack of attention a lack of respect.

“I understand that all of you will need time to adjust to your new life, but I will not tolerate this behavior,” he directed to the whole group. “All of you arrived at your rooms in plenty of time to get a sufficient amount of sleep. It would be wise for you to use that time for its intended purpose.”

Kael’s heart beat loudly in his chest and he felt his face get hot. *It’s not fair that the rest of us are scolded for their mistake!* He kept his mouth shut, wanting Ukiru’s anger to pass as quickly as possible.

When they resumed their exercises, Rainer kept his face toward the ground, trying to hide his snickering mouth.

Each day of the week continued in the same fashion, with Ukiru familiarizing the children with the daily routines. He explained that their real training wouldn’t begin until the start of the following week. In the meantime, the boys had fun acquainting themselves with their surroundings. For six days, they repeated the pattern until the morning meal of the seventh day.

Ukiru sat at the head of the dining table and spoke to the group. “The seventh day of the week is free time for you to do whatever you wish. We will have meditation and the morning meal after which you may retire to your room or spend your time with all manner of activities. There are games that can be played indoors or out. We have a library of books from which you may read. They day is yours to spend as you wish. We will all assemble here in the dining hall at sundown for the evening meal and the rest of the evening will be unscheduled as well. The seventh day is a day of worship unto the All Powerful and will not be a day for learning anything except to hear his voice speaking quietly to us. I hope that you will spend some of the time in meditation.”

The other boys hardly paid any attention to his last words. Everyone was so excited to have a free day that they immediately began to chatter amongst themselves.

Kael, however, was intrigued. *His voice speaking quietly to us? Do gods speak at all?* Ukiru kept talking of this All Powerful as if he were a person, but the gods that Kael learned about in [Bastul](#) were just statues. Sometimes people talked to them, but they never talked back. Or sometimes people left food offerings or lit candles for them, but they never gave anything back.

These thoughts quickly gave way to relief at having a break from the routine. When he lived in [Bastul](#), he would study in the morning and have every afternoon as play time. He and Ajani would explore, hunt, fish and occasionally wander into the city where they were not supposed to go. Kael was told that his father’s position made it dangerous for him to travel into the city without a guard. Of course, guards only inhibited the boys from doing many of the things they would normally do to occupy their time.

Ukiru’s loud but calm voice brought them all back to attention. “Settle down everyone.” When the children were quiet he continued. “Your servant will show you what games we have for you to play. Now that the meal is finished, you are free to go.”

The table exploded into a frenzy of activity. Most of the boys jumped out of their chairs and rushed out of the room as quickly as possible. Berit rose slowly from his seat, pushed his chair

in to the table, and left in the direction of the library. Kael remained seated at the table with Ukiru.

“Do you not wish to join the others?” he asked the child.

“I stayed behind to ask you a question,” Kael replied.

“Please,” Ukiru said with nod.

“Where...” he began, then paused. *Where are we?* Something told him to keep the question inside. “Do you hunt?” he asked instead.

“Well,” Ukiru breathed as he sat back in his chair. “There aren’t many things to hunt at this elevation. It would take a whole day to descend into the jungle where the monks do their hunting, but I’ve heard that there are ground squirrels that live in the rocks a few miles from here. The monks here occasionally hunt the little creatures for the meat. I’m told it is quite a delicacy. Would that suit you?”

“Yes, it would,” Kael replied with a smile. “We hunt a lot where I come from.”

“Yes, I know. So you are a hunter?”

Kael nodded.

“I am as well. I’ve not been able to hunt for quite some time. Although, squirrels are not exactly a formidable foe. May I join you?”

“Yes, Sir,” Kael replied, unable to contain the excitement in his voice.

“Then we shall make a day of it.” Ukiru rose from his chair. “Let’s pack a few provisions and I will have one of the monks accompany us on the short journey.”

They left the dining hall and within half an hour, Kael, Ukiru, and one of the robed servants were walking across the valley northeast of the monastery, choosing to go on foot rather than take the horses. Pale grass crunched beneath their feet as they walked. The cool morning air felt strange in Kael’s lungs but it smelled sweeter and was more refreshing than the salty ocean air of [Bastul](#). They quickly descended into the valley below and came upon a small river, flowing back to the south. Ukiru pointed out that this fresh water continued south until it fell off a cliff and into the ocean. They turned to the north and headed upstream into a forest of short pine trees. Crossing the river at a low, rocky shelf, they continued their ascent up the other side of the valley where the river narrowed to just a stream. As the sun crept higher into the sky, they left the water’s edge and climbed east until they reached a bank of rocks, exposed by the eroding soil.

The silent monk simply pointed at the bank.

Ukiru nodded. “This is the place.”

They stopped and laid their provisions next to a tree. The monk laid out weapons for the hunt and beckoned for Ukiru and Kael to come over and choose what they wished to use. Ukiru put his hand out, indicating that Kael should go first. Then he stood back and watched.

Kael looked at the assortment of weapons on the ground—a crossbow with a bundle of bolts, a spear, a sling with a leather bag of shot, and a bow accompanied by a quiver of arrows.

“What are you going to use?” he asked Ukiru.

“Well, they are small, fast creatures. I think I will use the crossbow for speed and accuracy.”

“Me too.”

“I’m sorry but we only brought one of each. Had you chosen first, the crossbow would have been available to you. Now you must choose between the other three.”

Kael thought for a moment and then bent down, grabbing hold of the spear.

“Are you sure that is the best choice?”

Kael stopped, reconsidering the positives and negatives of each weapon. Then he shrugged his shoulders. "This will work. I'm good with a spear."

Ukiru smiled as if he wanted to say something, but didn't.

When they had chosen their weapons, Ukiru and Kael set off in search of their prey with the monk following at a close distance, carrying a quiver and a few other provisions. Kael wasn't sure of how to approach these animals, so he stayed close to Ukiru and followed his lead. Ukiru led the hunting party up a collapsed section of the rocks and then began to traverse the shelf above. He explained quietly that the ground squirrels could be seen scurrying from the shelter of the rocks to forage for food. They would be quick and their dusty brown fur was a perfect camouflage for this rocky terrain. They walked for almost an hour before any sign of movement.

All of a sudden, Kael noticed a small brown shape dart out from the rocks. He raised his spear and waited for the rodent to turn around and come back before throwing his spear. The squirrel, startled by the sound above, sprang to the right as the spear struck the ground only inches away. It paused for a second before heading for the safety of the rocks.

Ukiru took aim and loosed his bolt, pinning the animal to the ground.

The three hunters scrambled down the rocks and gathered up their prey. The monk placed the squirrel in a cloth bag and slung it over his back.

Ukiru patted Kael on the back. "That was excellent. You have very quick reflexes."

"Thanks," Kael replied, even more determined to catch his prey.

They continued to hunt along the rocky slopes until the sun had passed its zenith. When they turned around and began to make their way back to the starting point, Kael chose to walk along the bottom of the rock wall, several yards behind Ukiru who stayed on top. Along the way Kael remained silent, scanning the rocks for another chance.

"You were about to ask me something this morning," Ukiru called down.

Kael wrinkled his eyebrows.

"At breakfast," he continued. "You were about to ask me a question, but you mentioned hunting instead."

Kael was surprised that he had noticed. "Where am I?" he finally asked.

Ukiru smiled. "You will know in time. For now, I will say that you are a long way from [Bastul](#)."

"Why is it a secret?" Kael asked.

"Because you need to forget about your old life. You must come to see this place as your home and all of us as your new family. The more you think about [Bastul](#), the harder it will be for you to adjust to this place."

Suddenly, movement at the corner of Kael's vision interrupted the conversation. Ukiru raised his crossbow, but Kael had already sighted the rodent and thrown his spear. The animal rolled to its side, pierced by the spear, and slid to a stop in the dirt.

Kael looked to Ukiru whose eyebrows were raised.

The hunting party gathered the remainder of the provisions next to the tree and headed back to the monastery with two squirrels to show for their efforts. Kael was finally starting to feel comfortable in his new surroundings, although he hadn't really made friends with anyone yet, like some of the other children. Coen seemed friendly, but then again, he was friendly with everyone. It was comforting for him to hunt; it reminded him of his normal life in [Bastul](#).

The return trip took less time, and was considerably easier than climbing the valley earlier in the morning. No one spoke the entire way back and Kael was perfectly content to follow the other two men, listening only to the sounds of nature and a few quiet footsteps. The monastery

was also silent when they returned and Kael couldn't help wondering where all of the other children were. The monk took the squirrels and promised Kael that the meat would be part of the evening meal.

"You should wash up, it will be evening soon." With that, Ukiru excused himself.

After washing his face and hands in the bathing room, Kael went to his room to change his clothes. He felt himself rushing in order to get back outside and find out where the other children were. He quickly found a fresh tunic and rushed downstairs, pulling it on as he went. He wandered for several minutes before entering the library where he found Berit sitting by a window. The large, dust-covered book on his lap suggested that he had been there for quite some time.

"Have you been in here all day?"

Berit looked up from his reading with a startled look on his face. It was apparent that he had grown accustomed to the privacy and silence. "Yeah," was all he said in return.

Kael waited a few minutes, hoping that the other boy might elaborate on what he was reading. When nothing happened, Kael realized that Berit might not be the best person for striking up a conversation.

"Do you know where the others are?"

Berit looked at Kael without lifting his head. "I think some are out back," he said with a nod. "I heard them earlier."

"Thanks." Kael tried not to look hurried when he left the library. Even though he had been gone all day with Ukiru, he was beginning to feel like he had been left out of something. He exited the building and circled around to the back, but was disappointed to find that the back of the building butted up to the wall which surrounded the whole monastery. Kael turned around and made his way to the front courtyard, exiting through the front gate, but there was still no sign of the other children. Then he remembered the cliffs overlooking the ocean that he found on the second day after his arrival. He hadn't been back since that day and decided to wander in that direction. As he neared the ridge to the south, he heard laughter. He stopped walking and waited a few minutes before he heard it again and realized that the sound was coming from the other side of the ridge.

By the time he reached the top he was winded, but the ocean view made the climb worth the effort. The sound of laughter drew his attention to the right and he could see Donagh, Horace, Arden, and Coen gathered around a pile of small stones. As he walked toward them, Horace threw a rock toward a stick planted in the ground. His stone flew wide of the target and landed in the sand. Horace stepped back and Coen, who had already chosen his stone from the pile, stepped forward.

"What are you guys doing?"

"We're trying to see who can hit the stick first," Horace replied, as he walked to the pile and chose another rock. "Do you want to try?"

"Sure," Kael said with a smile.

"Grab a rock and you can go after me," said Donagh.

Coen's attempt fell short and Donagh stepped forward. He took a few hops to gain momentum and heaved a rock the size of his fist toward the target. It landed with a dull thud at the base of the stick and moved it slightly.

"That's the closest one so far," Arden said. "Now it's your turn, Kael."

Kael had been watching the others and had forgotten to choose a rock. He quickly picked the first one his hand closed around and stepped up to the line dug in the dirt.

“Your foot can’t cross the line,” Donagh said, his competitive nature showing through.

“Okay,” Kael replied, inching back more than necessary from the line. The rock he had chosen was shaped strangely and didn’t fit well in his hand. He threw it anyway and it flew over the stick and bounced in the dirt.

The minutes passed and the pile of stones shrank with every attempt. The other boys were starting to grow bored of the game. When it came time for Horace to try again, he ran across the line with his arm cocked. Coen began to laugh as Horace stopped only a few strides short of the stick and threw the rock as hard as he could only to miss it completely. Exhausted with his wasted effort, he collapsed on the ground in a fit of laughter. Soon everyone joined in and all of the boys rolled on the ground clutching their stomachs. When the laughter subsided, they all stayed lying on the ground looking up at the few wispy clouds high overhead.

“Where were you today?” asked Arden.

“Who, me?” Kael replied.

“Yeah, we haven’t seen you since this morning.”

Kael hesitated. “Uh...I went hunting squirrels with Ukiru.”

The other boys rolled over and looked at him. “Where did you go?” asked Coen.

“Up the other side of the valley.” Kael could see the jealousy in their eyes. “One of the monks took us. We should all go next week,” he quickly added.

“Yeah. That would be...” Coen began, but Donagh interrupted.

“We should be getting back. It’s almost time for the evening meal.”

At his words the other boys got to their feet. As they started to walk back toward the top of the hill, Kael decided to try one more time to hit the target. He knelt at the pile and moved the rocks aside, searching for just the right one.

“Come on, we need to get back,” Coen yelled.

“I’ll be there in just a second,” Kael yelled back. “Just one more try.” As he looked down at the pile, his hand closed around a smooth rock. It was elliptical in shape and narrow, growing sharp at the edges. He held it up for a second to inspect the shape and could almost feel how it would fly. He stood up and faced the target, imagining the way it would arc through air and curve slightly in the wind. He stepped forward and threw it, feeling it spin off his pointer finger and cut through the wind just as he imagined.

CRACK!

The stone hit the stick and cut it in half.

Kael stared in disbelief.

“Whoa! How did you do that?” Coen yelled, running back down the hill toward the severed stick.

Kael ran toward the target and arrived just after Coen, who was holding the top part of the stick for inspection. The cut was smooth halfway through the stick where the rock had impacted, while the back of the stick was splintered.

“Good throw,” Coen said, patting Kael on the back.

Kael looked up the hill to see if the others had witnessed it, but they had already crested the hill and started down the other side.

“Wait till they see this,” Coen said, running off in the direction of the others.

* * * *

The midmorning sunlight streamed through the window of the study where Lemus sat at a desk strewn with papers. The quill stood upright in the ink pot, untouched. This room, as well as all of the others in the house, overlooked the bay of [Bastul](#). It was difficult to get any work

done with such a majestic view just outside of the window. Lemus sat back in his chair and placed his hands behind his head. Closing his eyes, he let the sounds of the ocean occupy his attention. The position of Governor had, so far, proven to be more difficult than he had originally expected. Not only did he have the rotation of soldiers to plan out, always keeping a state of readiness for the defense of the city, but it also seemed as though someone always needed his attention. Whether it was a ruling on some minor matter, or his presence at some occasion, he always had a list of things to do. After only a few short weeks it was all becoming a big headache to him.

As he allowed the slight breeze coming through the window to wash his thoughts away, a knock came at the door. The soldier who stood guard next to the door turned and unlatched the bolt. The motion startled Lemus who had forgotten that anyone else was in the room. The door swung open to reveal two men escorted by another soldier. The guard looked back to Lemus who waved his hand for the men to be let in.

As the two men came into the room, Lemus sized them up in a matter of seconds, deciding that they were not a threat. Even if they did something unexpected, it would be three trained soldiers against these two, who looked like priests. They were dressed in long dark robes that covered everything except for their faces.

“Sir. These men asked to speak with you. They are unarmed.” The soldier stepped to the side, his escort duty complete, and watched the men cautiously.

“What do you gentlemen want?”

One of the robed men stepped forward, bowing his head. “Are you the Governor?”

Lemus was silent for a second, not expecting to have to answer questions. “Of course I’m the Governor! What do you want?” he repeated louder.

“I apologize, Sir. I just want to be sure that I’m dealing with the highest authority in the city.”

Lemus nodded his head for the man to continue.

“We are looking for a man that we are told lives here. He goes by the name Saba.”

Lemus laughed. “He did live here, but he was escorted off the premises a few weeks ago. What do you want with him?”

“Our employer wishes to speak with him.”

Lemus smiled. “Sounds like trouble. Well, I’d be happy to pass on trouble to that meddling old man. He has many friends in the area, but the Captain of the Guard could probably steer you in the right direction.” Lemus turned to the men’s escort. “Take these men to the Captain; make sure they have everything they require.”

“Yes, Sir,” the soldier replied.

The two robed men bowed their heads to Lemus. “Thank you for your hospitality.”

Lemus nodded his head and watched as the escort led the men out of the room. When they entered the hallway, Lemus noticed Maeryn standing to the side holding a tray. “Bring her in here,” he said to his guard.

“Yes, Sir,” came the reply.

As Maeryn came into the room, she moved through a shaft of light next to the doorway. For a split second, Lemus could see the outline of her bare skin through the fabric of her tunic. Just as quickly as it appeared, the vision vanished, leaving Lemus in a state of shock. Had it not been for her, he might not have asked to take Adair’s position.

“I thought you might like something to eat. You’ve been working all morning without a break.” Maeryn set a tray of sweet bread on his desk, on top of the papers he should have been working on.

Lemus stared at the bread and then eyed Maeryn suspiciously. “Thank you. I was starting to get hungry.” He continued to stare at her, but was more than a little distracted by her bright blue eyes and fair skin. She was so different from any other woman he had seen. “What’s wrong now,” he said, when he came to his senses.

“What do you mean?” she asked.

“Why the sudden change of heart—bringing me something to eat? I suppose it’s poisoned and you’re trying to kill me.”

“No,” she protested.

He interrupted what she was about to say. “I have spies everywhere and if I even hear a whisper of a rumor about you trying to harm me, I won’t even wait for the jailers to carry out your execution. I’ll kill you myself.”

“No...of course I wouldn’t try anything. It’s just...” she trailed off. “I’ve been thinking a lot lately.”

“About what,” he asked, interrupting her again.

“I’ve really...it has been difficult for me to adjust to being without Adair. But all that has changed and I want to start over with you. By law, you are my husband now and I will respect that. My former husband abandoned me for some reason and left his responsibilities behind. Those are not the actions of a respectable man of Orud. I know that now. Anyway, I thought you might be hungry.”

Lemus continued to stare at her for a moment, looking for signs of deceit. He considered himself to be a good judge of things like that. But instead of lies, he saw only beauty. “It’s good that you have finally accepted the truth. Adair was a coward and did not serve the Empire well. I have much work to do, so if you will excuse me,” he said, motioning for the guard to open the door. “Thank you for the bread.”

The soldier closed the door after Maeryn left and returned to his guard position. It was silent in the room for a moment as Lemus inspected the slices of sweet bread arranged on the tray. “Come here,” he commanded the soldier.

“Yes, Sir,” replied the man who quickly came to Lemus’ side.

“Eat this,” Lemus said, handing him a slice of bread.

The soldier hesitated, unsure of whether or not this would violate any rules of conduct.

“Go on,” Lemus insisted.

The guard took the piece of bread from Lemus’ hand and stuffed the whole slice in his mouth and chewed quickly.

After the guard swallowed the bread, pretending not to enjoy it, Lemus rose from his chair and stepped back. “How do you feel?”

“Good, Sir.”

“How is the bread?” Lemus questioned further. “It’s alright, you can tell me.”

The guard was visibly uncomfortable with the whole situation. He finally answered. “It’s good, Sir. ...very sweet.”

Lemus stared at him for a moment, expecting the soldier to drop dead at any time. When nothing happened, he sat down at his desk and greedily ate the whole plate of bread.

* * * *

Maeryn had been nervous all day, hoping that her words had done the job. She was certain they had the moment she left Lemus sitting at his desk, but as the day wore on, she began to lose her certainty. As night fell, she prepared herself for bed in one of the spare rooms at the end of the hall. Lemus had long ago confiscated her bedroom and claimed it for his own. She combed her hair and braided it loosely. A small part of her really wondered if Adair had left on purpose. But just as quick as the thought came, it vanished in the face of logic. *That's impossible. He loved us very much. It was the Empire that took him away.* Maybe they didn't know where he was, but they were definitely responsible for his disappearance.

Suddenly, Maeryn was aware that the door to her room was open. She turned to see Lemus standing in the doorway. He looked startled, as if he had been watching for a while and had just been spotted. If that was the case, he tried not to show it.

"You shouldn't sleep in here anymore," he said, walking forward a few steps.

"But I thought you said..."

"Never mind that. Wouldn't it be nice to sleep in your own bed again?"

She doubted that he cared about her quality of sleep. She had prepared herself for this moment and knew exactly what to do. "Yes. I miss sleeping in my own bed." She rose to her feet and followed Lemus to the master bedroom. When she entered the room he closed and locked the door.

I'm not going anywhere. If anyone is setting a trap here, it's me.

When Lemus turned around Maeryn was standing close. She reached up and placed her hands gently on his face. He instinctively bent down and kissed her. Maeryn felt like she would throw-up and took a deep breath to clear her mind. *I planned for this to happen.*

Lemus walked her over to the bed and sat her down. When he began to take off his tunic she started to panic. *Can I really do this?* The question hung in her mind, waiting for an answer. She took another deep breath. *Of course I can; I have to. I have no other choice!* It wasn't any comfort, but it worked. She watched Lemus pull off his tunic and untie his loincloth. He was skinny and looked even more repulsive without his clothes. Somehow the whole scene was funny and she was able to think more clearly when she concentrated on the humor and nothing else.

This is just the first step. Win him over tonight and you'll have him. You've got a baby to think about now, a baby that needs a safe place to live. Eventually he'll grow comfortable with you and that's when you'll make your move.

Chapter 14

Saba turned from the western road and headed northeast into the hills, making his way on foot as the sun began to set. The outskirts of [Bastul](#) were populated by farmers who were attending to various tasks outside, trying to make the most of the daylight. Most of these hardworking people waved to Saba as he passed along the road and he couldn't help but think of the contrast in lifestyles between the city and country folk. These farmers worked from sunrise to sunset, sometimes even longer. But within the city, the workday had already ended hours ago so that the citizens of [Bastul](#) could enjoy baths and leisure time before their evening meals.

The small dirt path wound through the foothills for a short distance before cutting into a deep canyon dividing the mountain range. The setting sun cast strong shadows that separated the canyon into areas of intense orange light and patches of complete darkness. By the time the path climbed out of the canyon and leveled out into an area of rolling meadows, the sun had dropped

behind the ocean. Saba turned off the road and followed a walking path between fields of mature lettuce and cabbage, ready to be harvested.

Just as expected, Trenus was still outside, washing the soil from his hands at the well. It was difficult to see in the fading light, but he was a short, sturdy man, with light brown hair. His clothing, like all country folk, was similar to what a slave might wear. His tunic, now stained with dirt from a hard day's work, was not made of white linen, but a coarser, thicker material that would stand up against the harsh lifestyle. His sandals were not really sandals at all, but boots that covered his feet completely and laced on the top of the foot. Trenus waved as soon as he caught sight of Saba. It took a few minutes before they were within earshot of each other and by that time, he had finished washing his hands.

"Are you hungry?" he asked.

"Starving. I've been walking most of the day."

Trenus smiled. "I've got a stew going. Come inside."

The main house was a humble wood building with tiled roof and walls plastered on the inside. The layout was a departure from most houses in this region. There were only a few doors off the main living area and it contained a limited amount of practical furniture. Obviously, Trenus had built this place for function only.

"Have a seat." Trenus pointed to a table on the opposite side of the room. It was situated only a few feet from the stove, upon which a pot of stew simmered.

"Thank you," Saba replied, slumping into the chair, grateful to be off of his feet. Once he caught his breath, he looked around the room. He had only been here for an hour a few days ago to drop off his belongings before he went back to the city to check on Maeryn. He felt bad now at barging in on Trenus, though it didn't look as if it hindered his life one bit.

"What does that look mean?" Trenus asked, looking back at Saba while stirring the stew.

Saba decided to give him an honest answer. "This place needs a woman's touch."

"Yeah, I know. Maybe someday it will have that. But for now, I kind of like it."

Saba nodded his head. "I must say, it is...efficient."

Trenus laughed. "That's one way to say it." He brought two bowls of steaming food over to the table and set them down. Pulling back his chair, Trenus was about to sit down when he realized that he had forgotten the spoons. "Oops," he said, turning around to grab those as well. "I'm not used to entertaining company." He handed one to Saba.

"That's quite all right. Thank you, by the way, for letting me stay here."

Trenus waived his hand in dismissal. "Never mind that. Tell me how it went, though it seems obvious by your quick return."

"I only made it as far as the Market District before I was spotted."

"Soldiers?" Trenus asked. "And they let you go?"

"Yes. I think I've worn out my welcome."

The room was silent for a few minutes as the men began to eat their food.

Eventually, Saba looked up, wiping stew from his beard. "It looks like I will have to find something else to do."

"Well...you know you're welcome to stay here as long as you need?"

"Thank you. I guess I'll unpack my things tonight."

Trenus pointed at a door to the right of the stove. "That's my only empty room and it's used mostly for storage, so you'll have to forgive the mess."

"I'm sure it will be just fine. Thank you."

Several minutes passed before Trenus got up to refill his bowl. He offered to do the same for Saba, but the old man politely refused. "I've got so much on my mind that it has ruined my appetite."

"Are you sure it's not the stew?" Trenus asked, his face wrinkling into a smile.

Saba couldn't help but laugh. "No, it's not the food. Actually, you could probably make quite a living in the city selling your meals." Saba suddenly felt relieved. Trenus had a way of lightening the mood that made for easy conversation.

"So," Trenus began. "Even though we've been acquainted for years, I still don't really know much about you."

"What would you like to know?" Saba asked.

"I've never asked you how old you are."

"No, you haven't," Saba replied with a smile, trying to match the man's sense of humor.

Trenus laughed before rephrasing his statement into a question. "Okay. How old are you?"

Saba looked down at the table. "Actually, I'm not sure."

"What do you mean? It's a simple question."

Saba looked up and smiled. "Yes...for most people, it is a simple question. But I'm one of the exceptions."

Trenus took his seat and began to eat from his second bowl of food, still carrying a puzzled look on his face.

Saba decided to make the attempt to enlighten him, though he was hesitant about sharing this information. "I've actually never told anyone this before."

"Well, I'm honored," Trenus replied. "But please, continue."

Saba leaned back in his chair and crossed his right leg over his left, settling into a comfortable position that seemed to imply a long story would follow. "My first memory is of waking up inside a small, tent-like structure. I found myself lying on a bed of animal skins, clothed in a soft leather robe. There were no other people in the tent, so I just lay there, taking in my surroundings. Hours must have passed before I tried to sit up. It seemed like something I should be able to do, but when I tried, my body wouldn't respond." Saba looked up at the ceiling, trying to recall the details. "A few minutes later, a young woman came into the tent. She had long black hair and dark skin and was dressed the same as myself. I immediately wondered if I was an elder of this woman's tribe. I only thought of being an elder because I could see my own hair, which was already white at that point, reaching down to my waist. Indeed, she moved about the tent as if I was supposed to be there. I don't know why, but I felt compelled to get her attention. Without the use of my body, I felt frustrated. For some reason, it took a long time before I realized that I could try speaking. I called out to her, but my words only came out as a grunt. When she heard me, she spun around, startled. She looked at me as if I was a ghost and her skin became pale. Once she got the courage, she ran out of the tent, screaming at the top of her lungs. What shocked me more than my encounter with this woman was the fact that I knew she was screaming a foreign language, but I understood every word. She kept saying, over and over, 'He is awake. The old one is awake.'"

Trenus set his spoon carefully into his bowl and leaned back in his chair. He had completely forgotten about eating and was now staring at Saba with his full attention. "How long ago was this?"

"Twenty years."

Trenus' eyebrows shot up. "You were already an old man back then..." he trailed off, trying to make sense of the story.

“I can see that if I tell you the whole story, you might end up more confused than me. So I’ll try to skip to the point. Apparently I had been living with these people for some time. They were a nomadic tribe, following herds of wild animals and living off of what they hunted. I tried to ask them how long I had been with them, but they didn’t seem to understand. I asked them if they understood the passage of seasons and if they did, to make a mark in the dirt for every full cycle that I had been with them. The younger people all looked to an old man who was the elder of the tribe. He began to draw lines in the dirt.”

“How many?” Trenus blurted out.

“Nearly one hundred.”

The room was silent for a while, before Saba spoke again. “Of course, his answer would be impossible. I don’t think he understood my question. Although they understood seasons, they had almost no knowledge of past generations of their own people. They concerned themselves only with the present. So...as you can see, I’m not sure.”

“And you have no memory of anything before?”

“Nothing,” Saba replied.

After minutes of silence, Trenus shook his head. “I’ve never heard of something so strange.”

Saba lifted his hands and shrugged his shoulders. “I agree with you. But that’s all I know.”

“What brought you to [Bastul](#)? I assume that all of this took place somewhere else?”

“Yes it did, in another country,” Saba replied, answering Trenus’ last question first. “I began having dreams about a place that I had never seen. The dreams compelled me to search. I kept moving, staying with different people until the terrain around me matched what I saw in my dreams.”

“And that place was here?”

“Yes, in [Bastul](#).”

After the meal, Trenus helped Saba move his belongings from the barn into the spare room. Trenus insisted on doing most of the work, handing a candle to Saba and telling him that lighting the way was all that was necessary. The work was completed in under an hour and when the last crate had been moved, Trenus bid Saba goodnight and headed to his bedroom.

Though he had walked for almost an entire day, Saba’s mind was still racing with worry about Maeryn and he knew that sleep would not come easily. So, he decided to unpack his essentials and spent several minutes just trying to make heads or tails of how the soldiers packed his things. He finally located his clothing and laid it out in piles on the floor as there was no chest to put it in. In fact, there was no furniture in the room at all and Saba laughed to himself about what he would do for a bed. His belongings were either packed hastily in wooden crates, or thrown into linen bags and he knew that unpacking everything was too ambitious a project for one evening. Instead, he grabbed the nearest bag and began to untie the top. It rustled as if it was filled with paper and after opening the top and removing a few handfuls of its contents, that guess was confirmed. There were papers and writing utensils and even a book. Saba realized that this bag contained everything that used to reside on his desktop in his bedroom. Several of the papers were smudged with half-dried ink from the tips of the writing quills. Luckily, Saba was in the habit of corking the ink pot after every use, or this whole bag would likely be a dripping mess.

Reaching down into the bag, his hand settled on a rolled up piece of parchment. He pulled it out and questions immediately came to his mind as he couldn’t remember putting anything like this on his desk. Turning it over in his hands, he saw that it was tied with a thread to keep its

rolled shape. With his curiosity peaked, he quickly slid the thread off the tube of parchment and unrolled it, wondering how he could have missed this sitting on his desk.

Saba,

Something terrible has happened to an acquaintance of mine. I am looking into the matter, but have been unsuccessful in finding any useful information to this point. The only clue that I have thus far is this arrowhead. I leave it in your possession to find out what you can about the people who made it. I have been unable to find any meaning in it and would, therefore, be grateful for any information that would aid me in my searching.

Gratefully,

Adair

Saba put the parchment down and grabbed the bag, turning it upside down and shaking it to empty the contents. A few more papers fell out, but no arrowhead. He quickly rifled through the other bags that were present, shaking them to determine their contents until he found one that made a knocking noise when he set it on the floor. He untied the bag and dumped the contents onto the floor. Amid a shower of dried leaves and feathers, something heavy fell out of the bag and landed with a thump on the floor. He pushed aside the growing pile of debris until he found the arrowhead. Moving it closer to the candle, he turned it over in his hands, inspecting every feature. The construction was similar to what the Orud military used, a metal head sharpened to a double-edged point, set into the shaft and held in place with a metal pin that extended through the whole arrangement. The pin and shaft were both wrapped tightly with silk thread that wound around the base of the head. The silk was frayed in a few places and was starting to unravel. Saba sat down on the floor and picked at the thread, until it was completely unwrapped. As he started to pull the head from the shaft, he noticed a circular engraving in the wood that was covered by the thread. At first glance, it looked like a wreath. But upon closer inspection, Saba could see what looked like winged creatures gathered around in a circle with their wing tips touching.

Saba put the arrowhead down and sat back. For the first time in his life, he felt a twinge of memory, a link to his forgotten past. It was a faint feeling and didn't provoke anything specific, but he had the sense that he had seen this symbol before.

* * * *

Three weeks had passed since Kael arrived at the monastery. So far, he was enjoying himself, though he missed his family. He wondered if his father had ever returned. His thoughts often drifted to his mother, who was probably very sad to be missing her husband and her son. Sometimes at night, when everyone else was asleep, Kael would lie awake and picture his mother and father standing in front of him. He would tell them that he was okay and that he was being taken care of. He would try to explain all of the things he was learning and how Ukiru said that they would be the best-educated children in all of the Empire, maybe even the whole world. He knew they couldn't hear him, but maybe his thoughts would somehow find their way back to [Bastul](#) and they would be comforted. He always hoped.

Except for missing his family, Kael couldn't have imagined a better place to live. The morning exercises were becoming a way of meditation, just as Ukiru said. In the silence of the sunrise, Kael found that it was easy to lose himself in the peacefulness of feeling his body move in harmony with his surroundings. Most of the other boys still joked with each other the whole time, but he just tried to ignore them. The midmorning studies were fun, but they weren't as fun

as learning from Saba. Still, Ukiru was a very good teacher. But Kael's favorite part of the day was the physical activity in the afternoon.

The sun was bright through the open doors and the air was warmer than usual. Just as every other weekday, Kael stood with the other boys in the arena, facing Ukiru.

"For several weeks now, you have learned how to move your body and breathe steadily to create a strong center of balance. Some of you have grown bored with these exercises. But I assure you that they are necessary. Now that you have a basic understanding of balance, we will progress to defense."

Kael's attention was peaked at the man's words. It was obvious that the other children were excited as well.

"Everyone spread out. Each of you will be paired with an attacker." Ukiru walked among the boys, directing their steps until each child had plenty of room around him. A group of monks, who had been standing off to the side, now joined in, each facing one of the children. "The man in front of you is your partner. In a few minutes, he will try to attack you, and if you have paid attention to what you were supposed to be learning to this point, you will avoid his attack."

Kael's heart quickened slightly at the thought of confrontation. He wasn't sure what to expect.

"Your defensive position for this exercise will be the one you learned during our morning meditation called Tiger. Assume this position now." At Ukiru's command all of the boys leaned back and brought their hands up in front of their bodies. "Rainer, what does a tiger do?"

The boy looked around, unsure of the correct answer.

"It crouches," whispered Coen.

"Thank you, Coen," Ukiru said with a stern face. "A tiger crouches to be ready at any moment to spring into action."

"Oh," Rainer said aloud as he realized he was standing straight-legged. He quickly bent his knees and looked at the others to make sure he was in proper position.

"Very good," said Ukiru. "Now, your attacker will rush at you and try to grab you. From this position," Ukiru demonstrated, "you will lift your back foot and lunge one giant step backwards." One of the monks, at Ukiru's signal, rushed forward, trying to grab his clothing. Ukiru jumped backwards just as he instructed and evaded the attacker's hands. His quick and graceful movements made it look easy. "Now it's your turn."

Kael loosened his stance and made sure that his knees were not locked. He waited for Ukiru's signal and the attacker lunged as soon as it was given. Kael was expecting more of a delay, but was still able to easily avoid his attacker. Arden was not so lucky. His attacker grabbed him before he could move and he ended up tripping over his own feet. Sounds of muffled laughter could be heard as he got back to his feet.

"Once more," Ukiru said. "Back into position. Everyone ready? Go."

Once again the monk grabbed at Kael, but this time he was better prepared and was able to get much more distance between himself and the attacker.

"Very good," Ukiru commented, when he saw that everyone completed the exercise successfully. "Now if you will notice, jumping backwards only gives you a little more time before your attacker reaches you. Even though you have evaded him, he can simply keep advancing toward you. And I have never met anyone who could run backward fast enough to outrun someone who is moving forward. So, this time we will jump to the right using the same

technique.” Ukiru motioned for his attacker to advance and easily jumped to the side, returning to his crouching defensive position. “Now you do it. Ready? Go.”

This time Kael’s attacker got close to catching him and when he was finished, a quick look around the room showed that he was not the only one. Horace was straightening his clothing after being grabbed by his partner.

“Do it again, but notice that you are moving to the side and not backward. You will not have as much time to get out of the way. Instead of reacting, try to anticipate your attacker’s move. Bend your knees and be ready. Wait for the slightest sign of movement, then spring out of the way. Get in position.”

Kael watched the attacker’s feet, waiting for Ukiru’s signal. Suddenly, the monk sprang forward and Kael jumped out of the way, barely missing the grasping hands. “Very good. Some of you were ready. Do it again. This time don’t wait for my signal, watch your attacker.”

The second time Jorn failed to evade his attacker, but the third time, everyone was successful. As the afternoon progressed they learned to evade their advancing attacker by jumping in combinations of different directions.

At the end of their time each child was breathing heavily and Ukiru had them line up once more. “You all did well today. Some of you may have noticed that when evading to the side, your attacker left himself exposed and vulnerable on that side. What you learned today is the basis for a counter attack. But that will have to wait until tomorrow. Go and get washed up for the evening meal. You are dismissed.”

As each of the boys walked unhurriedly toward the main building, the monks stepped back and lined up near the door. Kael’s heart was beating rapidly when he walked out into the open air. The sun was beginning to set and the air had grown cold, but it felt good to his overheated skin. The evening meal tasted better than anything Kael had ever eaten and when it came time to retire to his bedroom, he was unable to keep himself awake to think about how much he missed his family. He didn’t have much time to think of anything at all before his eyes closed and he fell into the deepest sleep he could remember.

* * * *

Maeryn lay awake in the early morning hours, watching the moon-shadows dance along the wall. The nauseous feeling in her stomach woke her and it was just the moment she had been waiting for. She spent many nights lying next to this evil man trying to decide how to tell him that she was pregnant; to convince him that the child was his. There was no way to tell how he would react. Eventually, she realized that the best way to break the news was to let him find out by himself, to make it appear as if the two of them were discovering it together. Shortly after arriving at this decision, the sickness went away and Maeryn began to lose hope that things would go her way. That was one week ago. But tonight, the nausea returned, and the feeling was strangely welcome.

She climbed out of the bed, being careful not to wake Lemus. She had planned the whole event and if he woke now, it would ruin everything. She tiptoed her way to the bathing room and found the toilet. Breathing heavily, Maeryn flexed her stomach to make it irritated. It took a while and she began to wonder if anything would happen at all, but finally her stomach obeyed and she began to gag. After a few seconds passed, she could hear Lemus stirring in the bed. *He’s probably annoyed at the disturbance of his sleep.* She decided to make it louder so that there was no chance of him falling back to sleep. Her stomach heaved again and she did her best to make it as loud as possible. After several minutes, Lemus was standing in the doorway.

“What’s wrong?” he asked in a muffled voice.

“I’m sick,” Maeryn mumbled between gags, trying to look as pathetic as possible. It wasn’t difficult under the circumstances.

“Well that’s obvious isn’t it,” he shot back, his irritation never too far below the surface of his personality. “Why are you sick...is it something you ate?”

“I don’t think so.” She hesitated, wanting him to draw it out of her.

“Well, what’s the problem then?”

“I think I’m with child.”

Lemus stared at her with a blank look on his face. “How long has this been going on?”

Maeryn lifted her head from its drooped position and looked him in the eye. “A few days,” she lied. “I thought it would go away, but it hasn’t.”

“That’s ridiculous. There is no...”

“It usually happens in the morning,” she interrupted, trying to distract him from his train of thought. “...but sometimes at night.”

Lemus stood speechless for a moment and Maeryn secretly rejoiced at the way everything was turning out. “I have work to do in the morning,” he finally blurted out, but with less conviction than she was used to hearing in his voice. “I’m going back to bed.”

As Maeryn listened to his retreating footsteps, she knew that it had worked. Not one word was mentioned of Adair. In fact, it seemed that Lemus had all but forgotten about him. If he acted as she expected he would, it would be days before he would revisit the subject. *He won’t like the idea of having a child at first. But when he accepts the fact that it will happen regardless of how he feels, he’ll change his opinion. In a few days, he’ll come bursting into the room, talking about the legacy he will leave to his children, as if the whole thing was his idea in the first place.* Maeryn had never been the type of person to manipulate others, but now it was a matter of survival. Her old life was gone, forever changed. This was her life now and it was horrible for the most part. But like Zula said, she would have to change the way she looked at the world, to find little things to make her happy. And, she had to admit despite her new position in life, she felt more powerful than she ever did before...and that made her happy.

Chapter 15

In the grandest library in all the Empire the smell of old parchment hung in the air, unable to clear out from the lack of ventilation. But that is exactly what one would want out of a suitable library. The old documents needed to be kept away from the elements, protected from sunlight and air. Saba sat alone at a stone table amid rows of shelving that reached to the thirty foot arched ceilings. The journey to [Orud](#) had been exhausting, taking months, but Saba was no stranger to travel. It seemed that most of his life, what he could manage to remember, had been spent moving from one place to another. His arrival in [Bastul](#) marked the longest stretch of stillness, but that had now passed. Though tiring, Saba had grown accustomed to the peacefulness of traveling through the land. So accustomed, in fact, that if he spent too much time indoors he began to grow restless.

Well, you’d better get used to being restless, old man! You’re going to be here for a while. He pulled a thick book off the top of the stack to his right and set it down in front of himself. It contained paintings of the numerous crests of the most important families in the Orudan Empire. Saba thought that it would be a good place to start looking for a match to the symbol on the

arrowhead. As he leafed through the pages, his mind began to wander. There was something about that symbol that seemed familiar, but he had been unable to figure it out during his travels.

One painting made him pause in mid thought, but it was only a likeness of an eagle and he began to turn the pages again. He picked up the trail of his last thought and retraced the steps that brought him here. Unable to remember anything about the symbol, he decided instead to research the arrowhead itself. The construction was typical of what the Orud military used, so he had the idea of searching through the family crests for a lead. But so far, it had proven useless. He reached the end of the book and closed it, frustrated with the lack of progress. He had been here for two days already and without results.

I need to try a different approach. Saba rose to his feet and began to walk down the aisles of books, hoping that something would jump out at him. After a few minutes, he found himself lingering near a section that documented the various religions of the regions that the Empire had conquered. *It wouldn't be a religious symbol would it?* He picked up one of the books and quickly turned a few pages, immediately seeing an improvement. Most of the content was text, but the few drawings were much more similar in style than what he had been looking at before. He set the book back on the shelf. *Something older, more elaborate perhaps.* He walked further down the aisle and slowly, the documents turned from books to scrolls. They were not labeled like the books, so he grabbed an armful and headed back to his table.

It was tedious work going through the scrolls, untying and unraveling them, only to find that they were also a dead end. After several hours of searching, Saba decided to go back to his room at a nearby Inn and get some rest. Perhaps tomorrow would bring better results. After placing all of the scrolls and books back in the places that he found them, Saba climbed the stairs leading up to the first level of the library. There was no light coming in from the windows and the custodian waved to him from behind his candle lit desk.

“Will I see you tomorrow?” he called out.

“First thing in the morning,” Saba replied, waving as he headed for the entrance.

The vestibule of the library was a long and wide corridor with columns lining the sides. Between each fifth column was a statue of the gods of Orud, their bodies partially clothed and posed in some dramatic gesture. At the end of the hall, two great wooden doors stood ajar, allowing the cool air to make its way inside. Saba stepped through the doorway and walked into the night air of [Orud](#). Apparently he had been down in the basement longer than he thought, as he looked to the darkened sky. The view from this vantage point always took his breath away. The library was perched atop a small knoll within the academy district, surrounded by various temples and schools. From the terrace, Saba could see a great deal of the city and the flickering light from torches spread out for miles. The beauty of this city was unrivaled and Saba realized that one needn't look far to see it. The flat stone streets curved throughout the city lined with alternating iron torch posts and planted trees. The vegetation within the city was maintained by an enormous force of gardeners enlisted by the Emperor himself.

Saba took a deep breath and descended the library steps to the street below. Crossing the road, he walked south for a few blocks before turning east along the street that would eventually lead him to the Inn. It had taken a few days to find a place to stay, but luckily, he still had plenty of money from his days of tutoring Kael.

Kael! As soon as the name came to him, his heart dropped. He was such a special boy. Inquisitive. It broke Saba's heart to think of how his life had come to an end. He was yet another innocent casualty of this brutal life.

Suddenly, Saba's senses became alert. Perhaps it was a noise or a smell. He couldn't be sure but it felt like someone was following him. The sensation wasn't foreign to him, as he had noticed it during his travels to [Orud](#) as well. The last few days before his arrival were spent with the occasional glance over his shoulder, but the feeling went away when he entered the city limits. Now it was back again and it was unsettling. He quickened his pace toward the Inn and kept his eyes moving, checking each alley as he neared it.

"Sir," called a voice.

Saba stopped in his tracks and looked around.

"Sir, may I have a word with you?" came the voice again. It echoed slightly off the stone buildings on either side of the street.

Saba turned around and saw a dark-robed man walking briskly in his direction. If he was trying to be stealthy, he was not very good at it. "My good man, it's late and an old man needs his rest," he replied. Turning back around, Saba began to walk faster than before.

"Please Sir, I must speak with you," the man pleaded.

Saba tried to ignore him, only glancing behind to make sure that he was showing no signs of aggression. To his surprise, the man had stopped walking. *Good. If you mean me no harm, then whatever you have to say can wait for the light of day.* When Saba looked ahead, he saw another man dressed like the first, standing under a torch post half a block away. "What do you want," he called out, trying not to sound scared.

"We wish to speak with you about a very important matter," the second man called back.

"It is late. Perhaps we can talk over breakfast."

"No," the man behind him said, from much closer than before. "We have been waiting for you for too many years. We are done waiting."

Saba turned back around, looking to the nearest alley for an escape route, but the shadows in the alley began to move. He turned to run across the street, but all of the alleys around him began to empty with men, their cloaks billowing in the slight breeze. In a matter of seconds, he was surrounded by more than twenty strangers.

"What do you want to talk about?" he called out, turning in circles to keep an eye on the nearest man.

One of the figures stepped forward. "We are looking for someone and we need your help."

"Who are you looking for?" he asked the man. Suddenly, he heard a step behind him and whirled around to confront the man, but it was too late. Something brushed passed his shoulders and immediately cinched his arms to his side.

"We're looking for you," the man replied with a calm, methodical voice.

Saba looked down at the rope which now restricted his movement and felt panic. He tried to scream for help but one of the men stuffed a rag into his mouth, muffling the sound. Saba was helpless in that instant, and his only emotion was fear. Suddenly the vision of the streets of [Orud](#) disappeared as someone slipped a cloth over his head. Saba dropped to his knees, not knowing what was happening and powerless to do anything but comply.

Then the struggle stopped, just as suddenly as it had begun. Saba knelt on the ground, wondering why they were not dragging him off or beating him. He received only silence for an answer, which was no answer at all. Then, faintly, he heard the sharp clipping sound of hooves on stone. It was a horse. *No, several horses.* And they were moving in his direction. Saba waited a few seconds, listening intently, also making out a wagon, presumably pulled by the same horses. Saba struggled to his feet, yelling for help as loud as the rag in his mouth would let

him. He took a few steps in the direction of the horses before he felt a sharp tug on the rope around his arms. He lost his balance and fell back to the street.

“Settle down old man,” an amused voice commanded. “That’s your transportation, not your rescue.”

The man’s words were confirmed when the wagon, pulled by a team of horses, stopped next to Saba. He was lifted to his feet and escorted to the rear of the wagon where he was, to his surprise, gently placed inside. As he lay on the floor of the wagon which jostled with the movement of the horses, Saba’s fear slowly gave way to reason and he tried to make some sense of the situation. *Is this an arrest?* These men were not soldiers, so that was not a likely answer. *Whoever these people are, they have not harmed me other than scaring an old man half to death. They must want me alive!* That, at least, was an encouraging thought as the horses took him away.

* * * *

Kael was awakened by a tapping sound at his door. At first he thought it was a dream, but it happened again. The night air was cold on his skin as he threw back the covers and went to the door. It made a creaking sound when he opened it, loud as a trumpet in the stillness of the night. Donagh and Narian were standing just outside of the door.

“Are you hungry?” Donagh whispered.

“Why?”

“Cause we’re all going down to the kitchen to get some food.”

Kael peered out into the hallway and saw several of the others standing in the shadows, waiting.

“Were not supposed to. We’ll get caught.”

Narian leaned closer. “That’s why we’ll have to be quiet.” Kael could see Narian’s teeth as he grinned.

“Alright,” Kael said. “Let me get dressed.”

“Hurry up,” said Donagh as Kael ran back to his bed and pulled a tunic from the clothes chest. When he rejoined them in the hallway, the group stopped at Berit’s door. He was the only one left. Donagh tapped at the door and it opened almost immediately.

“What are you guys doing?” he asked before anyone could explain.

Soren made his way to the door. “We’re goin’ down to the kitchen to sneak some food.”

“Whose idea was that?” Berit asked, suspiciously.

“Mine,” Soren answered. “Now get some clothes on; you’re coming with us.”

“Alright. Hold on.” Berit closed the door.

After several minutes Donagh knocked again. “What’s taking so long,” he whispered, as loud as he could.

The door opened and Berit came out into the hallway, fully clothed.

Horace laughed out loud. “Were not going on a journey, were just going to the kitchen.”

“Be quiet,” Soren said in a harsh whisper. “You’re going to get us caught. Let’s go.”

The boys followed Soren to the end of the hall where he signaled for them to stop. “I’ll go down and make sure that it’s safe.” He crept down the spiraled stairs, keeping close to the wall so they wouldn’t squeak. It was several minutes until he came back up, waving the group forward.

They went single file down the stairs, running quietly from shadow to shadow until they made their way through the dining hall and into the kitchen. “Everyone grab something and we’ll take it back to my room.” Soren was the oldest and no one had any problems following his

lead, especially when he seemed to know what he was doing. They all looked around for anything edible; fruit, bread, anything that could easily be carried back upstairs. Kael was eyeing a cheese block when Horace came out of the ice room struggling to lift a piece of salted meat twice the size of his own head.

“Find something smaller and hurry up,” Donagh told him.

Arden tried to stifle his laughter as Horace slipped going back in. He was promptly silenced by Soren, but couldn't keep from giggling under his breath. When Horace came back out empty handed, Arden started to laugh all over again.

“Let's get out of here,” Soren said, and they all followed him back upstairs. Creeping down the hallway, they stopped at Soren's bedroom. “In here,” he waved to the group. One after another, the group piled into his room until he locked the door and opened the window to let in some moonlight. Kael and Berit sat on Soren's bed and Soren joined the others on the floor. Everyone placed what they had taken from the kitchen in the middle. Soren and Narian began to divide the spoils and deal out everyone's portion.

“Soren. Where are you from?” asked Coen, stuffing a chunk of bread into his mouth.

“[Nortuk](#),” he answered simply.

“Did you ever go on kitchen raids there?” Coen asked, his smile reflecting the chuckles around the room.

“Yeah, all the time. In fact, that's the only way to get food where I come from.”

Coen was confused and the other boys were intrigued. “Didn't your parents feed you?”

Soren glanced around the room at the curious faces. “No. My father died when I was a baby; I don't even remember him. And my mother died a few years ago, so I had to learn to fend for myself.”

Coen was so shocked that he was speechless for a few seconds, which was a long time for him. “So, where did you live?”

“Well, everywhere I guess. I just wandered around the city, mostly looking for places to sleep and get food. It took a while, but I found this tavern in a rich part of the city. They used to throw away the food that their guests didn't eat. They had these barrels in a back alley where they put the old food until there was enough for someone to take it away.”

As Soren spoke, all the boys listened with full attention. Kael thought that they had probably never heard of such a thing before. Or, at least, that's how it looked. He, on the other hand, would often run across such boys in [Bastul](#), when he and Ajani would sneak into the city. Some of them were very nice, but others were mean to everyone they met.

“I remember one time,” Soren continued, “I showed some of my friends to this place. They weren't too careful. I told them to wait until nighttime when everyone was sleeping, but they were hungry and they didn't want to wait. It was only barely past sundown when they ran over to the barrels and started tipping them over, looking for food.”

Some of the boys had looks of disgust on their faces. Soren stopped his story. “Have you forgotten already what it's like to be truly hungry?”

Kael immediately thought of their time in jail, and cringed. He just wanted to forget.

When everyone went back to chewing on their food, Soren continued. “Anyway, the owner came out. I guess he must have heard my friends. I was waiting across the alley and I saw the whole thing. The owner saw the barrels tipped over and grabbed one of my friends. The rest of us started to run, and we didn't even see, at first. Well, he started hitting on this kid.”

“What did you do?” asked Coen.

“What do you think I'm trying to tell you?”

Coen laughed. "Sorry. Go ahead."

"So we all turned around and went back. By the time we got there, the kid was beaten up pretty bad. The rest of us weren't even sure what we could do about it. But we had to do something. When we gathered around the man, he must have panicked, because he took my friend and threw him against the wall. The kid hit his head pretty hard on the stone. The owner tried to run back inside, but I chased him and hit him in the back of the head with a stick that I was holding. He fell down, just inside the door like he was sleeping. The others helped me drag him out into the alley and we just started kicking him until our legs were too tired to kick anymore."

"What happened to your friend?" Donagh asked.

"Oh. He didn't make it."

Everyone was silent, except for Coen. "He died?" Coen asked.

"Yeah. It was that last throw against the wall that did it."

"What about the owner?" Coen asked with a look of disgust on his face.

"Oh, I'm not sure. But I hope he died too. We never went back there after that."

Kael had a nauseous feeling in his stomach. After the horrible experience of their imprisonment, he was disgusted by the thought that someone might live like that their whole life. And the callous way that Soren spoke of the whole event gave him the shivers. "I hope it wasn't like that all the time," Kael said.

"No, not all the time, but I have a lot of those kinds of stories. The rest of the time we just wandered around, bored and hungry."

"Well, I'm starting to get tired. I'm going to bed," Arden said, standing up and stretching. His thoughts were echoed by most of the other boys who left the room as well. Kael stayed, as did Berit and Narian. Through the night, they traded stories of their homes and parents. Kael didn't say much, but asked lots of questions. Their lives were fascinating, but Soren definitely had the hardest time.

When morning came, Kael found himself on Soren's bed, facing the wrong direction. Narian was gone and Berit was asleep on the floor, huddled in a ball. Soren was putting on his shoes.

"You guys had better get ready or you're going to be late." Soren's words awakened Berit who promptly ran out of the room with a look of panic on his face.

"Sorry I took your bed," Kael said as he was leaving.

"Don't worry about it. I can fall asleep anywhere."

"Thanks," Kael said, and went to his room to get ready for morning meditation time.

The morning's exercises were a struggle because of the lack of sleep, but Kael made it through. The late morning studies were the most difficult, however, as Kael couldn't seem to keep his eyes open. As Ukiru spoke of the history of the Orudan Empire, his voice sounded like the steady beat of the ocean waves, lulling him to sleep. By the time the afternoon rolled around, the sleepiness had faded, replaced by excitement for the coming lessons.

As always, Ukiru stood facing the boys in the arena. "We are fast approaching the year's end. You have all learned many things that will be of great use to you in the future. However, your studies thus far have only been concerned with how to control yourself in various situations. The next logical step in the training of a warrior is the control of his horse."

The boys bristled with excitement. For most of them, a horse represented the life of the wealthy and not something that everyone was privileged to have.

Ukiru waved a hand, and at his signal, ten horses walked into the arena, each one led by a monk. "A horse is a valuable tool in the arsenal of a warrior. With knowledge of how to use it well, it can be a great advantage in any war. Use it without proper knowledge and it can be a great distraction. I have seen many men go down in battle because they did not have command of their horses. These beasts are powerful. It is best to have this power working for you and not against you. Today we will begin learning how to ride a horse. The best way to learn is to do, so everyone choose a horse and we will help you up." Ukiru walked to the nearest horse where he waited to help Rainer.

The boy's father was wealthy and Rainer knew horses well. He grabbed as high up on the saddle as he could while placing his foot in the stirrup. With one fluid motion, he pulled himself onto the horse.

"Very good, Rainer. I can see this is familiar to you."

"Yes, Sir. My father owns many horses."

"I'm sure he does," Ukiru replied. "But the 'All Powerful' is your father now, and he owns many horses as well. In fact, all of the horses that have ever lived are his. You must put your old life behind you and press on."

His last words were spoken loud for the whole group to hear. "Is everyone ready?"

"No, Sir," came a muffled reply.

"Who said that?"

"Me, Sir," said Jorn, stumbling out from behind his horse. Jorn was a stocky child and was having difficulty pulling himself onto the horse.

Ukiru walked over to help the boy. "Jorn, you are heavier than the other boys, but you are also stronger. Use your weight to your advantage. Lean into the horse and pull hard with your arms."

The boy tried again, following the advice of Ukiru. He was able to stand on the stirrup, but was unable to swing his leg over the animal. Ukiru grabbed his foot from the other side of the horse and pulled his leg over the saddle. "This takes much practice. It will come in time."

After each child was mounted on his horse, Ukiru motioned for one of his own. When the monk brought it the children gasped at its beauty. It was black and shiny and walked with gracefulness. All of the other horses were brown in color and didn't look quite as strong as Ukiru's steed. He took the reins from the monk and ran his hand down the nose of the animal. "First we will start with a few basic commands. These horses are already trained, so for now, you will simply learn to command them. At some point you will learn to train one of your own, but that will come later."

After a few simple lessons on how to control the horse, Ukiru sprang up into position with ease, not bothering to place his foot in the stirrup. Apparently he didn't need the help. They rode out of the arena and into the bright sunshine. There was a chill in the air and several patches of snow clung to the shadows, leftover from a storm that had passed through a few days ago.

Kael was excited to ride. His father used to take him on rides before it became dangerous to travel around for pleasure. There were many things that his father wasn't able to do because of his position within the Empire. *But I guess that's why they found Saba.* A thought suddenly came to him. "Did you know that far to the east is a tribe of people who train their horses to obey their voice?" The thought of Saba sparked a memory of one of his lessons.

"Yes, Kael. That's right." Ukiru slowed, letting Soren take the lead. "But in battle, there are many voices. Whose voice will the horse listen to? No, it is best to lead these animals by

hand. A rider must always have one hand on the reins, which is why it can be a disadvantage in battle. But if trained properly, a rider can never lose to a man on the ground.”

Kael was about to say that these people also train their horses to be led by hand or by the pressure of the rider's legs to accommodate any situation. But he suddenly didn't feel like finishing his story. He only sulked for a few minutes before the enjoyment of riding overcame him once more. The sun felt good on his back and the lurching motion of the walking horse was mesmerizing, like being in a boat.

The group rode for a few hours before circling back to the stable, arriving just as the sun went down. Ukiru leapt off his horse and helped the children down as well. When Kael's feet touched the ground, he found it difficult to walk. His knees were cramped and his feet hurt, despite the fact that he had not walked on them for hours.

“Everyone is dismissed. Wash up and we will have our meal.” Ukiru handed the reins of his horse to a stable hand as other monks came out to take the rest of the horses.

Later that night, as Kael lay in bed, he thought back over the months that had passed since he arrived at the monastery. It was fun to learn everything that they were being taught. These boys had all become friends to him. And Soren was a closer friend than any. He saw things and went places that most people three times his age would never get to. But even with last night's raid of the kitchen, Kael couldn't help feeling like he didn't belong here. No matter how much he enjoyed his time here, he felt even stronger a growing sense of isolation. *What's wrong with me? I have friends...food. I'm training as a warrior. Most kids would love to have this life.*

The question kept crossing his mind. He rolled over and pulled his pillow over his head to block out the sound of his thoughts, but it didn't help.

Chapter 16

The screams echoed down the hallway and Lemus felt his nerves cringe. He didn't have the patience to sit and wait for the birth of his son. It was driving him mad to do nothing but stare at the floor. He decided, instead, to get some work done. Walking down the hall, he stopped at the door to his study. He wasn't eager to deal with his new responsibilities either, but under the circumstances, he had no choice.

He entered the room and sat down at his desk which was covered in an assortment of parchment scraps. Charts, lists, and maps of various sizes filled his vision. He slowly began to organize the mess that had been building for a week. He tried to clear his mind of everything but the problem at hand. A shipment of armor and weapons would be arriving in three days from a neighboring city and he had to make sure that it arrived safely. He had come across several bits of information that led him to believe the shipment would be attacked.

He had already rescheduled the ships to arrive at midnight, which was unusual. Hopefully, the would-be attackers would be thrown off a bit. Although the city of [Bastul](#) never seemed to sleep, the population on the streets would be considerably less at that time of evening, making it easier to spot anything out of the ordinary. Still, there was the problem of extra reinforcements. There was no good place from which to pull guards. Lemus buried his face in his hands and massaged his temples. He was having trouble concentrating. Suddenly a knock sounded at the door.

“Yes?” Lemus responded, waiting for an answer.

The door opened slowly and the face of a female servant peeked through.

“Yes, what is it?”

“Sir, the baby is coming.”

Lemus raised an eyebrow. “Is it here yet?”

“No,” she answered timidly.

“Come back when my son is born.”

The woman nodded and pulled her head back from the room.

“Make sure he is cleaned up before you come again,” he yelled at the retreating sound.

Now...back to business. Where was I? Oh yes, reinforcements. He scanned a map of the city, letting his vision pause at the major defense points. Each had only the minimum number of soldiers necessary. Finally he stopped at the armory. *Thirty guards.* He thought it seemed a bit excessive. *I’ll leave two guards there and move the rest to the docks for just a few hours.* He looked back to the docks lining the bay. *Twenty-eight extra men should be plenty.* He would have them dress in plain clothes, not their uniforms, and hide them in the dark alleys near the docks. They would be quick to join the fight if the attack came from the bay. If it came from the streets he would be able to cut them off before they could reach the ships. Another knock interrupted his thoughts.

“Yes?” he said, annoyed.

“It is time for you to see the baby,” came the voice from the other side of the door.

Lemus jumped to his feet and walked briskly to the door. As he opened it, the servant girl flinched. He ignored her and strode quickly down the hall. His heart was racing and he couldn’t think of a time when he had been more excited. The thought of having a son who would follow in his footsteps gave him such a joy that he finally realized what all the fuss was about. He never thought of himself as the type to be married and have a family, but over the course of the last few months, the idea had grown on him. Finally, there would be someone whom he could train, instruct and guide through life, steering him past difficulties while teaching him how to lead people. It was an opportunity that Lemus’ own father had neglected completely. The excitement was almost too much to bear.

Halfway down the hall he found the spare room where he had chosen for the baby to be born. Maeryn had wanted to be in the bedroom, but Lemus insisted that the mess be kept to a room that was rarely used. Three of the servant women were gathered around the bed and Maeryn was sitting up, propped by pillows. She was holding what looked to Lemus like a bundle of cloths. As he got closer he could see the pink face of the baby protruding from the bundle.

“Give him to me.” Lemus grabbed the baby from Maeryn. “He’s lighter than I thought he would be.” Pulling the baby close, he moved some of the blankets out of the way of the baby’s face, then noticed that the women were staring at him. “What?”

Maeryn looked at Zula.

What’s that expression she’s wearing?

“It is a woman child.” Zula answered instead, with the cautious look of a mouse about to be struck by a snake.

“What?” he asked, partially because of the strange wording from the slave woman, partially from disbelief. “What did you say?”

“It is a girl, not a boy...Sir,” she corrected.

* * * *

Maeryn watched as the blood drained from Lemus’ face. His arms went slack and Zula caught the baby girl before he had the chance to drop her. Then the blood returned and his

features burned with anger. His eyebrows wrinkled as he backed away from them and turned, storming out of the room.

The women looked at each other in disbelief. Maeryn had expected something bad to happen, but everyone seemed shocked at Lemus' silence. The girl who announced the arrival of the baby to Lemus was still standing out in the hall, unsure of what to do next.

Zula gave the baby back to Maeryn who had tears running down her smiling face, despite the awkward event with Lemus. "She looks like her father." It was a statement that didn't ask for confirmation.

Zula agreed anyway. "Yes, she does. I am proud of you, my lady."

Maeryn was unsure what the woman meant, but was too exhausted to ask.

"Your strength has been tested and you have proven to yourself that you are strong. I know that you will raise your daughter to be the same way."

Maeryn cried tears of joy as she looked from Zula to her new daughter. "Aelia will be strong indeed as long as she is in the presence of women like you."

The soft light of the morning filtered in through the window of the birthing room. Maeryn lay awake watching Aelia's body expand and contract with each breath. She seemed so peaceful as she slept, unaware of the world she had been born into. Maeryn felt more at peace than she had in a long time.

"When is it coming?" came a faint voice from outside her window. A scrap of someone else's conversation drifted into the room from the courtyard. Maeryn listened for a recognizable voice. It didn't take long before she heard Lemus' hissing.

"Two days from now...at midnight."

Maeryn's interest was peaked at the hushed voices. She leaned closer to the window to catch more of the conversation.

"What should I do?" asked the other man.

"Leave two men behind at the armory. The rest of you will be reassigned to the protection of the shipment."

"Is that really necessary?" The other man seemed to be confused about his orders.

"I have received information that the rebels will attack the ship as it docks in the harbor. You and your men will trade your uniforms for less obvious attire." Lemus paused, apparently enjoying his own brilliance.

Maeryn imagined that the other man was probably smiling with a devious grin that would only serve to make Lemus think more highly of himself than he usually did.

"What do you expect to happen?"

"The docks will already be guarded with the usual amount of security. Perhaps the rebels will attack from the sea; however, I find that unlikely. Instead, I think they will be waiting a short distance away from the docks in the city. Your men will be disguised in various places near the docks as drunks, fishermen, and whatever other rabble can be found at that time of night wandering the city. We will stop the rebels before they can even reach the boats."

A quiet laugh echoed slightly off the stone buildings and made its way to Maeryn. It was obvious that Lemus' underling was trying to flatter him.

"Make sure that your men are ready. If you sense that any of them are not up to the task, you must tell me at once. I will deal with them. We cannot have any mistakes."

"Yes, Sir," the other man answered.

The retreating footsteps signaled to Maeryn that the conversation had come to an end. Ever since she realized that she was pregnant, she hadn't given much thought to the idea of getting

back at Lemus. She had been focused on how to keep her baby safe from the monster who was now her husband. She remembered how Zula had once told her that there were better ways to get back at Lemus than to kill him while he slept. Until this morning, she hadn't understood.

Zula was right. This is much better!

Maeryn lived with the man responsible for governing the city of [Bastul](#) and she had access to information that other men would kill to have. She remembered that while Adair was Governor, he had kept informed on the Resistance movement. They were a subversive group of people living within the Empire and among its citizens. Adair never spoke of what these people stood for, but she remembered that he had even communicated with them on several occasions through a local fisherman who relayed messages. Throughout his time as Governor, he had managed to avoid any major confrontations. The fact that they were now planning to attack a shipment in the harbor meant that they didn't think too highly of the new Governor.

"Zula," Maeryn called as carefully as she could without waking the baby.

"Yes, ma'am," the slave woman replied, coming in from the hallway.

"Is Lemus gone?" she whispered, tilting her head toward the window.

The woman walked to the window and peered out. "Yes, ma'am," she answered after a few seconds. "Shall I fetch him for you?"

"No," Maeryn answered quickly, wondering if the slave woman was being facetious. "I was thinking that I would like to have fish this evening for dinner. I would like you to go into the city and buy some from a certain fisherman."

"But, ma'am, we have plenty of fish here." Zula was obviously confused.

"Yes, I know, but he is a friend of the family and it has been a long time since he has heard from us. I am also going to send a letter for you to deliver to this man." Maeryn motioned for the writing utensils on a nearby desk and Zula quickly brought a quill along with a sheet of parchment and an ink pot.

"Thank you," she said as the woman handed her the items. "Give me a few minutes to write the letter and then you can go into the city."

"Yes, ma'am," Zula said and left the room to finish what she was working on before she was called.

Maeryn dipped the quill in the ink and paused to look at the baby. *One day, I'll be able to tell you who your real father is.* And we won't be forced to live a lie. She looked back to the parchment and began to write.

I have recently become aware of information that may be of some use to you. There is a shipment coming to [Bastul](#) at midnight, two days from now. There are rumors that the Resistance has made plans to attack the shipment as it reaches its destination. I can assure you that measures are being taken to solve this problem and the attack will likely be unsuccessful. Your lives will be at great risk should you choose to continue with this course of action. I have heard from a reliable source that the armory will be emptied of all but two men on the night of the shipment to deal with this rumored threat. Perhaps the cargo of the ship is not as important as the contents of the armory to a movement such as yours.

Maeryn blew on the ink and folded the parchment into thirds. When she was finished, she noticed Zula standing in the doorway. "Would you please seal this with Adair's symbol?" she asked as she handed the letter to the woman.

Zula nodded. "I will be back in a few hours. Do you need anything else while I am in the city?"

"No thank you, just the fish."

As Zula turned to leave, Maeryn felt a pang of guilt. “Zula...”
“I know, ma’am. He won’t ever know. I’ll be careful.” She gave a knowing smile and left the room.

* * * *

The jostling of the wagon stopped, waking Saba from his uneasy sleep. For a moment, he forgot where he was, but the aching in his joints quickly reminded him. *Why have we stopped?* He couldn’t see anything with the covering over his head, so he sat still, waiting to see what his captors would do. He had been in the back of this wagon for close to a week now, or so he guessed. Several times a day they would stop and allow him to get out and walk around. It was during these times that Saba was able to relieve himself. *But it’s too soon since the last break!* Saba began to grow nervous.

To his left, Saba heard the sound of metal grating on metal.

“Get out,” one of his captors said.

Saba tried his best to comply with the command, but his body was stiff. Once out of the wagon, the man placed a hand on Saba’s shoulder and pushed him forward. Saba’s heart began to beat louder as he anticipated something terrible.

“Where are we going?” he mumbled through the gag in his mouth.

“Huh? Did you say something? It sounds like you have something in your mouth.”

Laughter broke out from the other two men who were following at a safe distance, probably waiting for Saba to try and run.

He didn’t bother. He didn’t repeat his question either.

The ground under his feet suddenly became smoother and the stranger pulled on Saba’s shoulder to stop him. He briefly heard the creaking sound of wood and then they were moving again. After a few minutes he stopped Saba, reaching up to the back of his neck to untie the bag.

“Welcome to your new home,” he said, as he lifted the covering off of Saba’s head.

After seeing nothing but darkness for a week, the light was intense. Saba could only open his eyes for seconds at a time. What he did manage to see was a fenced area of well-trodden soil, containing a few buildings, one of which was directly ahead of them. Saba spat his gag onto the dirt, then took a deep breath. The air was cold, but smelled clean and damp and the soil under his feet showed signs of recent rain. He quickly noticed that his captors were not dressed the same as the cloaked men who had attacked him in the city of [Orud](#). These men wore black as well, but were garbed like soldiers with long-sleeved leather tunics and trousers that reached down to their calves.

“In you go,” he said and pushed Saba toward the nearest building.

One of the soldiers ran ahead and opened a wooden door in the stone structure. Once inside, Saba’s eyes could relax, though there wasn’t much to look at once his eyesight returned. Along the right side of the building was a long narrow room with a fire pit in the floor on the far end. A few crudely built chairs surrounded the pit with others arranged near a table in the corner. Along the left side were thick wooden doors with narrow viewing slots carved into them at eye level. The three men walked Saba down to the far end of the building and opened the last door, pushing him inside.

“Make yourself comfortable,” said one of the soldiers as the others laughed. The door was shut and locked, and once again, Saba was alone. A quick look around the room was all that was needed to take inventory of his surroundings. There were no windows, only a small cot and a hole in the floor that smelled of urine. Saba walked over to the cot and inspected it with a probing hand. *I think I’ll stand.*

The next few days were as uneventful as his trip in the back of the wagon. They fed him regularly and kept the fire going outside of his room, so that the chill night air never made it to his cell. It was the inconsistency of the situation that confused him most. *What do they want from me? Why keep me locked up, and yet tend to all my basic needs?* It didn't make any sense. Saba set his pondering aside at the sound of voices. Footsteps preceded the sound of jingling keys and suddenly, the door was open.

"Come on, old man, it's your turn," said a soldier whom he hadn't seen before.

"My turn for what?"

The guard smiled. "You have a big day tomorrow, don't you want to look your best? You don't have a choice in the matter anyway. Come on, get out of your cell," he said before Saba had the chance to answer.

Saba was escorted back the way he entered the building. On his right, he heard sounds coming out of the other cells. He tried to remember if there were people in the cells when he came in, but before he could recall, the door opened and the guard pushed him outside.

The chill in the air made him feel instantly awakened. For the first time, Saba got a good look at the place where he was being held prisoner. It was a compound with several stone buildings that appeared to be randomly placed within a high stone wall surrounding a dirt courtyard. *Although the term 'courtyard' is usually reserved for more hospitable surroundings.*

A thin fog obscured most of what was beyond the wall, but a few trees which stood close to the wall could be seen. Saba noted that they were some variety of pine, which meant that they must have traveled north from [Orud](#) and had climbed a considerable amount in elevation.

"Keep moving," the guard said in a bored tone.

Saba got the impression that these men were either being paid to do what they were doing or else they were just following orders. They didn't express any malice toward him, in fact, he felt almost ignored, but for the attention needed to prevent his escape. *Like watching animals.*

They walked across the courtyard toward a building that looked much like the one Saba had been sleeping in for the past few days, except for a small wing that extended off the main structure at an angle. As they approached the extension, the door opened and a guard led another old man from the room and the two began walking in the opposite direction. When they passed, Saba could see that the man's head had been shaved as well as his face. Neither guard said anything as they passed each other, as if they had done this a hundred times already.

Saba was pushed through the doorway and into a small room with a wooden floor that sloped downward toward a center drain. One man was sweeping gray hair off of the floor while another was setting down a bucket of soapy water with a rag draped over the side. Saba's escort pushed him toward a chair that sat in the center of the room.

"Take off your clothes and sit," he commanded.

Saba looked at the man with raised eyebrows.

"Hurry up, I don't have all day."

Saba unfastened his belt and pulled his tunic over his head, tossing both to the side of the room. He had just settled into his chair when he noticed the silence. He looked around at the three men and received suspicious looks in return. *Why are they acting so strange?* The man who had been sweeping left the room and came back with two more guards. There were now five men in the room and four of them stood guard around the perimeter while the first guard stepped closer to Saba with a short blade in his hand.

"Now don't move. I don't want to hurt you, but this thing will take your ear clean off if you're not careful."

Saba nodded that he understood and sat still while the guard rubbed soap suds into his hair and proceeded to shave his head. He watched the hair that used to fall down to his shoulders drift toward his feet and onto the floor. It only took a few minutes before the man was done and moved around in front of Saba.

“Put your head back,” the man said carefully.

Saba obeyed, tilting his head back while another man started on his beard.

“You know, I could do that myself?” Saba offered.

“And let you get your hands on this razor? That doesn’t sound like a good idea to me. Now shut your mouth so I don’t accidentally cut your throat.”

Saba closed his mouth and tried to keep as still as he could. Shaving his beard took longer than shaving his head, but before long, the man was finished.

“Take that bucket and wash yourself. And hurry up, we’re running late.”

Saba got to his feet and walked over to the bucket, rinsing his head and face first. After scrubbing himself with the rag, he tipped the bucket over his head and let the cold water wash over his skin. Despite the shocking temperature, it felt refreshing to bathe for the first time in weeks. “Do I get something to dry off with?” he asked, setting down the bucket. When he looked up at the men, they were all staring at him again. “What do you keep looking at?” he growled, not able to tolerate the awkwardness.

“How old are you?” one of the men asked.

“Old. Why?”

A different man answered this time. “You sure don’t look that old.” He looked back to the man who had performed the shaving. “We might have made a mistake with this one.”

“Never mind,” the guard said, putting down the razor and handing Saba a towel. “Dry off and put your clothes back on.”

Chapter 17

Two nights after writing the note, Maeryn stared at the ceiling of her bedroom and waited impatiently. She was not sure of the time but it had to be close to midnight. After feeding Aelia and putting her back to sleep, Maeryn’s mind began racing. Soon, the events that she had possibly affected in a tremendous way would unfold, if the letter reached its intended destination. Zula had delivered it with no problems and made it back to the house without seeing Lemus. But since then, there had been growing in her mind a sense of doom. At first, she was pleased with herself and the idea that she could slowly destroy the man who tried to replace her husband. The Empire to which Adair had devoted himself had so quickly abandoned him, even though he had gotten into trouble by serving that very same Empire. It was exciting to think of the privileged information to which she had access on a daily basis. If she was careful, she might be able to do great damage to the Empire that had stolen her true love away. But now she was scared of the consequences of her actions. Maybe the letter was not the smartest thing to send. If Lemus found it, he might suspect her, and he had proven that he had no reservations about sending family members to their death. But she had already sent the letter and there was nothing to be done about it now but to wait. As she watched the moon reflections cast by the ocean dance along the ceiling of her bedroom, she eventually drifted off to sleep.

The sound of a baby crying jolted her awake. She glanced around the room, now awash with the orange hues of early morning, looking for the crib and found it at the foot of the bed. Aelia was sleeping soundly and Maeryn wondered if the sound that had awakened her had been

just a dream. She pulled the covers back and got out of bed to stretch her legs. Suddenly, the sound of approaching footsteps echoed loudly in the hallway. She could tell that it was Lemus; he had a certain attitude that permeated everything he did, including the way he walked. The footsteps passed the door to her room and entered the master bedroom at the end of the hall. From the agitated sound of the footsteps, his plans must not have gone well. Maeryn waited for a few moments, then left the room while Aelia was still sleeping.

She found him out on the balcony that used to be her favorite place to think. Since Aelia had been born, Lemus had not let her return to the master bedroom because of the child's crying. He told her that a man of importance with his amount of responsibility could not afford to be disturbed at night with crying children. It was just as well though; she enjoyed not having to share a bed with him. Lemus was standing at the railing, overlooking the city as it began to sparkle in the increasing light of the sun.

"Are you alright?" she asked quietly and carefully.

He didn't respond, but continued to stare out into the bay. After several seconds, Maeryn started to wonder if he hadn't heard her at all. She tried once more to bring him out of his thoughts.

"Things are not well. You seem troubled."

"I don't wish to talk about it," he stated flatly.

She didn't want to give up so easily. "Well, if you decide that you want to talk, I'll be in my room; sometimes it feels better just to get the words out." As she turned to leave, Lemus let out a sound as if he started to say something, but decided not to. Maeryn stopped and waited for him to say what was on his mind.

"There was trouble last night," he said at last.

Maeryn waited for the rest of his story and when it didn't come, she coaxed him out of his silence with more questions. "What kind of trouble?"

Lemus turned around from the railing and walked back into the bedroom. He slumped down on the bed and crossed his arms. "Last night..." he began and then drifted off.

Maeryn figured he was either too worked up to think straight or else he was uncomfortable discussing the details of his business with her.

He took a deep breath and started again. "Last night there was a shipment of armor coming in."

"And?" Maeryn questioned. "What was the trouble?"

"It was supposed to be attacked by a group of rebels...or so the rumor said. So I pulled most of the men from the armory to help guard the shipment." The despair in his voice slowly gave way to anger at being outsmarted. "Apparently the rumor was just a diversion because they attacked the armory while we waited for them at the harbor."

"Oh no!" Maeryn did her best to sound surprised. "What happened?"

"The two guards were killed and the rebels stole everything. Every last weapon and piece of armor is gone."

"That's horrible," Maeryn said with as much disgust as she could muster. "Who do they think they are that they should try to rise up against the Empire?"

Lemus picked his head up and looked at her with piercing eyes. Maeryn thought that she might have sounded a little too eager. When he smiled she felt a great deal of relief.

"Your patriotism is admirable, but there's more. While we waited at the harbor we heard the sounds of fighting. I sent a man to check on the matter and he came back a short while later to inform me that the armory was under attack. So I pulled the guards from their positions at the

harbor and we went to confront the rebels at the armory. By the time we got there most of them had disappeared. We defeated the ones we could find, but the bulk of them got away.”

“I’m sorry,” Maeryn offered.

Lemus continued without acknowledging her words. “When we got back to the harbor...” He trailed off and his skin grew red. He clenched a fist and finished his statement. “The rebels attacked the ships when we were at the armory. They looted the entire shipment and set the ships on fire.”

Maeryn really was speechless this time. She had to admit that the rebels were more devious than she had previously thought.

“Apparently there were two groups and they knew exactly how we were going to respond.” Lemus put his head in his hands and massaged his temples.

“What will you do now? Do the soldiers have no weapons?”

“No, no,” he assured her as if he were speaking to a child. “All the soldiers here have weapons and armor, but I have an additional three hundred soldiers arriving in six weeks and now I won’t be able to arm them.”

“Oh!” Maeryn tucked that bit of information away in her mind as well.

“What’s worse is that I must dispatch a report of the state of my army to [Orud](#) at the end of the month.”

“Perhaps the Empire will ship more armor when they hear of this attack. Maybe they will even send more than armor to aid you.” Maeryn offered whatever suggestions came to mind. It was actually easier to make conversation when the words were not planned out beforehand.

“I don’t know what is worse, the Empire knowing of this failure or the fact that the dispatch rider could be attacked on the way and the report stolen.” Lemus got to his feet and walked back out on the balcony. “Before last night, I wouldn’t have considered that the rebels were this well organized. But it is clear now that I have underestimated them and I mustn’t let it happen again. This report will contain every detail of the state of my army and it cannot fall into their hands. If they are able to plan such a successful attack, then surely they are a force to be considered and it would not go well to have my enemies privy to all of my military capabilities.”

“Is there no other way to send a report to [Orud](#)? Maybe you could disguise the rider.” Maeryn couldn’t feel the least bit of pity for this man; the man who had raped her, had her only son executed, the man who almost killed little Ajani, sent Saba away and tried to take the place of Adair. She had to fight the urge to celebrate his failures right in front of his face.

“I can think of no other way that would be sure to escape the rebels...not after tonight.”

“I don’t pretend to understand how one would govern an entire city, but perhaps there is a solution. I have heard of a man in the city who raises birds and trains them to do all sorts of amazing things.”

Lemus darted a quick, angry glance at Maeryn. “What does this have to do with anything?”

“I’m sorry. I just meant that perhaps this man could help you. Zula told me that he has trained birds to fly all the way to [Cerrar](#) and back. The rebels would not be able to catch a bird if you sent the report that way.”

Lemus laughed out loud and turned around to face Maeryn. “You were right...you can’t even pretend to understand all that I must deal with. But it does feel better to talk about it. Leave me alone now, I must figure out what to do.”

Maeryn smiled and left the man to his thoughts. By the time she got back to her room she was overflowing with excitement. She had no idea that the information she gave to the rebels would have such a potent effect. It was a scary thing to write that letter, even scarier to have it

delivered into the hands of the enemies of the Empire. She had partially expected to be caught and executed, but fortune had smiled on her this day. And the way Lemus opened up and told her such useful information, it was better than she had hoped for. For the first time since losing Adair, she felt that her future held promise. Aelia was still sleeping soundly and Maeryn stood over the child and watched as her tummy rose and fell with each breath.

* * * *

The evening proceeded slowly as Saba worried about the so-called *big day*. He didn't sleep well and found his mind racing with anxiety the whole night. Finally, morning came much the same as all the rest. The guard brought him a bowl of porridge shortly after his waking and Saba sat in the corner, half chewing, half drinking his breakfast. He tried to pass the time by thinking about the garden back in [Bastul](#). He had helped Maeryn with much of the planting and looked back on those times with fondness.

A few hours after breakfast, voices began to stir outside of his cell. He could also hear muffled shouting coming from outside of the building. He rose to his feet and walked over to the door, trying to peer out of the observation slit in the thick wood. When his door suddenly opened he was as shocked as the guard, who quickly jumped back and grabbed for his sword. Saba held up his hands in protest. "No. No. I was just trying to listen."

When the guard regained his composure, he waved for Saba to come out of his cell. He pointed to the open door at the end of the room. "Get moving."

Saba complied and headed for the door with the guard close behind. As he exited the building, the scene in the courtyard made his heart race. Dozens of old men were being ushered into groups and lined up side by side. All wore looks of fear and confusion on their faces and Saba couldn't help but wonder what was going to happen to everyone, himself included. The guard shoved him toward the nearest group where several others were arranging the old men into orderly ranks at the points of their swords. Saba did his best to comply with their commands and not appear to be a threat, all the while thinking as fast as he could how to escape. When the last of the prisoners were brought into formation, the guards stepped back and joined the others at the perimeter of the courtyard. Saba looked around and made a mental note of the number of prisoners. *Ten in each group. Probably ten or twelve groups. At least a hundred in all.*

Suddenly, a dead silence fell over the crowd. Saba stopped in mid thought and instantly knew the reason. An overwhelming sense of dread poured over him. Not the kind that would make one want to run and scream, but the kind that is so powerful, it makes one paralyzed.

At the far right corner of the courtyard, a small group of soldiers appeared through a narrow gate. They strode confidently toward the groups of old men and stopped a short distance away. Pausing only for a moment, the small band of dark clad men separated to reveal a mysterious figure waiting at their center. He was covered head to foot in a black cloak which hid his face and even his hands. The soldiers escorted the figure to the first group of old men, where he proceeded to grab hold of the frightened prisoners by their necks, lifting their heads. Saba watched as their leader, or so he assumed, carefully inspected each prisoner as one might do when buying livestock. Slowly, one by one, the cloaked man dismissed the prisoners, who were then taken away to a large building on the opposite side of the courtyard.

The time went by at an agonizingly slow pace as the cloaked man made his way through more than half of the prisoners before coming to Saba. Although the man stood almost a foot shorter than Saba, like all the other guards and prisoners, he was still intimidating. Even at such close proximity, Saba was unable to see his face through the shadow cast by the thick hooded cloak.

Suddenly, the man's hand snaked out and grabbed him by the chin. Twisting Saba's face from side to side with incredible strength, he stepped closer. After a full minute of silence, he let go. Saba exhaled his breath and lowered his gaze to the ground, apparently passing the inspection. He began to feel dizzy and took a few deep breaths, but his vision was beginning to blur. The ground started to spin around his feet and Saba quickly shut his eyes to make it stop.

{Ahh...Sariel!}

A voice forced itself into Saba's mind, pushing his own thoughts aside.

{I've found you at last}

Saba opened his eyes and looked at the cloaked figure who was still standing in front of him.

{Yes,}

{That's right.}

{You didn't think I would forget about you, did you?}

Though Saba couldn't see his face, somehow he knew that the words were not coming from his mouth. Saba looked around at the guards who were now taking the remainder of the prisoners away. None of them were speaking. Saba looked back to the shadow beneath the hood. "How are you doing that? Who is Sariel?"

{You don't ask the questions here.}

{Not this time!}

The voice in Saba's head exploded with fury.

{You had your chance and now it's my time!}

Saba was confused. He heard the man's voice in his head, without hearing him speak. It was as if he was hearing the man's thoughts.

"Take him to the chamber and get rid of the rest of these," the robed man said audibly and in a completely different voice, waving a hand dismissively at the other old men.

Suddenly, Saba was being pushed across the courtyard toward one of the smaller buildings, in the opposite direction from the rest of the prisoners. A guard ran ahead and produced a set of keys, unlocking the door into the small structure. Just as Saba reached the doorway, he heard screams. He only had time to glance over his shoulder before being shoved through the door, catching a glimpse of smoke pouring from the windows of the large stone building where the other prisoners had been taken.

Saba stumbled to the ground just inside the doorway. When he lifted his head, he saw a square room, twenty feet across, with stone walls and floor. There were no windows or features of any kind, aside from a small hole in the floor at one corner. The thick wooden beams that made up the ceiling were the only break in the visual monotony of the room. Saba scrambled on his hands and knees to the other side of the room before turning around and sitting against the wall.

The cloaked man entered the room and held up his hand. "Leave us," he said to the guards, who promptly did as they were told, locking the door behind them. "Now," he turned his attention toward Saba, "I have someone who wants to speak with you."

Saba quickly looked around the room, wondering if they were alone. The room was completely empty. He looked back to the mysterious figure whose head was bowed and arms crossed. His body seemed to shudder before he lifted his head and resumed a more normal body

language. Once again, Saba felt an overwhelming sense of dread that made him feel dizzy with nausea.

When the man spoke it was not with the inaudible thoughts as before, but his voice was also not his own. "Sariel, you were a hard one to find, though I didn't expect you to make it easy for me. Nevertheless, I succeeded."

"You must have me confused with someone else," Saba replied, at once confused and terrified.

"Ha!" barked the man. "Do you not recognize your old friend? Surely the depth of your treachery cannot be so easily forgotten? I admit the physical manifestation is a bit of a change," he conceded, waving a hand in front of himself, "but you must be joking?"

"I'm afraid I don't know what you are talking about," Saba pleaded.

The man took a few steps closer and knelt down, pulling the hood of his cloak back away from his head. Saba's confusion fled, replaced with a feeling of disgust. The man's eyes were rolled back in their sockets and his facial features were contorted, as if struggling to resemble something they were never meant to. When the man spoke again, Saba realized that he was not conversing with the man before him, but whatever had taken control of his body and mind.

"You honestly don't know me anymore." The statement seemed to come as a complete shock to the man.

Suddenly, Saba's vision blackened and he fell on the floor, unable to control himself. Images flashed in his mind. Maeryn, Kael, Adair, scenes from their time in [Bastul](#) flashed through his mind in a random succession. Saba felt as if his head would explode from the pressure. Places and people whirled by from a time when Saba was looking for [Bastul](#). Then, the images stopped. For a few moments, there was only darkness. The pain was the most excruciating thing Saba had ever experienced. *He's looking for something...in my mind.*

A sharp pain exploded in the front of Saba's head, and more images flashed through his mind, things that he had never seen before. *Are they memories of the past? Visions of the future?* As soon as the question formed in his mind, Saba realized that these were old memories from a time before he lost his memory. Then, the images stopped. Saba could see again. He was lying on the floor of the small building with his face on the stone floor. He tried to move, to sit up, but his body was limp with exhaustion. Then the voice in his head spoke once more. Calmly this time.

{I knew it was you.}

The words or thoughts disappeared from Saba's mind and the man began to speak audibly once more.

"How fortunate that you should lose your memory after what you did to me. I often wondered how you were able to live with yourself. In your mind, you are a different person. But that doesn't change what happened. For thousands of years I have been alone with my thoughts, trapped in a prison of your making. I have been waiting for an opportunity to return and take my revenge, and it has presented itself. It is so close now that I can taste it. For now, you will stay confined to this jail until I can come and deal with you myself. My only regret is that your sentence won't last as long as mine. You will die much too soon."

Saba watched from the floor, still unable to move, as the hem of a black robe passed in front of his face and floated across the room. The door opened and the man's cloaked silhouette stood in the doorway.

"Enjoy your new home," the man spoke, with his own voice this time. Then the door was shut and locked and Saba heard only silence.

Chapter 18

The bright sunlight did little to warm Kael as he sat on a rock outcropping overlooking the ocean. The air was cold and still, except for the occasional gust of wind. There were hardly any clouds to be seen in the whole sky, though it would not have mattered to Kael anyway. He sat, legs crossed, with his eyes closed. He had found this spot shortly after arriving at the monastery; though, at that time, it wasn't the hiding place that it had now become. Seven years had passed, and with each year, Kael felt more and more distant from the people around him. His heart had grown heavy and he couldn't figure out why. But it was always therapeutic to hear the ocean and feel the breeze on his face. Some days, when he had free time, he would sit in this place for hours with his eyes closed and try to feel everything that was happening around him. Today was no different.

Darkness filled his vision, but his memory, in combination with his imagination completed the picture. Years of watching the waves below, the wind as it passed through the pale grasses in the field behind him, told his mind what should be happening when his eyes were closed. The sound of his heart beating was loud in his head, even though he was not doing anything strenuous. He had lost track of how long he had been in this position, but it didn't matter. It was soothing to his soul.

He tried to think back over the time he had spent in this place and the friends he had made. Even though he knew almost everything there was to know about each of his brothers, as they called each other, he was sure that they all knew far less about him. With the passing of time he found it harder to relate to those around him. Even the things he was learning in class made less sense lately. Sometimes Ukiru would be teaching a subject and it would remind Kael of a long time ago, when he and Saba would talk for hours. It seemed like he was doing more listening than talking lately.

Kael tried to push the thoughts out of his head. He had been dwelling on this matter for too long now and was tired of it consuming his mind. He took a deep breath and replaced the negative imagery in his head with the soothing feeling of nature. He could feel the air stir to his left and blow gently across his face. He imagined all of his negative thoughts floating away on the breeze. He imagined them tumbling and dancing like leaves off the cliff and out over the water. Occasionally one of the leaves would fall from the group and swirl downward until it was too small to see. The rest kept tumbling into each other as they moved farther away until they too were lost to sight. Somewhere off to the right, just above the cliff face, he imagined the air stirring, driven by a lone seagull. It flew in from the ocean and hovered for a second above the rocks before spreading its wings for the slow descent of its landing. When it reached the ground, it let out a screech as it tucked its wings close to its body.

Kael suddenly felt silly to be imagining such things, even though it was fun to let his mind wander for a time. He opened his eyes to the bright sun and blinked at its harshness, unable to stop himself from yawning.

A second screech sounded and Kael glanced to his right. It took him a second to realize that the seagull perched on the rocks, only thirty feet away, was real. He shook his head and looked back, but the bird was still there. He slowly got to his feet and watched as the bird, previously unaware of his presence, leaped off the cliff and spread its wings to catch the air. It glided for a while before it began to beat its wings, slowly descending to the beach below.

Did I watch the seagull come to a landing, or were my eyes really closed when it happened? Kael continued to watch the bird as it retreated. *No. I'm sure I had my eyes closed the whole time.* But just as he came to that conclusion, he dismissed the idea as impossible. *If I had my eyes closed, then I saw it in my mind before it even made a sound. I'm definitely not feeling well.* Turning around, Kael headed back to the monastery to get some sleep.

Kael slept from before sundown until the next morning. He awoke feeling refreshed and realized that it had been quite some time since he had slept so well. The morning's activities passed in a blur, as they usually did, and Kael found himself in the arena, standing next to the other young men, awaiting the opportunity to act upon the instruction of Ukiru. The instructor, who was now only taller than a few of his pupils, paced back and forth in front of the group.

"In combat, a warrior may easily find himself in a situation beyond his control. Facing a number of adversaries at once may be such a situation. Regardless of how much you train and practice the skills of fighting, there are times when you cannot control what is happening around you. The only way to prepare for such a time is to be able to recognize a bad situation and avoid it before you become trapped. Today we will split up and each of you will have a group of adversaries from whom you will have to retreat and defend yourself. Offensive tactics are not allowed in today's training. The way to succeed today is to avoid being trapped by the enemies who outnumber you and to hold out for as long as possible."

As Ukiru ended his introduction, the group split up and each person found his own space at the edge of the arena. The sand crunched beneath Kael's feet as he walked away, his footsteps producing an intriguing rhythm. He tapped the soil with the wooden staff he held in his right hand between each step and watched as it left a dimple in the soft earth. When he reached the edge of the arena, he turned to find his adversaries following at a short distance. There were eight monks in all, dressed in their usual attire and carrying staffs of their own. He looked around and noticed that most of the others had only five enemies, except for Soren, who had eight as well. When starting a new training session for a particular fighting concept, they always used wooden instruments, eventually moving on to bladed weapons when a level of proficiency was attained.

Kael gripped the staff firmly in both hands. *So we're supposed to carry a weapon, but we can't use it?* He always liked how weapons felt in his hands, like they were alive and just wanted to move. He had the urge to twirl the staff around his body. He had done so a long time ago and was chastised severely for it. Ukiru used him as an example that day to explain that a weapon was not a toy and should never be treated as such.

The enemies stopped twenty feet away and gathered in a bundle. Everyone looked to the center of the arena where Ukiru stood with his hand raised in the air.

"Begin," he shouted and his hand dropped.

Immediately the group in front of Kael spread out into a line and started to advance. Kael quickly moved to the left. The men on the left side ran wider to flank him and he quickly doubled back to the right, slipping past the men who waited to trap him there by the wall of the arena. Slowly at first, but with increasing frequency, he could hear the crack of wooden sticks hit each other as the other students tried to defend themselves. The sounds of combat meant that the others were not faring as well, as the purpose of this lesson was evasion.

Kael now had his entire group of enemies lined up behind him and closing in fast. He slowed his pace and turned out toward the middle of the arena so they couldn't use the wall to their advantage. Again they fanned out, hoping to encircle him and he backed away from them, dodging to the side of the group and closing the distance before they could use the advantage of

their numbers against him. It became a dance after a while and his body moved through the evasion methods he had learned so thoroughly, allowing his mind to wander as his enemies chased him to no avail. After several minutes the sounds of struggle and wooden staffs beating against each other dwindled to nothing and Kael realized that he was the only one left who had not been defeated. Somehow, he didn't take any pleasure in the thought. He was beginning to get frustrated with the concept of evading the enemy. He knew what Ukiru was trying to teach by this exercise, but he didn't find it very efficient. He was also starting to get fatigued from the monotony.

Suddenly one of his enemies lunged forward and Kael realized that he had let the man get too close. He dodged to the side as the man swung his staff in an overhead motion, trying to bring it down on Kael's head. Kael raised his staff and deflected the blow to the side, sending his enemy tumbling past him into the sand. His knuckles ached as he realized the blow glanced off his hand. Kael quickly swiveled around and jabbed the man in the back with his staff.

"You're out," said Ukiru to the monk from a short distance away. The monk stayed on the ground and pretended to be a slain enemy.

Kael turned back to the group only to find that two others were advancing at a run. It was too late to run away from them. He instantly made the decision to run at them and try to break through, which would place him, once again, beyond the reach of the other five enemies. It was only an instant before the two were upon him. The man on the left swung his staff at waist level and the other man jabbed for the chest. Kael spun to the left and blocked the jab, throwing the enemy's staff in the way of the second adversary. The two blows met each other as Kael used his spinning momentum to dodge to the right of both men.

"What are you doing?" Ukiru yelled from across the arena.

Kael decided that there wasn't enough time to stop and defeat the two men. Instead, he ran for the safety of the open area behind the other five men. Ukiru was shouting something in the distance, but he wasn't paying attention any more. The pain in his hand fueled his frustration with this exercise. *I guess I'm just supposed to run around until one of them wounds me enough to slow me down. That's no way to fight.*

As he ran to the edge of the arena it occurred to him that he just didn't trust any of the things he was being taught. *Is that what's bothering me?* As the thought came, it triggered a memory from two years ago when he pointed out a flaw in one of the attack stances that Ukiru was teaching. The awkward position left the attacker unable to step backwards quickly and, therefore, the attacker would not have enough time to react if the defender decided to rush him. He had never seen Ukiru lose his temper the way he did that day. After being scolded and belittled in front of the rest of the young men, Kael was sent to his room without dinner and was not allowed out until the next morning. Ever since that day, Kael began to find problems with many other things about their training. It eventually bothered him so much that he devoted much of his personal time to developing his own methods of combat, though he would never have the chance to use them anywhere other than in the privacy of his own bedroom.

The seven remaining enemies stopped in the middle of the arena at Ukiru's command. Kael could see the instructor's face, flushed red with anger. "You men," he shouted at a group of other monks who were standing nearby. "Join in with the others." At his command, twenty other monks joined the ranks and Kael's enemies almost tripled. "If you insist on disobeying me, this will indeed become a painful lesson."

The rest of the students were watching intently.

Maybe I will get the chance to put my private studies to good use. Kael closed his eyes and breathed deeply. He tried to put everything out of his mind but the awareness of his own body. Ukiru's yelling voice slipped into silence. The vision of twenty-seven monks with wooden staffs blinked out of sight and quickly gave way to silence and darkness.

Kael could feel his heart beating heavily in his chest.

He could feel his lungs expanding and contracting as air rushed in and out of his body.

The sand moved beneath his feet as he shifted his weight from left to right.

There was another sensation as well, just at the edge of his perception, but still out of reach. It nagged at him until the sound of approaching footsteps caused him to open his eyes.

Suddenly, in that instant, he saw and felt the position of every man in the approaching group. Not only could he see and hear the enemies approaching, but he could actually feel them as if they were an extension of his own body. It took only a fraction of a second for him to know where the weakest point of the mob was. And that was where he ran. The faces of the monks dropped as the young man charged willfully into the insurmountable odds.

Kael closed the gap on the group before they had the chance to shift their order around to meet him. Even if they had the time, there was hardly any reason for twenty-seven men to think about the perfect way to approach one young man. And that was the weakness that Kael planned to exploit. As he came within striking distance, Kael twirled his staff above his head in open rebellion against the instructions of Ukiru, and brought it down at the limit of his reach on the head of the closest man. The blow caught the monk by surprise and shoved his head downward toward the sand, causing him to topple forward.

Kael kept his forward momentum and stepped onto the monk's back, springing off of his defeated enemy in a spinning motion. His staff flicked outward as he spun through the air, smacking into hard surfaces in rapid succession. Kael didn't have time to notice what he had struck until he landed in a somersault and came to his feet again. Turning around, he saw the group now trying to deal with the changing direction of their prey. Four men were lying on the ground, holding various parts of their bodies in an attempt to soothe their pain.

He had just broken through the thinnest part of the mob and would not get the same opportunity again. The remaining men split into two groups and began to circle back on Kael, trying to flank him on either side. Before they could get into position, he sprinted to the left and watched as their ranks broke formation. The men in front ran as fast as they could to keep Kael from getting around the left side of the group. As the closest man approached he swung his staff in a level arc aiming for Kael's head. Kael ducked under the attack and rolled onto his back, sweeping at the man's leg with his staff. The counterattack caught the monk on the knee and brought the man to the ground as well as two others behind him who tripped over their fallen comrade.

Kael tried to keep his momentum, but was too slow in getting to his feet. By the time he regained his footing and spun to meet his attackers, they were too close to run from. He crouched into a defense position of his own making and waited for the men to advance. The rear group spread out to encircle him as the group in front attacked to keep him from running.

Three monks advanced and the one in the middle jabbed his staff out at Kael. Parrying the jab with a two-handed block he struck the monk in the face with the same motion. Before the attacker on the right had time to bring his staff up to protect himself, Kael spun around and jabbed his own staff into the man's stomach. The third monk swung for Kael's head and Kael dropped to his knee, spinning his staff once above his head and smashed it into the man's chest, driving him backwards into his group.

Kael could feel a blow coming for the back of his head and spun to block the attack, but he was too late. The staff knocked him on the side of his head and dazed him for a moment. Then he was jolted by another blow to his back. Several more strikes crashed into his body before he fell over to the ground.

“That’s enough.” Ukiru’s voice stopped the attackers and they slowly backed away. Ukiru stood over Kael and stared at the defiant young man. After several seconds of silence, Ukiru spoke. “Take him to his room.”

Kael felt his arms lifted as two monks dragged him from the arena. He could see all of his fellow students watching in stunned silence as the men removed him from the training area. Even though he had taken several hard blows, Kael didn’t feel very much pain. He decided that it would be best, however, to let the monks continue dragging him as if he couldn’t walk. When they reached his room, the two men laid him down on his bed and left without saying a word. Kael rolled onto his back and stared at the ceiling. He couldn’t remember now why he had done what he did. He only knew that it was important at the time. An appropriate emotion might have been regret, or even anger, but he just felt numb. One day, those buried emotions would come boiling to the surface, but for now he took a deep breath and closed his eyes.

When he awoke it was to the sound of the others returning from their meditation the following morning. Loud footsteps pounded down the hallway as each of his fellow students came back to their rooms for a change of clothes before breakfast. Kael looked down at his own body, still dressed in the dirty clothing from the previous afternoon. A soft knock at the door came as a surprise to Kael who rarely had anyone else in his room. *Not lately anyway.* Usually, the others would gather in Soren’s room if they wished to socialize.

“Come in,” he called.

The door opened and Ukiru stepped inside, carefully closing the door behind him. Kael’s heart, which was so willing to defy this man yesterday, now trembled at the coming confrontation. Ukiru walked over to the bed and sat down slowly next to Kael with a calm look on his face.

“Are you hungry?”

The question seemed out of place to Kael. “Yes,” he answered, not noticing his hunger until Ukiru mentioned it.

“You may come down to breakfast after we are finished talking.”

“Okay,” Kael responded, still unsure of how to read the man’s body language.

“Are you hurt in any way?”

“No. They’re just bruises; they’ll heal.”

Ukiru breathed deeply and exhaled. “What were you doing yesterday? I was trying to teach you all how to stay out of danger and you ran straight into it. I don’t understand why you disobeyed me.”

Kael wanted to explain everything to him, but how could he? How was he supposed to tell his mentor of seven years that the methods he is teaching are wrong? What words could he possibly use to explain what was impossible to prove; that he just knew something was missing? “I don’t know,” he mumbled instead. “I don’t know.”

Ukiru was obviously hoping for more of an answer and waited for Kael to elaborate. When nothing more was said, he stood up and walked over to the window. “You want to know what I think? I think that you still look back to your old life and wonder what would have happened if you had never come here.”

Kael shrugged his shoulders, not really agreeing, but not necessarily disagreeing.

Ukuru continued. "This world rejected you and you were nearly dead when I found you. By the authority of the All Powerful and the direction of our High Priest, I saved you from that life and gave you the opportunity of another. This life," he motioned with his arms, "is a blessing. It's a chance to see what the All Powerful may accomplish through us. But I don't believe that you have given yourself wholly to it, or to him."

Ukuru spoke truthfully. Kael realized in that instant that he hadn't. Hadn't fully given himself to the training. Hadn't given himself fully to the god that Ukuru so often spoke of. As soon as Ukuru mentioned the All Powerful, Kael felt a twinge of uneasiness. He had never been able to reconcile his religious instruction with the concept of a single god that he had learned from Saba all those years ago. *Maybe my former life is really holding me back.* "Sometimes I feel like I'm just going through the motions, like this whole place is just one big exercise."

"Exactly," Ukuru spoke, suddenly looking encouraged. "Isn't that what life is, a preparation for what is to come when we die? But that doesn't mean that we should walk through life as though our actions don't matter. They do matter a great deal. This life is where our character is shaped and we become who we are supposed to be. I think that you are holding back in many ways, that you are keeping a small part of yourself reserved. You must trust that the All Powerful can do great things through you if you surrender yourself completely to him." Ukuru paused to look more directly at Kael.

He's trying to make sure that I understand.

"The humorous part about all of this is that, even though you are holding yourself back, you are still the most talented of all the boys here."

Kael wrinkled his eyebrows. "That's not true."

"Why do you disagree?"

Kael looked to the window and let his mind wander through all of his years of memories at the monastery. In every subject, whether in the classroom or the arena, Kael knew that he excelled. He wasn't always the best, but he was always near the top of his class. "Soren beats me every time in war strategy."

"Yes, but that is only one area. In the years that I have known you, I have seen glimpses of absolute perfection in individual combat that the others cannot even touch. Just think of what you could become if you would only trust my instruction."

Kael looked down at the bed and fumbled with the edge of his blanket.

"Please trust me; it is the only thing holding you back."

Ukuru stretched out his hand and waited.

Finally, Kael grasped it firmly. "You're right, I'm sorry."

Ukuru smiled. "No words, only actions." It was a saying that he was fond of and Kael thought that it was appropriate for the situation. "Now, it is time for breakfast," Ukuru said, walking to the door.

"I'll be there as soon as I change my clothes."

"Very well," Ukuru said and quietly left the room.

Kael lay back on his bed and stared at the ceiling. Ukuru was right. He had been holding a part of himself back, following all of the rules, but never really giving himself to his studies. Especially during meditation, when they were all supposed to focus their thoughts on the All Powerful, he always felt like it was make-believe. *Maybe I'm the one who is fake!*

He knew that there was only one more year until their pilgrimage and he decided to forget about everything that had just happened. He knew that he had to push aside his feelings of mistrust and forget about the combat methods that he was developing on his own time. He could

see how all of these things were clouding his perception. *One more year. I need to see what I'm capable of.*

Another knock at the door interrupted his thoughts. "Come in."

Soren's face peeked around the door. "How are you doing?"

"Fine," Kael replied.

"Are you coming to breakfast?"

"Yeah, as soon as I get changed."

Soren walked into the room and smiled. "You're still wearing your training clothes. You didn't have time to change since yesterday?"

"No," Kael replied with a laugh. "I fell asleep as soon as I got back to my room."

"Oh," Soren said, searching for the right words. "What happened yesterday?"

Kael exhaled loudly. "I'm not sure. I guess I just got frustrated with constantly retreating and running. I didn't think that running was the best way to deal with eight enemies, but I guess I was wrong, huh?"

"Yeah. But it sure was a good show," Soren said with a mischievous smile. "You were amazing. I've never seen someone move that fast before. You must have defeated a dozen of them before they got you."

"...nine actually."

"They looked like they hit you pretty hard," Soren stated, but it was more of a question.

Kael pulled his shirt off and showed him the bruises that were still forming on his back.

"Oh yeah," Soren said, "those'll be good ones in a couple of days."

"Oh well," Kael offered, "you always say the best lessons are the ones you learn, not the ones that you're taught, right?"

"That's right," Soren replied, walking over to the door. "I bet you'll never forget this one. Anyway, you'd better hurry before the food is all gone."

"Okay, I'll be there in a second," Kael called to the retreating footsteps.

* * * *

The air smelled clean and fresh following the recent storms that had passed over the city, washing everything with three days of rain. The bright sun was out now, drying the soil and a fresh humidity hung in the air. Maeryn sat on the steps of the garden and watched Aelia play in the flowers with one of the servant girls. Nearly seven years old now, she was looking more and more like Adair every day. Lemus had no suspicions about the child's origins. Once he believed something, he never again questioned it. His stubbornness was a large part of his detestable personality, but it had a positive side.

The sound of rushed footsteps brought her out of her thoughts as Lemus entered the garden from the courtyard on the opposite side. He strode across the groomed soil in a hurry. Maeryn hoped that he would ignore her and keep walking by, but to her disappointment, he stopped briefly in front of her.

"Come with me," he commanded.

Maeryn looked to Aelia who was oblivious to anything but the clump of newly picked flowers in her dirty hand.

"She'll be fine," he added, hurrying up the steps and into the house.

Maeryn rose to her feet and tried to keep up with Lemus' pace.

Lemus stopped at the nearest room and motioned for Maeryn to follow. Once the two were inside he shut the door. The dusty room was strewn with books and papers. Several pieces of

furniture were piled on top of each other in one corner. Adair had used this room to store things that he didn't want elsewhere in the house and it looked as if it had not been entered since then.

Lemus was visibly angered. "Many years ago, you mentioned a man who trained birds to fly between cities. Where can I find him?"

"Oh," Maeryn said. "That was such a long time ago. I'm not sure if he still lives in this region."

"Well, where did he used to live?"

Maeryn had to resist the desire to ask why he needed this information. When he was in a mood like this, he needed to feel important. She decided that it was best to just answer as soon as possible. "His name was Cornelius. He used to perform tricks with his birds in the City Square to earn money. That was the only time I saw him." It was the most direct answer she could think of.

Lemus nodded his head and his anger seemed to be pacified slightly.

After a moment of silence, Maeryn thought it was safe to ask questions. "What's wrong?"

Lemus looked up from staring at the ground.

Maeryn thought he might be waiting for her to ask.

"I sent out the census report last night. I used one rider as a decoy and a second rider to carry the report. The decoy left the city at midnight and rode to a checkpoint beyond the city limits where he was to wait for the second rider. The report left shortly after that, but the rider never made it to the checkpoint."

"Oh my!" exclaimed Maeryn, truly surprised, but exaggerating for effect.

Lemus' countenance changed as he enjoyed laying his burdens on Maeryn. She had worked hard to get to this point and now that she had gained his confidence, he spoke to her about everything. It made him feel important to impress her with the difficulty of governing the city, especially all of the problems he had to deal with on a daily basis. "We haven't even found his horse yet."

"Do you think it could be the rebels?" Maeryn asked, playing ignorant.

Lemus barked out a laugh. "Of course it's the rebels. Who else would have the nerve to do something like this? I can tell you one thing though; this won't carry on for long. They have grown from an annoyance to a menace and I will put a stop to them."

That's what you have said all along. Since the attack on Lemus' ships in the harbor, Maeryn had kept the rebels well informed of his plans for counterattack. It was because of her intervention that there hadn't been any major confrontations since that night. "What will you do?" she asked instead.

"I will see this bird-man of yours and find out if it is possible to send my report that way. Now that the rebels know the state of my forces, I will have some reorganizing to do. It will take much thought and patience, but I will dedicate my time to finding every last one of these vermin and exterminating them. They have sought to undermine the Empire and they will receive a just punishment." Lemus opened the door and walked confidently down the hall, not bothering to say goodbye or even to thank Maeryn for her time.

Maeryn, pleased to be rid of Lemus, walked back to the garden and resumed her position on the front steps. Aelia was leaning over the low wall surrounding the fountain and was running her hand through the water. The servant girl was trying to convince Aelia to come away from the fountain, but the gurgling water proved to be much more interesting than anything else at that moment.

Maeryn watched her daughter play and felt a sudden pang of guilt. Aelia had no idea about the circumstances surrounding her birth. As far as she knew, life was normal. She had a father and a mother who loved each other and her life was happy. That was how Maeryn intended to keep it. It would do more harm than good to tell her the truth—that Lemus was not really her father. All of the other horrible things that Lemus had done would go unmentioned as well. But what bothered Maeryn more than anything was the knowledge that Aelia had become a tool of her deception. If it had not been for her birth, Maeryn was sure that none of this would have worked. She had used Lemus' love for Aelia as a way to secure her own safety and was now using that safety as an inroad to do whatever she could to strike back at the Empire she had come to hate. That was the bottom line and it hurt to think about. Maeryn tried to shrug off the painful thoughts. *It won't do any good to think about that now. This is your life, and you must live it. One day, when Lemus has been brought to his lowest point, you will destroy him and then you will be free.*

Chapter 19

Saba sat in the corner of the cell that had become his unwilling home for many years now. His hair and beard that had been shaven before his encounter with the cloaked man, now hung well past his shoulders. His body was thin and weak from inactivity and lack of proper nourishment. The guards only brought one meal a day, no longer concerned with keeping him unharmed. He tried his best to move around the cell and stretch his limbs every day to keep his body from becoming completely useless, but there was only so much he could do.

For all the years he had spent in this cell, there were only two things that occupied his time—the coming of his meal brought by a guard at dawn every morning, and the thoughts in his own head. The latter proved to be the more exciting of the two lately. When the cloaked man, or the being that was contained in his body, searched Saba's memory, he brought images and sounds out of a place where they had been forgotten. Most of them were forgotten once again, as Saba was unable to hold on to memories that had no connection to his present life. But a few lingered with him still and had actually grown more vivid with the passing years.

One such memory was an image—the symbol on the shaft of the arrowhead that Adair had given to him so many years ago; the symbol that took him to [Orud](#) where he was captured. All he had to do now was close his eyes and the memory came instantly to him.

Saba stared at his own hands, the skin smooth and healthy. In his hands he held a scroll. The edges of the discolored parchment were ragged and worn, as if they had seen many years of use. On the page in front of him was a sketch, drawn in the same ink as the surrounding text. Ten winged creatures, vaguely human, with their arms and wings outstretched, formed a circle. His hands reached down and placed the scroll into a small stone sarcophagus and slid the heavy lid over the top.

Saba walked through a cave with a rough dirt floor and arched stone ceiling covered with stalactites. The tunnel of the cave widened as it turned around a bend and stopped at a wall of water. It was the backside of a waterfall. Saba ran toward it and jumped. For a second, there was a muffled cacophony of sounds, until Saba's falling body emerged from the waterfall into the sunlight. He continued to fall a short distance until he splashed into a pool of water. Swimming back to the surface, his head broke free and he drew in a few quick breaths. All around the pool was dense vegetation and a forest of a bright green color, suggesting regular,

heavy rainfall. On the bank of the pool stood three men of a primitive culture. Each brown-skinned native wore only a loincloth and carried a short spear. They were barefoot and had no adornments aside from the white bones that pierced their noses. Saba swam in their direction as one of the men waved his hand, beckoning him to come closer. Just as Saba reached a shallow area where his feet dug into the soft sand, he stood up and looked behind at the waterfall.

Saba opened his eyes and was confronted by the drab jail cell once again. No matter how long he dwelled on the memory, he couldn't make it tell him anymore. It started with seeing his hands, and ended with the waterfall, no matter how many times he revisited it.

* * * *

Kael stood in calf-deep grass, which was now green from the spring rain. The breeze made the grass sway and ripple like ocean water. Sweat began to bead on his forehead as the sun beat down on his body. He stood firm on the ground with his arms extended, holding a bow stretched taut and ready to fire. On his left, a few paces away was Soren, and on his right, Jorn. All of the students were standing in a line and each held a bow, waiting for the command to loose their arrows. Kael closed his eyes and imagined his surroundings, trying to recreate the strange event that happened on the bluffs and again during his encounter with the monks. Since that day, he attempted to bring back the sensation at the start of each exercise, but it proved to be elusive. It was like trying to train a muscle that he wasn't even sure existed. He steadied his thoughts and concentrated on his breathing. In his mind's eye, he could begin to feel the grass waving in the breeze as if each blade were a hair on his arm. He could feel the targets made of hay and canvas lined up out in the field in front of them. Each student had his own set at varying distances based on the limit of each student's skill level. Kael's own target was set at almost twice the distance of the others, next to Soren's.

Ukuru's voice spoke softly. "Fire when ready."

Almost immediately, Kael felt seven bolts fly at their targets, all striking their mark, some more accurately than others. The eighth arrow was loosed only a second later by Rainer who missed his target. The other students scrambled to restring the second in a series of three arrows. Soren and Kael still held back waiting for a break in the wind.

"You first," Soren whispered, when the breeze died down.

Kael opened his eyes and saw his target. Even at its great distance, Kael could feel it as if he were asked to reach up and touch his own nose. He aimed for the fist-sized red circle painted in the middle and loosed his arrow. It flew quickly to its target followed by Soren's. Both arrows struck inside of the circle. Immediately, Kael plucked another arrow from the quiver at his right leg and set it to the bow-string. In one motion he raised the bow and pulled the arrow back, resting his hand just below his cheekbone. The rest of the students and their attempts had disappeared now and the only thing in Kael's mind was his own target. He aimed and released his second arrow just as a gust of wind blew. The arrow struck the target only inches to the left of the red circle, blown off course by the wind. He grabbed his third and final arrow and aimed while the wind continued to blow. Closing his eyes, he could immediately feel the path that the arrow should take. He didn't stop to question it, but aimed almost a foot to the right of the target and several inches higher than the last shot. He released his last arrow and quickly opened his eyes, watching the bolt arc through the air, fighting the wind. It struck the target with a loud crack.

"What was that?" Horace yelled.

Kael couldn't see his third arrow and began to question whether or not he missed completely.

"Let's go see," Ukiru suggested and everyone ran out to the targets to see the results.

As Kael got closer, it became clear what had happened. His third arrow struck the center of the red target and split his first arrow in two pieces. The split pieces of the first arrow were still lodged in the target so that they looked like one arrow. Kael looked to the left and Soren was staring at him.

"You know...you're making us all look bad," he said with a smile.

Kael smiled in return just before noticing that Soren's target had all three arrows inside the red circle. "Not with a pattern like that..." he countered.

Kael felt a hand on his shoulder and turned to see Ukiru behind him. "Good shooting, you two," he said in a quiet voice so as not to make a scene. "Kael, what happened is very interesting, but you must work on your consistency."

Kael nodded, his joyous feelings immediately deflated.

"Soren, excellent job," he congratulated the young man. He searched for something more to say, but there was nothing for him to critique. Instead he patted his student on the back and turned to address the rest of the students.

"Are you pleased with your results?" he shouted to be heard over the sound of the waving grass. A few mumbled words were the only replies he received. He waved for everyone to follow him back to their starting positions and addressed them on the way. "It is easy to reach a high level of proficiency with bow and arrow when shooting once. It is quite another matter to be consistently accurate when shooting multiple times in a row. In a war setting, archers must shoot one arrow after another and it is not enough to simply let one fly. Each arrow must count as if it were your last."

When each student reached his starting position, Ukiru pointed at the targets in the field. "The target in front of you is your enemy. He is charging at you and you have no other weapons but your bow. Visualize the small red target on his chest and fire three more arrows. Don't try to hurry. Don't panic. Simply pull an arrow from your quiver, set it to the string, pull back, aim, and release. Do this three times until your enemy is defeated." Ukiru raised his hand and each student readied himself.

Kael was already visualizing the target in his own way. When Ukiru's hand dropped, he pulled an arrow from his quiver and began the fluid process of firing once, twice, and three times. When he released his last arrow to join the other two inside of the red circle, he looked around and noticed that he had finished before all of the others, except for Soren, who was enjoying the competition.

The next day, Kael found himself waiting on a bench in a hallway. He was staring at the floor when the door opened. He rose to his feet and walked into a room where Ukiru and three other monks were standing around a table. As he walked closer, he could see a large map spread out on the table covered with small wooden statues. It was an elaborate game that Ukiru had devised to teach his students the principles of warfare strategy.

"One day has elapsed. Your scout has just returned to inform you that the enemy has breached the northern wall of the city." Ukiru leaned over the table and pointed to a black statue on the map to indicate the new information.

Kael looked over the pale statues representing his own forces, most of which were still far to the east. The objective of this game was to take the abandoned city in the center of the map and use the advantage it offered to defeat the opposing forces. It looked like he was going to have to

take the role of the attacking army in this game. Somehow Soren, who was waiting outside another door, had managed to move his army to the northern wall fast enough to take the city while most of Kael's forces were waiting for the foot-soldiers to catch up. He had already put himself at a disadvantage by his lack of aggression.

"Pull the army back from the wall and set up a camp until the other soldiers arrive." *I'm already committed to a siege. I might as well wait until the full force of my army is ready.*

"Very well," Ukiru nodded his head. "Please wait in the hall."

Kael walked out to the hallway and resumed his position on the bench. After a few minutes, he was summoned back into the room. The map looked very different from when he had seen it last.

"Half of the enemy's army has taken up residence in the city and is guarding the walls with archers. The other half has come out of the eastern gate and is attacking your unguarded camp." Ukiru's face was unreadable, but Kael knew that he must be disappointed.

Kael looked to his foot soldiers in the east and saw that they were now close enough to attack. "The archers will retreat from the camp and the foot soldiers will attack." Once again, Ukiru nodded his head and Kael left the room to give Soren his turn at the map.

Long moments passed before Kael was let into the room. When he came back and looked at the map, he saw that Soren's forces were now all inside of the city. "What is the status of my army?" he asked immediately.

Ukiru pointed to the map. "Your foot soldiers pushed the enemy back into the city, destroying a quarter of his forces. But most of your archers were destroyed in the process."

Kael shook his head and tried to think of some way to take a defended city with only a few archers and the rest of his army. This game required an active imagination to understand how each stage might progress. Kael thought that the northern gate must have suffered some damage when Soren's forces broke through. "All of my forces will move to the northern gate. The archers will provide cover for the foot soldiers to attack the gate." Kael turned and left the room before he had the chance to see Ukiru's expression. It didn't matter anyway; Ukiru hadn't shown one bit of emotion since this game had started. He was obviously doing his best not to show favoritism.

As Kael waited in the hallway, he became aware that Soren was taking longer and longer on each turn. He must be choosing his actions very carefully. He had always been the best at this sort of competition. He had a way with people and knowing what they were capable of. Kael, on the other hand, had long since lost the patience for this sort of game. There was so much speculation involved that it became difficult to make decisions. Kael preferred to confront an enemy face to face, study his actions, and react. That is why he enjoyed the physical combat training the best. The principles and actions were all real and substantial.

"Come in, please," one of the monks said, peering around the door.

Kael rose to his feet and entered the room where Ukiru and Soren stood by the table. "This exercise has reached a point where the smallest of decisions will affect the outcome. Now that your two forces are within close range, you will be able to see everything that your enemy is doing; therefore, you are both allowed in the room at the same time." Ukiru waved Kael over to the table to update him. "The rest of your archers were killed in the attack. They could not compete with the range of the archers on the wall. However, they provided enough cover for your foot soldiers to breach the gate. You lost one quarter of your foot soldiers taking the gate, but you still have half of your original forces."

Kael surveyed the map and noted the location of Soren's forces. "How has my enemy reacted?"

Soren looked up from the map and winked at Kael, who smiled in return.

Ukiru answered. "After breaking down the gate, your soldiers have found themselves in a narrow corridor leading into the courtyard of the city. Your enemy has massed his foot soldiers in the courtyard to meet your attack and has placed his archers on top of the corridor to fire arrows down on your soldiers. You have already lost several men in the initial surprise."

Kael looked up at Soren who was now expressionless. "The soldiers in the rear will lift their shields over their heads to defend against the volley of arrows." Kael tried to imagine actually being in that situation. "The entire unit will drive the enemy back into the courtyard and get out of the narrow corridor."

Ukiru looked to Soren for his instructions. Soren looked straight at Kael. "My foot soldiers will push back to keep his forces inside the corridor. And my archers will continue to shoot." Ukiru looked back to Kael for his response.

"What is the status of both armies?" Kael asked.

"Both forces are dwindling, but the archers have given your enemy the advantage," Ukiru responded, still waiting for Kael's decision.

Kael knew that it was just a matter of time before he was defeated. It was strictly a numbers game now. His soldiers were evenly matched against Soren's, but the archers were bound to take out a few of his men, even with their shields above their heads. "My forces will retreat out of the northern gate."

Ukiru looked to Soren for a nod of confirmation before picking up the pale statue from the courtyard and placing it back in the corridor. He then reached for a black statue and placed it outside of the gate. "The other half of your enemy's force exited the western gate and has come behind you. Your men are now trapped in the corridor by a force in the courtyard, another outside of the gate, and archers above you. Your men are defeated."

Kael immediately looked up from the map and extended a hand to Soren. "Well done."

Soren grasped Kael's hand and shook it. "Thank you," he said with a smile on his face.

Ukiru turned to Soren and clasped a hand on his shoulder. "You are the winner of this competition. Congratulations."

Soren only smiled in response.

"Now, you must finish packing. Tomorrow we begin our pilgrimage. We must be ready to leave at first light."

The two young men walked out of the room together and Soren put his arm around Kael. "You put up a good fight."

"No, I didn't," Kael argued. "You're just saying that to make me feel better."

"Yeah. You're right. You didn't stand a chance," Soren said, patting Kael on the back. "Come on. I've got to hurry. I haven't even started packing yet," Soren said, running ahead.

"We were supposed to start a week ago," Kael yelled, but Soren had already rounded the corner and was out of earshot.

* * * *

The light from the quickly sinking sun filtered through the trees, leaving the ground in the garden dappled with alternating yellow light and purple shadows. Maeryn sat on a rock ledge surrounding an island of flowers, carefully pruning them by snapping off the dead parts of each plant. The soft humming of a melody drifted to her ears from across the garden and it brought a

smile to her face. Aelia liked to sing and it warmed Maeryn's heart to have the child in her presence.

Life is difficult to understand sometimes. It seemed like such a long time ago that she was surrounded by very different circumstances. She used to watch while Kael and Ajani would play in the courtyard. Saba would always be nearby, ready to give an explanation to the boys about how something worked. Eventually, when the sun went down, Adair would come home and everyone would sit down to a meal together.

Life was different then. Maeryn knew that even in her current circumstances she was more fortunate than most, but somehow, that didn't make her feel any better. It was peaceful in the garden, among the trees and flowers. Somehow, regardless of the things going on around them, the plants and trees kept growing, kept going through their seasons. They would shed leaves or change colors depending on the species, but eventually, all would bloom again. *What will my life look like when it blooms again?*

"Ma'am?" came a voice behind her. Maeryn was so deep in thought that she had not heard the footsteps in the coarse sand.

"Yes," she replied, turning to see Zula standing patiently behind her. The woman held a piece of parchment in her hand, which she extended to Maeryn. "Thank you, Zula."

"Yes, ma'am," she replied with a nod and quickly turned and walked away.

She is a strange woman to figure out. One moment she would speak with such passion, disregarding every manner expected of a slave. Then the next moment she would be polite and follow all of the rules to perfection. Maeryn thought that it must be difficult for such a passionate woman to keep quiet. And it seemed to be getting more difficult for her. Indeed, Maeryn herself was finding it more difficult lately to be in the presence of Lemus and not say all of the things she wished to. She only hoped that Zula would not make a mistake in front of that man, for her own sake.

Maeryn turned the letter over in her hands and the sight of the wax seal on the other side sent her heart racing. She immediately lifted her head and glanced around the garden to make sure that no one was watching her. The slight movement of Aelia at the other end of the garden was the only presence she could see.

She broke the seal on the letter and unfolded the parchment.

I know not the final destination of this letter. Nor do I know to whom it is sent. What I do know is that the one who reads it has proven himself time and again to be a true ally. For that I must extend my appreciation as well as the offer of my aid in any circumstance where I may be of assistance to you. As I do not know your identity, I will trust that if you ever need anything that is in my power to give, simply communicate it to me and it will be done. As a gesture of my trust in you, I wish to give you information as well. Please forgive the generalities as I do not wish to endanger anyone with specifics. Indeed this letter is already incriminating and I hope you will follow my advice and burn it as soon as you are able. In the past, [Bastul](#) has not been a major focus of our efforts throughout the Empire. Therefore, it has gone overlooked for some time. Lately, certain events have brought [Bastul](#) to the forefront of our attention, due in large part to your own contributions. However, we do not have enough allies in your city to make any difference. Therefore, I must ask a favor of you, if you wish to continue this relationship, but it will require much patience. The Empire has been built upon the backs of slaves who reap none of the benefits of its citizens, but who must labor every day for its welfare. The city of [Bastul](#) has one of the largest slave populations in the Empire and I believe that these people are the key to developing a large

base of sympathizers to our cause within your city. My request is that you take note of every slave within [Bastul](#) and find out if there are any who would not want the chance to change their way of life. From the information we have received from you in the past, I feel confident that you are the man for this task. My hope is that you are willing to take this next step and become an active part of our cause. However, if you do not wish this relationship to continue, simply burn this message and I will not contact you again.

I await your reply.

Maeryn quickly folded the parchment into its original form and looked around the garden to make sure that no one was watching. Her heart was still beating loudly in her chest in stark contrast to the silence in the garden. Aelia had only moved a few feet from her last position and was now staring in awe at the butterfly flexing its wings on her arm.

Maeryn looked back at the letter, afraid to open it again. Somehow it seemed more dangerous if she were to reread it, as if the first time had been an accident. Many thoughts raced around her head, crashing into one another and making it difficult to think clearly. She raised her hand to her eyes and massaged them until her mind cleared. The words of the letter shocked her in many ways. She had no idea that the Resistance was so elaborate and involved so many cities. It made perfect sense that a movement such as this would not be limited to [Bastul](#), but for some reason, she hadn't considered the vastness of it and the consequences of involving herself in such a cause. When she first wrote a letter and gave it to Zula, it was a result of her own personal struggle with Lemus and a desire to see him fail. She didn't realize what she was getting herself into. But the more she thought about it, the more sense it made. *Who else is capable of doing this task? Who else has my position and is not fiercely loyal to the Empire? What about the attack on the shipment in the harbor? If [Bastul](#) really has been 'overlooked', what kind of power do they have in other cities?* It all became too much to think about. Maeryn knew that she would need to think more on this matter before deciding, but something inside her already knew the answer.

"Aelia?" she called out.

"Yes, Mother," came the reply from behind a flowering bush, followed by a sweet little face.

"Let's go inside, the sun is almost down."

Chapter 20

Tears flowed down Saba's face. He had no images to recall, only the feeling of a deep and immense sense of loss. Someone had died in his past; someone he loved deeply. In the recent months since this memory—if it could be called such—came back, there were several occasions when the feeling would overwhelm him and he would cry until his body fell asleep from sheer exhaustion. He would wake, only to find that the feeling had not gone away, but had only lessened in intensity. Eventually, he would heal and begin to feel normal for a while until it happened again, unexpectedly. As far back as his time in [Bastul](#), Saba had wished that he could remember what was in his past. But on these occasions, he knew that the pain was too great for him to experience and that it was a blessing to have no memory of it. He wondered now if there were other painful things in his past, things from which he was being protected by his own forgetfulness.

* * * *

Kael sat at the prow of the ship, watching as waves broke into white foam around the hull. From somewhere behind him he heard the laughter of Horace and Donagh as they shared a joke. They had all been at sea for weeks now. Initially, the trip had been an exciting break from their normal routine. But when the first day of the week arrived, they began with the usual morning meditation, followed by all of their normal instructions in various subjects. The afternoon's physical training consisted mainly of hand-to-hand combat while trying to keep one's balance during the rocking, swaying motion of the boat at sea. It was difficult at first, but Kael found that the rhythm of the ocean was like everything else in nature; it felt alive and seemed to have a predictable pattern once you got to know it.

But Kael wasn't thinking of any of that right now. He was preoccupied at the present with trying to catch a glimpse of their destination. He had been told, along with all of the others, that they would reach the temple before sundown, and he had grown tired of being at sea. Finally deciding not to torture himself any longer, he got to his feet and moved past the others, taking a seat at the stern. The view was much of the same. Stormy skies and ocean as far as the eye could see. The only difference was the wake left behind the large boat.

It was strange to think how much time had passed since he had left [Bastul](#). He had stopped counting long ago, but it must have been close to eight years. Things had changed drastically in the past year for him. Ever since that talk with Ukiru, Kael realized that he had been living in the past.

The past is past, but the future is yet to come, Ukiru would say.

Kael laughed to himself. It was funny how well you got to know people when you spent enough time with them. Although in his case, he didn't have any choice. It wasn't as if he could go anywhere. Still, he was starting to enjoy his life again. He was living in the present now, and looking toward the future. Ukiru told all of them that by the end of the trip, they would get to see the temple, meet the High Priest, and receive a commission straight from the All Powerful. Kael knew that it was just another step in his training, but it would give him a taste of what his purpose in life was to be, and that had recently become very important. He was no longer a child, he realized, but a young man being prepared to go out into the world as a messenger for the All Powerful.

"What is that?" yelled an excited voice from the front of the ship. Kael turned around and looked to the southwest, off the starboard side of the ship. About half of a mile away, the low-lying clouds had parted, allowing a bright shaft of daylight to stream down to the ocean in a column of brilliant pale yellow.

"Wow," remarked Kael as he walked back to the prow. "That's beautiful."

Soren turned around and noticed what Kael was looking at. "No. I think he was talking about that."

Kael turned from the spectacle and followed Soren's pointing finger toward the southeast where the boat was facing. At first he didn't see anything. "What am I supposed to be looking at?" he asked for clarification.

Arden turned around. "Don't you see it?"

Soren waved a hand at Arden and turned back to Kael. "Look closer at the water."

Kael looked back to the ocean and after several seconds he noticed something different. It was still more than a mile away, but the shimmer on the water was slightly different, duller somehow.

"Is that where we are headed?" asked Jorn.

Kael wasn't sure to whom he was speaking until he realized that Ukiru was standing behind him. "Yes, Jorn. That is where we are headed."

Ukiru always had a fatherly tone in his voice and Kael realized that it was getting more noticeable as time went on.

"What is it?" Jorn asked, still confused.

Ukiru couldn't help but smile. "I'll explain it when we get closer," he answered, adding to the mystery of the situation.

During the next few minutes, all of the boys stared in wonder at what they couldn't understand. The clouds began to break apart and more light streamed down from overhead. The glittering light reflected off the water making it more difficult to see the object of their fascination. Suddenly, as they moved closer, its silhouette broke apart from the horizon and became a substantial object.

Ukiru's timing was perfect. "What you are looking at is a circular wall surrounding the location of the High Temple of the All Powerful. The surface of the wall is covered in sheets of polished metal to reflect the image of the water around it. It is not too much different from a mirror; only, instead of reflecting one's face, it reflects the water around itself, thereby concealing what is behind the wall."

"Is it floating?" asked Coen.

"That is a good question," Ukiru replied. "It is not floating, but underneath the water, the wall is anchored to the ground. The water is very shallow by the wall and we must circle around the wall and enter from the south where there is a deeper channel through which boats may travel."

As soon as Kael realized what he was looking at, a question formed in his mind. "Why is it necessary to hide the High Temple?"

Ukiru turned to Kael, somewhat shocked by the question. His agitated features slowly gave way to his usual calm demeanor as he gave Kael an answer. "This world is no longer loyal to the All Powerful. Therefore, it is not safe to leave the temple exposed to anyone not specifically looking for it. For that matter, followers of the All Powerful are not safe to roam about freely in this world, which is why your training has included combat."

"I thought the temple would be bigger," Donagh pointed out.

"Actually, it is very large; you just can't see it," answered Ukiru.

"What do you mean?"

Ukiru smiled. "It's under the surface of the water."

"How can you build a Temple under the water?" Donagh asked in a deep voice.

Ukiru turned to face Donagh, apparently liking his line of questioning better than Kael's. "I don't know how one might build a temple under the water, but this one was originally above the water. You see, thousands of years ago, the gods built this temple. Everything that you see now was once dry land and the waters were not this deep. The temple was carved out of a mountain and the people would come here to worship. There was a great war between the gods, and the one that we call the All Powerful emerged victorious. He chased the other gods away, never to return again. But eventually, this world stopped worshipping him and he left until such a time as he would return to claim the world that is rightfully his own. After he left, the oceans rose and buried the temple beneath the water. It has remained this way for thousands of years until now."

"Why would he leave?" Kael asked, interrupting.

Ukiru tried not to show his frustration. "The All Powerful left this world to give everyone the opportunity to see how detestable life would be without him. We have had many years to

make our decision and still the people of this world choose to live without his guidance, or most of them anyway. But now the High Priest has heard the voice of the All Powerful and has restored the temple. We are, at this very moment, preparing for his return.”

As Ukiru answered the questions of the young men, the boat made its way around to the south side of the wall and was now within a hundred yards of the structure. As they approached, its camouflaging quality began to lose its effectiveness as the individual sheets of polished metal could be made out from one another by their riveted seams.

“The wall conceals the top portion of the [mountain](#) which is the only part above the waterline,” Ukiru continued explaining. He was about to say something else when he realized the boys were not paying attention. Everyone was watching as a section of the wall slid sideways to reveal a glimpse of the interior through a narrow channel, just wide enough for their boat.

Kael looked over the side of the boat and could see a distinction between the shallow water and the darker, deeper channel through which they were sailing. As the ship left the open ocean and entered the confines of the channel, the water abruptly changed to glassy smooth. The air was more still as well, the wind being blocked by the surrounding wall. As if waiting for a signal, dozens of oars sprouted from the hull of their ship and began to propel the boat through the channel and into a courtyard of sorts.

It was even more impressive on the inside. All around the interior of the [wall](#) were covered ports filled with various sizes of ships. Some were tiny and others were larger than any ships Kael had ever seen. Rising from the center of the harbor was an island without trees or vegetation of any kind. What did cover the land, however, were numerous buildings and structures as well as a multitude of different piers jutting out a short distance into the channel like spokes on a wheel. Most of these docks had small rowboats moored to their sides. But the strangest sight of all was the enormous cave burrowed into the island.

Narian, who had been silent for most of the trip, finally spoke. “Is that how we get into the mountain?”

“Yes, it is one of four entrances. There are three more facing the north, east, and west.” Ukiru seemed pleased to hand out information that pointed to the glory of the High Temple.

As their boat approached the island, six men walked out from the shadows of the cave entrance and quickly made their way down to the pier. These men were dressed all in black, much different than the monks who staffed the ship on which Kael stood. Their long-sleeved tunics fell only to their waists and they wore loose-fitting pants that ended several inches above their calf-high sandals.

The boat came to rest next to the pier and the six men secured the ship to the dock with ropes. Ukiru extended a walking plank from the ship to the dock and motioned for the young men to exit the boat. As they did so, the six men on the pier formed a single file line, shoulder to shoulder, parallel with the pier. Kael wondered whether these men were monks or soldiers as he walked down the plank and finally stepped on to the pier.

Luckily, Coen had the same thought. “Are these men monks as well?” he said in a hushed voice to Ukiru, not wanting to offend the men by speaking about them in such close proximity.

“No,” Ukiru answered, matching Coen’s hushed tone. “These men are guards of the High Temple, soldiers in a way.”

After everyone was assembled on the dock, Ukiru led the group up to the island. They walked in single-file following a raised deck that passed between buildings and led to the

southern entrance in a straight line. Kael glanced behind him to see the six men no longer standing at attention, but hurriedly unloading their supplies from the ship.

As they made their way into the cave, the gray light of the overcast skies gave way to the flicker of torchlight. The cavern was enormous in size. The ceiling was at least thirty feet overhead and it stretched a hundred feet deep before disappearing into the shadows.

“First, I will show you around the temple and you will see how close it is to being fully restored. Then we will have our evening meal.” Ukiru directed his words to no one in particular, although Jorn’s stomach was growling audibly. “This is the supply storage area and as you can see, the temple can sustain many people for over a year without the need of outside assistance.”

Kael tried to estimate the number of wooden boxes lining the walls of the cavern but quickly gave up. The boxes were stacked four high and four wide in columns that lead all the way to the back of the cave. They were not labeled and so their contents were a mystery, but Kael thought that they must contain food in order for the temple to be independently sufficient.

This time it was Soren who questioned what he was looking at. “Why is it necessary to have this many supplies?” His voice echoed slightly.

Ukiru didn’t stop and only turned his head as he kept the group moving. “Oftentimes, a temple will become a place of refuge for its worshippers. We already know that the world is not friendly to the All Powerful and his followers, so every precaution must be taken to ensure that they always have a refuge.”

The group moved through the cavern and made its way to the back where the torches on the wall did little to illuminate their surroundings. The silence was broken only by the sound of their own footsteps on the stone beneath them. It took a few seconds for Kael’s eyes to adjust, but eventually he could make out a wide doorway at the top of a short flight of stairs toward the back of the cavern.

Ukiru walked up the steps and paused for a moment when he reached the doorway, waiting for the others to catch up. “Stay close to me and don’t wander; it is easy to get lost here.”

Everyone proceeded through the door and down the spiraling staircase on the other side. The steps were wide enough for two people to comfortably walk side by side. Kael found himself at the end of the line and decided that he would prefer to walk alone so that he could get a good look at this place without having to carry on a conversation. Something about this place unsettled him. Maybe it was the black stone walls, or the way he felt all alone when he lagged behind, as if the world had passed him by. He ran his fingers along the wall and was surprised at the smoothness of the stone. Suddenly he realized that the others had gotten ahead of him and he quickened his pace.

The staircase ended at a hallway that branched into three directions. At the intersection stood a guard, dressed like the others from the dock, but holding a spear at his side. He didn’t even move to acknowledge their presence. Ukiru passed by the man and nodded, taking the path on the right. This hallway seemed to stretch forever with doorways lining both sides. As they walked, Ukiru explained what most of the rooms were used for and even offered a little history as to their original design. After what seemed like an hour of walking, which didn’t make sense to Kael who thought that they should have reached the other side of the island already, Ukiru turned to the left and followed a narrow passage. Everyone had to duck to keep from bumping their heads except Jorn who walked all the more tall under the circumstances.

The narrow passage opened into what seemed like a gigantic cavern. “This is one of the major passages in the mountain through which large groups of people would pass in order to make their way to the temple,” Ukiru explained.

“I thought we were already in the temple,” questioned Horace.

Ukiru’s smile wasn’t visible, but Kael could hear it in his voice.

“Not yet. And you will not get to see it right away. It is still being prepared for the ceremony. But I will take you to the entrance.”

Ukiru again turned to the right and began to walk at a brisk pace. Kael finally understood the reason that they had never reached the other side of the island. This enormous hallway, like the previous one, curved slightly to the left making a large circle. They were closer to the center of the island now and the curve of this passage was more noticeable than the last. The torches flickered much more in this passage and the air seemed fresher.

As the rest of the young men tried to keep pace with Ukiru, Kael couldn’t help but wonder how this temple was constructed. He looked to the ceiling, which was more than fifty feet above him and marveled at what it must have taken to carve such a large amount of stone out of this place. His gaze drifted to the walls and quickly fixed itself on a hole to his left. It was far above the ground, almost at the ceiling and he could almost smell the fresh air coming in through it.

“Stay close,” echoed Ukiru’s voice from farther ahead than Kael realized.

As he jogged to catch up he noticed another hole in the wall ahead. By the time he reached the group he could see it more clearly. This one was slightly lower than the previous one, but still too far away to see if it led to open air. As the minutes went by, Kael watched as the holes continued to appear at the same frequency, with each one being slightly lower than the one before. Finally, the passage ended at a large doorway, blocked by a wooden door that seemed as solid as the mountain itself. Kael looked up and saw the last of the windows only nine or ten feet above the ground. It was completely dark, but fresh air was definitely coming in through it. The window was circular and looked large enough to fit a grown man through.

A loud clank startled Kael and brought his attention back to the group. Ukiru was pushing the door open and beckoned for the young men to follow. They all stepped into a well-lit, dome-shaped room with two doors. The one straight in front of them was ridiculously large and covered by a thick curtain. The other door to the right seemed to be the only thing in this whole mountain sized appropriately for normal human beings.

Ukiru walked to the smaller door and knocked. “That curtain covers the entrance into the temple. We will eat our evening meal first and then I will take you inside to meet the High Priest.” The door opened and Ukiru walked through.

Immediately, the smell of food came to Kael’s nose. The rumble of Jorn’s stomach brought a bit of hushed laughter from Donagh and Horace. As they followed Ukiru into the small room, Kael noticed the man holding the door was dressed in robes like the monks at the monastery, only his were all black.

Inside of the small room was a ring of large pillows circled around a pedestal. Ukiru motioned for everyone to take a seat. Being the last in line, Kael was the last to find a pillow. The intimacy of the setting was strange and made him feel uncomfortable.

Ukiru looked at ease sitting on his pillow with his legs crossed. He extended both arms out to his sides and addressed the group. “We have come to the end of our journey and I’m sure that you are all hungry.” At these words, the monk who was holding the door approached the group and placed a silver tray of cheeses and bread on top of the pedestal. He walked back to the

corner of the room and opened a wooden chest, producing a silver goblet and filled it with wine from a bottle. He walked back to the group and placed the goblet next to the tray of food.

“Is that all there is?” asked Jorn, sounding sincerely worried.

“My dear Jorn, your question is an honest one.” Ukiru paused, thinking of the right words to say. “This is only a small meal to take the edge off of your hunger. But in a few minutes, you will meet the High Priest who will lead you in a meditation where you will be met by the All Powerful. Please believe me when I tell you that food will be the last thing on your mind. In fact, I doubt that you would be able to keep anything in your stomach if you were to eat too much.” Ukiru took the tray and handed it to Jorn. “Take a few pieces and pass it around.”

As each person chewed on the small amount of cheese and bread, Ukiru continued. “Until this point, I have attempted to show you everything that I know about how to protect yourself, lead others, and be a useful tool for the work of the All Powerful. The time has come for all of you to meet him. This is a great privilege, reserved only for a select few. And everyone who has come into his presence has been unable to keep his grip on consciousness, including myself. I do not say this to scare you, but I want you to realize that after this experience you will feel a presence in your life that will guide and protect you. The All Powerful will accomplish great things through you and you will never experience a greater life than this one which has been given to you. I have shown you everything that I know in our time together, but after tonight there will be another who will instruct you.”

Ukiru isn't going to instruct us anymore? Kael felt a tinge of sadness. He tried to imagine what the next part of his life would be like.

It seemed that they had only been in the room for a few minutes before Ukiru stood and waited for the others to do the same. “It is time,” he stated and walked toward the door. The monk who had fed them opened the door and the group followed Ukiru out into the dome shaped room. Ukiru waited by the large curtain until everyone was present.

Again, Kael was the last in line. There was a tension in the air that made him feel uneasy. *It's probably just the anticipation of an important event.* But it felt more like something terrible was about to happen. He looked around at the others to see if he was the only one who felt worried, but they only seemed excited.

“You are entering the temple of the All Powerful and so I will remind you that I expect the highest level of respect from all of you.” With these words, Ukiru pulled hard on a thick rope to one side of the curtain and it glided slowly sideways to reveal a dark tunnel. The effect was a little anti-climactic and the boys looked back and forth at one another, clearly expecting something different. “Follow me,” Ukiru added, and proceeded into the darkness.

For a few seconds, Kael was unable to see anything and had to rely on his sense of sound to guide him, listening to the footsteps ahead of him. But slowly, a soft glow began to reflect off the walls and the silhouettes of the figures ahead could be made out. The glow quickly grew into a flicker of sharper yellow light and the echoing sounds of footsteps diminished. The tunnel ended at a large wooden cage set into a hole in the wall.

Ukiru grabbed hold of the cage and opened the front like a door. “Everyone in,” he instructed.

With hesitation, the others walked into the wooden cage and moved to the rear. Kael followed, while Ukiru brought up the rear after closing the door. Then, grabbing hold of a lever on the ceiling of the cage, Ukiru pulled it sharply and the cage began to descend.

As their descent began to quicken, Kael's stomach began to tighten.

“What is this?” asked Rainer.

Ukuru, still holding the lever, turned his head. "It is a lift that is used to transport supplies between the various levels within the mountain. It is also the quickest way to the temple."

After several minutes of watching the stone walls and occasional tunnels pass by, the lift began to slow. Kael watched Ukuru's hand on the lever as he controlled the speed of the descent.

Ukuru began to apply more pressure to the lever until the lift stopped completely. Then he walked to the front and unlocked the door which swung outward over another smooth stone passage.

The group exited the lift in the same order they entered it. Then the young men waited for Ukuru to close and latch the door.

When the instructor was finished, he walked to the front of the group and proceeded down the short passage that ended at another thick black curtain. Without hesitation, Ukuru reached up and pulled the curtain aside. The passage gave way to an enormous cavern that stretched away so far that the other side was lost to the shadows.

"Ouch," Horace whispered as someone bumped into him from behind. The group had unknowingly stopped a couple steps inside, unable to walk and appreciate the majesty of their surroundings at the same time.

The [cavern](#) was spherical from the ceiling down to the walls, ending abruptly at a sand floor, smoother than the beaches of Kael's childhood. Around the perimeter of the cavern were enormous statues of creatures with great wings reaching out to either side. They looked almost like men, but their features were stretched lengthwise. There was a bonfire burning a short way out into the cavern, from which heat could be felt even at this distance. The most visible thing in the whole place was a large hole in the roof where moonlight streamed down in a column to illuminate a circular stage at the center of the sand floor. The stage was surrounded by a moat of still water that reflected the moonlight onto the cavern ceiling.

In front of the fire was the silhouette of a man. He was tall, a full head taller than Ukuru who immediately started walking forward. The High Priest, or so Kael assumed, spread his arms wide in welcome, revealing the draping of a heavy cloak covering his entire body, including his face. Ukuru stopped short and knelt before him. The straggling group behind him followed his example and knelt in the sand.

"My lord, High Priest of the All Powerful, I bring you ten young men from the farthest reaches of the Empire. All ten have been raised in accordance with the instructions given to me. All ten I now present to you as gifts to the All Powerful." Ukuru rose to his feet and the young men did the same.

Suddenly, the High Priest, who had been completely silent until now, spoke with a commanding voice. "Young men, present yourselves."

Kael stepped forward with the others and assembled into a single line like they had been instructed to do on several previous occasions.

The High Priest walked to the end of the line and stood in front of Coen. "Coen, do you present yourself as a gift to the All Powerful, to be an instrument for his glory on this earth?"

"I do," Coen answered uneasily.

Kael's heart was thudding in his chest as he waited for his turn. After Berit and Donagh, his turn came and he answered the same as all the others. When the High Priest moved on, Kael felt no sense of relief. His nausea persisted. Jorn was the last to answer, after which, the High Priest moved back to the center of the line and faced the group.

"Come with me," he said and began to walk across the sand to the center of the cavern. As they approached what now looked like a stone dais, Kael could see arched bridges attached to

either side, which extended across the moat to disappear into the sand. It was at one of these bridges that the High Priest stopped the group. Once again they gathered in a line as they were accustomed to doing from all of their time at the monastery. The man in front of them walked three steps up the archway and turned to face them.

Kael was startled at the volume of his voice when he began to pray. "Mightiest of all gods, the one we call All Powerful, we beseech you to meet us here in this place."

Kael looked to either side and noticed that some of the young men had their eyes closed. He took this to be the proper conduct and closed his eyes as well.

Suddenly, the High Priest began to speak in a language that Kael had never heard before. Usually he could guess languages, or at least the region they came from, just by the sounds. But this was one that he could not figure out.

Kael could feel his shoulders and neck muscles tightening with each passing minute. With his eyes closed, he couldn't help but concentrate on the mesmerizing words of the High Priest and his own heavy breathing. His heart beat in a loud, steady rhythm that fell in line with the cadence of the High Priest's voice.

Kael was unsure of the passage of time. It could have been minutes or possibly hours since the prayer had begun. Unexpectedly, a soothing sensation washed over him and calmed all of his anxieties. It was a peaceful feeling that changed his mood about the whole situation. Suddenly, the prayer being echoed off the stone walls of the cavern seemed majestic, even if he couldn't understand any of the words. The air was cool and the sand felt soft beneath his feet. An overwhelming sense of belonging welled up in his heart and for the first time in a long while, Kael felt truly happy.

The beat of his heart, the cadence of the prayer, and the rhythm of his own breathing grew louder and louder until they became one symphony of sound. At some point, Kael lost all sense of direction and feeling of his body, but it didn't matter because the feeling of intense joy drowned out everything else.

Kael opened his eyes and saw nothing but darkness. The cavern, the High Priest, and all of his friends had disappeared. It wasn't a scary feeling, but a feeling of intimacy. There was another presence there with him and Kael felt comforted. He seemed to float in nothingness with the company of this other being for minutes before any perceptible change took place. When it happened, it was so subtle that, if he hadn't been paying attention, he could have easily missed it. It was as if he was at the bottom of a large lake staring up at someone who was talking to him from above the surface of the water. But the change wasn't anything as simple as a vision. Neither did it make as much sense as words. Instead, ideas floated into his head from somewhere else. Peaceful feelings that made him imagine that he was waiting on the front porch of his home and an old friend was walking toward the house. The friend waved and Kael waved back. A wild excitement welled up inside him, although he couldn't make out the face of the visitor. After several minutes, the friend stood in front of Kael. His features could not be seen, but his calm presence could be felt. He didn't speak but Kael could feel that he had been traveling a long distance and wished to come inside and rest. Kael turned and opened the door and led the friend inside. Kael realized that the house was nowhere that he had ever been before, but he knew exactly where everything was located. He showed the man to a sitting room with many comfortable chairs and gave him the best one in the room. As the man made himself comfortable Kael took a seat across from him and eagerly sat down, not knowing why he was so excited to visit with this stranger who seemed so familiar. As he watched the figure across from him, a fleeting thought crossed his mind and vanished just as quickly as it came. There was a

sense of being in this situation before, but then he lost the thought and the man was talking and Kael forgot all about it. His words carried no sound, but Kael had a vague sense of satisfaction, as if the communication were making sense. It must have been hours that Kael sat and listened to this man speak, when the memory returned in a flash. Suddenly, Saba was sitting across from him, dressed exactly how the stranger had been dressed. Saba spoke in his soft, gentle voice and Kael smiled at the sight of an old friend. All of a sudden, Saba's face vanished in a grimace of pain and the stranger sat before Kael once again. His demeanor was different this time, replacing the calm friend was the body language of one who had been severely offended. Kael reached his hands out and pleaded with the man. He apologized for thinking of someone else and tried to explain that he was only reminded of Saba because of his kindness. The stranger didn't want to hear any explanations and abruptly stood to his feet. Kael ran to the man, but he was too fast. The stranger had already turned and was running toward the staircase leading up to the topmost portion of the house. Suddenly, Kael began to panic, as if there was something up there that he didn't want this stranger to see. The man was fast and could leap several stairs at once. Kael quickly lost sight of the man, but continued to run as fast as he could. By the time he made it to the top, he could see that the door to the top room had been smashed in. Kael ran into the room and skidded to a stop. The stranger's back was turned to him and he was kneeling down, about to open a wooden chest that lay in the middle of the floor. Suddenly, Kael became aware of a pitchfork in his hands and a feeling drifted to him from somewhere in his memory, a frenzied sense of protection for what was lying on the floor. Then he ran at the stranger and drove the pitchfork into his back.

Abruptly, the vision vanished and Kael was once again aware of his body. Only this time, he was lying down in the sand. His eyes wouldn't open and he could still feel the presence of the stranger in his mind. His body began to simultaneously itch and convulse as if someone else were trying to get inside of it. Kael drew in a deep breath and tried to block out all other thoughts except for his own heartbeat. He could feel the extremities of his body and began to flex his muscles. First his fingers, then his toes and slowly the rest of his body came under his control. Eventually his vision returned and he opened his eyes. Briefly, he caught sight of an orange glow like a dying fire and then the attack returned.

This time, it was in his mind. Hundreds of images flashed in front of him, some were from his childhood and it seemed that some were from his future. He watched himself crawl on the floor as a baby and then the vision changed to himself as an old man crippled on the floor. Images of dying people and feelings of suffering shot through him like lightning. The most intense feeling of hatred that he had ever felt washed over him like an ocean of sewage. He felt hopeless and alone and all of a hundred other negative emotions at the same time. He reached out for help and suddenly the images stopped and the stranger stood over him with an extended hand. Kael felt exhausted and dirtier than the lowest human being on the face of the earth. But something inside him, something that was truly his own, would not let him take that hand. Instead, he kicked at the man and spit on him. Just as quickly as the defiant thoughts came to him, the flood returned. He saw his mother being hacked to pieces by a barbarian. When he turned his head he saw his father being stretched by horses until his limbs pulled away from his body. As the images flashed in front of him, he grew cold and numb. It was like being in the presence of a massacre and not being able to blink or even close his eyes. Kael knew that his eyes were deceived, but he still cried at the horrible things that he saw. Hours seemed to pass before the images in his head stopped.

The first pleasant feeling was the cold sand beneath him. His body had sweat so badly that his clothes stuck to his skin as if he had been swimming in the ocean. The cavern ceiling was far overhead and the moonlight that had been streaming down before was gone now. The only light was from the fire, which was now only a small pile of glowing embers. He turned his head and saw several figures lying on the ground but could not make out who they were. Whoever was to his left was still standing and he thought it might be Narian. Suddenly, the figure began to wobble and lean back. Footsteps crunched by Kael's head as one of the monks ran to catch whoever it was who had just lost consciousness and lay them safely on the ground. When the monk walked back to wherever he had been standing, Kael could see who it was that was next to him. Donagh's calm face leaned slightly to the right where Kael could get a good look. He didn't seem to be in any pain, but just laid there in the calm posture of someone in a pleasant dream. The exhaustion of the events caught up with Kael and he found his eyes drooping. He tried to resist sleep, for fear of experiencing any more of what had happened, but sleep overtook him.

Chapter 21

Bright morning light was shining in Kael's face when he awoke. The soft rocking motion of his bed told him that he was back on the ocean. He opened his eyes and sat up. The other young men were all in their beds sleeping soundly. Kael wondered, but doubted that the others experienced the same thing that he did. The sound of footsteps startled him and he lay back on his bed, pretending to be asleep. For some reason, he felt guilty, like he shouldn't be awake. He could hear Ukiru walking around the room, stopping at each sleeping body. Kael's heart was beating loudly as he waited for Ukiru to pass by. Unexpectedly, he felt a warm spoon against his mouth and the aroma of soup filled his nostrils. He allowed the nourishment to be poured down his throat. Ukiru lingered over Kael a bit longer than the rest before moving on and eventually going above deck.

When he was gone, Kael sat up to see if any of the others had been awakened by the feeding, but he was still the only one. His head ached and his muscles hurt like he had been training for combat all day. He rose to his feet and stretched his weakened body, surprised by the toll that the ceremony had taken on him. After more than an hour of pacing around the room in silence, Kael returned to his bed and tried to sleep again, but couldn't get comfortable. It was like torture, waiting below deck for someone else to wake up, but there was nothing he could do. So Kael passed the time by imagining what had happened in [Bastul](#) while he had been away and he was alone with his thoughts until dusk.

The sun had dipped toward the western horizon, off the port bow of the ship, when Kael's thoughts finally resolved into a decision. All day he had been struggling with how to continue at the monastery. He wasn't sure of when they would finally be sent out into the world, but he knew that he had to leave soon. If the being that attacked his mind and body was really the All Powerful, then Kael didn't want any part of him. He still felt like he needed to bathe after the whole experience, though he knew it wouldn't do much to clean the polluted feeling inside of him.

"So, you're awake too?"

Kael spun his head around and saw Berit sitting up on his bed. "Yeah, I just woke up," he lied.

“My head hurts,” Berit grumbled, and turned to look out the porthole situated above his head.

“Mine too,” Kael lied again. His headache was actually gone, lessening and eventually disappearing over the course of the many hours he had been awake.

One by one, the others began to wake up. The only one who seemed to be in the mood for conversation was Coen who immediately began talking about his amazing experience. As the sluggish mood wore off, everyone began to chime in about this or that incredible feeling or experience. After several minutes, Kael realized that he was alone in his experience. Everyone else had done exactly what they were supposed to do except for him. Suddenly the conversation stopped and Kael realized that someone had asked him a question.

“What?”

“I said,” Arden repeated, “how long before you passed out?”

Kael tried to look mystified to share in their excitement. “I lost all sense of time, so it’s hard to say.”

“I know,” Jorn blurted out. “That’s exactly what happened to me!”

“So you are all awake now,” announced Ukiru who was standing on the stairs, watching his group of students. “Why don’t you continue your conversation up here and get some fresh air.”

Coen was the first one up the stairs and Kael waited to be the last. The group assembled at the bow of the ship and Kael leaned over the railing to watch the water as it split around the ship in smooth strips of white foam. The chattering continued around him and he was content to just look at the ocean until Ukiru tried to draw him in.

“Kael. What was it like for you?”

Is that skepticism in his voice? Kael wondered if he knew what happened and then dismissed the thought because there was no way that he could. “Uh...” he stammered, searching. “I just don’t have the words.”

Ukiru nodded, apparently satisfied. “That’s a good way to describe it.”

* * * *

Saba sat on the floor against the door, with his ear pressed to the wood, straining to hear anything that might be happening outside. He heard a footstep near the door and pushed himself back, frightened that someone was coming. He waited for a moment, then leaned in again. As soon as his hands touched the door, he felt a strange sensation pass through his body. It lasted only for a second, but in that moment Saba could swear that he *felt* the inner workings of the lock on the door. Reeling back in surprise, Saba listened carefully for movement outside while his mind raced with questions.

Slowly, he leaned forward against the door. But nothing happened. *Did I imagine it?* He placed his hand near the lock and waited, attempting to recapture the feeling. When he closed his eyes, it came again.

The sensation was dulled somehow, muffled at first, but with concentration, Saba regained the clarity of the first occurrence. And then it was obvious, like looking at a picture, only more interactive. Saba could feel the bolt running through the iron lock on the door into the housing on the door jam. And just as one might wiggle their finger, Saba knew without even testing his knowledge that he could move the bolt without having to touch it. But his excitement at the discovery was too great to allow him to be satisfied with that knowledge; he had to test it. And just as he expected, the bolt slid back at his will. It screeched slightly, grating on the inside of the door jam, and Saba paused to make sure that no one heard. When nothing happened, he tried

again and the bolt slid free of the door jam. *How is this possible? And who am I that I can do such things?*

He pushed gently on the door and it moved open, allowing him an inch of visibility to the courtyard and the wall beyond it. There were no guards to see along his narrow path of sight, but that didn't mean they weren't out there. There was a change of guard every night at midnight, or so it seemed to his limited senses. And that had occurred more than an hour ago. Pushing harder on the door, he opened it far enough to peek his head out. Just as he suspected, to his left a guard sat outside on a crude chair, slumped back against the building. Saba smiled to himself. *It's nearly impossible for a guard to follow the same routine for years without losing vigilance.* This man had probably become bored with his task long ago, and tonight was just another night to get some sleep while the old man inside the jail couldn't possibly escape anyway. *But this old man has a few tricks.*

Saba pushed the door open a bit wider and walked quietly out of the cell, slipping into the night.

* * * *

The hours dragged on into days as their ship cut a northeasterly path through the ocean. When they sighted land, Coen spoke up.

"Are we traveling faster than before?"

"No," Ukiru answered. "It is only that you were asleep for several days at the beginning of this return trip, so it seems shorter."

They kept the land on the starboard side of the boat and continued traveling north until there was only ocean again as far as the eye could see. Kael didn't feel much like talking and kept to himself most of the time. Ukiru allowed them to skip the usual morning routine of meditation and instruction, explaining that they would need some time to think about what the All Powerful had shown each one of them. They would resume their studies after they returned to the monastery.

Kael had been doing nothing but thinking for days now and he would have liked to do something else to take his mind off of it. All of the old feelings of mistrust were coming back to him, only stronger this time. His meeting with the All Powerful was not what he had expected it to be. They were always taught that he was a loving and merciful god who was heartbroken when the world turned away from him. But the intense hatred and wretchedness that Kael felt from being in his presence made him think that they had all been lied to. Anyway, he was tired of thinking and just wanted to sleep. When the sun went down, Kael went below deck and lay on his bed. It was quiet with everyone else above deck, talking about the whole experience. Kael shut his eyes and let the gentle rock of the ocean soothe him to sleep.

Sometime during the night, he began hearing voices. When he lifted his head, he realized that most of the others were gone. Berit and Horace were still sleeping. The thump of footsteps moved up above, heading for the stairs. Shortly after, Coen peeked his head down.

"You guys better wake up."

"What's going on?" Kael asked.

"We've reached the island and some of the monks are loading our stuff into the wagons. Ukiru said we could take a few of the horses and ride back to the monastery. If we're quick, we could be back in our own beds before the sun comes up."

"Where are the others?" Berit asked.

"Soren and Narian are waiting for us; the rest already left."

The remainder of the night was a blur for Kael. He felt half-asleep most of the time. Immediately after leaving the small desolate harbor of their island, the horses began to climb. It was slow going at first, but after climbing for the first few hundred feet, the path leveled out and the horses began to pick up speed. The sky was still dark when they got back and Kael went straight to his room and collapsed on his bed.

The next day was unusual compared to their normal routine. They didn't have to get up at a certain time, nor were they required to do any of the activities to which they had become accustomed. Kael woke up just before noon and wandered down to the kitchen where one of the monks was starting to prepare the evening meal. He gave Kael something to eat and shooed him out of the kitchen. For a few hours, Kael wandered around the monastery, letting the silence clear his head. He didn't know where the others were, but he also didn't care. He eventually found Berit in the library where he usually spent his free time, but neither one of them was in the mood for conversation, so Kael moved on. Finally, Kael arrived at the top of the cliffs overlooking the ocean and took a seat on his favorite rock.

The past eight years of his life had been quite strange, he realized. How many children grow up in a bustling port city like [Bastul](#), living the life of a privileged few, only to have that life ripped away in an uncontrollable string of events that leaves you to grow up in a monastery?

He stood up suddenly, trying to shake off the questions. He wanted to do something instead of thinking, so he walked around looking for rocks to throw over the edge and finally found an area where a boulder was falling apart under the relentless forces of nature, slowly eroding into a pile of rubble. Kael picked up a handful of stones and tossed them, one by one, over the edge. He watched the smaller ones zigzag through the air as the wind moved them. The larger ones fell without any perceptible movement other than straight down. The surface of the ocean was too far down for Kael to see them hit, but it was something to keep his mind occupied.

The hours of daylight diminished and the sun began to slip behind the mountains. Kael made it back to the monastery just in time for the evening meal. Everyone seemed to be in good spirits and even Kael was happier after a good meal.

"Before we retire for the night, I just want to say a few things." Ukiru stood up to address the group. "I am proud of you all. We made a difficult and long journey, but it was for a great purpose. The All Powerful has met each of you in a different way and has seen your future. In a short time, I am expecting to hear a message from the High Priest. The message will contain a commission for each one of you. For the next two years, you will continue to train in a more specific manner related directly to your commissioning. Until we receive this message, our days here will look much different. There is cleaning and reorganizing to do and I'm sure it would be a welcome break from all of the recent traveling. So, get your rest tonight. Tomorrow things will begin to change around here in preparation for the coming months. I assure you that the next two years will go quickly and before you know it, you will be back in the world of men once more."

Everyone clapped their hands together and cheered at Ukiru's words; everyone except Kael. The feelings of contentment and gratefulness which used to reside in his heart had vanished, replaced by a sense of uneasiness and doubt. As the others went off to their rooms in high spirits, Kael had to pretend in order to not draw attention to himself. Ukiru had been acting strange toward him ever since their time at the temple and Kael was doing his best to appear as normal as everyone else. When he lay down to go to sleep, his mind was racing. He tossed and turned in his bed for hours until he couldn't take it anymore.

I know what I have to do!

Quietly, so as not to disturb anyone, Kael began to lay out a few articles of clothing on his bed. He got dressed and wrapped the rest in one of the sheets from his bed. Easing open his door, he peered down the hallway until he was certain that all was clear. As he tiptoed out into the hallway, every sound seemed amplified in the silence. Even the sound of his own breath threatened to wake up the whole monastery. He continued moving cautiously until he found himself outside, heading through the outer wall and along the path that would eventually lead down to the harbor. He wasn't sure how he was going to get off of the island, or what he would do once he did. But it didn't matter; he just knew he had to go. The moon was nearly full, illuminating the fields and casting shadows beside trees. Within several minutes the monastery began to disappear into the darkness behind him and Kael was feeling better with each step.

Suddenly, a shadow flitted behind a tree at the corner of his vision and Kael stopped in his tracks. His heart was beating in his ears, making it difficult for him to listen for further signs of movement. He waited for a few seconds, but there were no other noises.

"Who's there?" he called out, more sure with every passing second that it wasn't just an animal.

"Where are you going?" came a voice out of the woods.

Kael immediately recognized Ukiru's voice. Now he was scared. He looked around, but wasn't sure where Ukiru was, and had forgotten exactly where the voice had come from. "I can't stay here," he shouted, the panic rising in his voice.

"And I can't let you leave." A figure, silhouetted by the moonlight, walked from the trees and onto the road, fifty feet away. Ukiru was silent, standing sideways as he watched Kael with the careful but relaxed look of someone in complete control.

Kael's heart was beating powerfully in his throat. But he choked down his fear. "It's all a lie. This whole...place. You. Your so-called god. Everything!"

"You choose to see it that way," Ukiru responded calmly.

Kael didn't know what else to say. He knew the truth, but Ukiru was deceived along with everyone else. Once Kael experienced the true presence of the All Powerful, felt the hatred and filth of being near him, his fragile faith began to unravel. He was lost now, unsure of anything but the powerful need to leave. Any trace of gratefulness at being rescued from the prison, cared for, and trained, was swept away by an overwhelming sense of betrayal. And then a thought occurred to him, a thought that would have seemed ridiculous until this very moment.

"You didn't rescue us from that prison, you miserable liar! You put us there. You locked us up like animals to see who would survive!" Kael was yelling now, his volume in sharp contrast to the silence of the night.

Ukiru turned to face Kael. "Pack animals develop their own hierarchy, especially under threat of extinction. Humans are no different. I had to have a winning team, to see who was capable of survival."

"You bastard!" Kael shouted between gritted teeth. "How could you do such a thing? We were just children."

The figure before him, who now seemed more like a complete stranger than a friend, crouched slightly into an attack posture.

Kael had seen this many times before, but it was never directed at him. He dropped his bundle of clothes on the ground because he knew that it would only be a hindrance. "If I had a sword, I'd cut you down right here!"

In response, the ring of sharpened steel rang clear as Ukiru pulled his sword from its scabbard, a shaft of reflected moonlight moving down the length of the blade. "The All

Powerful was displeased with what he saw in you. It was obvious to him that you were never one of us. I told you time after time that you must let go of your past, but you just wouldn't listen."

For a moment, the two stood still.

Then Ukiru burst into motion.

Kael spun on his heels and ran as fast as his feet could carry him. He lengthened his stride and breathed steadily as he had always been instructed to do. A quick look back told him that he was keeping just out of Ukiru's reach, even if he was closer than expected. The monastery came back into view and Kael circled around to the right following the outside of the perimeter wall, not wanting to get trapped inside the grounds of the monastery.

He was gliding now across the meadow between the monastery and the ocean cliffs. The ground started to rise before him and he sprinted up the hill as his legs burned and his lungs gasped for air. Another panicked look behind showed that he had gained a few strides on Ukiru, but not nearly as much as he had hoped for. The older man was still as fit as a man half his age and ten times more deadly when the chase was over.

Cresting the hill, Kael picked up speed and started down a slight decline. He suddenly realized that he had been heading for his favorite spot and knew that now he was trapped between Ukiru and the cliffs. He slowed to a stop.

Ukiru stopped just past the peak of the hill, knowing that he had already won. "You're trapped," he stated, hardly out of breath.

Kael turned and stared into the eyes of his mentor, his mentor who had now become an enemy. Slowly, a calm presence came over him, slowing his heartbeat and breathing. It was a familiar sensation that made him feel safe, and consequently, he felt a confidence stir up inside him. "You can't have me!" Kael yelled, turning toward the cliff.

* * * *

Ukiru lunged forward, but it was too late.

Without hesitation, Kael ran and jumped off the edge, spreading his hands to the air.

Ukiru only caught a brief glimpse of the swirling fog as it enveloped Kael's body. When he reached the edge of the cliff, he stood for a moment, shocked at the outcome of the situation. Already, the words were forming in his mind of what he would say to the other students. *Kael was a traitor and his true self was revealed to him at the temple. He threw himself over the edge because he couldn't tolerate his own unworthiness.* Ukiru tried to look down at the ocean, but it was obscured by the fog.

I'll have to send some men down to recover the body, or what's left of it. Re-sheathing his sword, Ukiru turned and headed back toward the monastery.

The Awakened: Book Two is available now for download at <http://www.smashwords.com/books/view/52665>. Or, visit <http://www.smashwords.com/books/view/44641> to get books *One* through *Three* in a single edition.

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Figure 1: The City of Orud



Figure 2: The Northern Territory



Figure 3: The Southern Territory



Figure 4: The Island of Tur'cen



Figure 5: The High Temple-Profile View

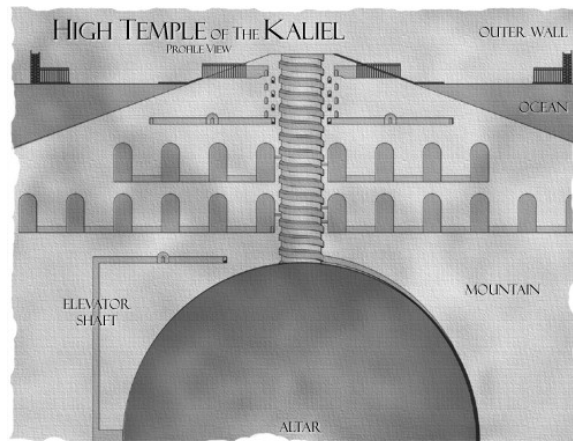


Figure 6: The High Temple-Plan View

HIGH TEMPLE OF THE KALIEL
PLAN VIEW

