

*Two Thousand Years of Peace
A War Between Angels and Demons is Quickly Approaching*

From Men And Angels

THE DELIVERANCE TRILOGY: BOOK ONE



H. L. WALSH

From Men and Angels
The Deliverance Trilogy: Book One

H. L. Walsh
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Chapter 1

Malach Tresch ran through the dense underbrush swiftly and quietly; he was in his element. It was night, and even though these woods were not the woods he grew up in, he did have an idea where he was headed. He also knew it would be easy to get turned around and lost in this forest. His legs ached from running so fast for so long and he was pulling in ragged gasps of breath. Something was hard on his heels and he didn't know who or what it was, but it was big, and it scared him so much he didn't have the courage to even look back. He just kept running.

Something hard and metal was in his hand, and it was heavy. He looked down to see what it was. It was a peculiar looking weapon. A short staff with two swords protruding from both ends of a handle, one on each side so that he could use either side of the staff to stab or cut at... well, at whatever he wanted. It felt good in his hand; balanced, normal, right, like he had used it all his life, and it was just an extension of his body. The only issue was he had never seen it before! He also had his bow slung over his chest, his side quiver, and a large hunting knife on his belt. Those he recognized. However, as he ran, he realized there were no arrows in the quiver, which was probably why he was carrying the staff weapon instead of his bow, his weapon of choice.

All of this only took him seconds to process and seconds more to realize he had, in fact, gotten lost. He couldn't stop though. He could hear the monster behind him, breathing as hard as he was and knew it would be on him at any moment. As scared as he was, he knew he would have to turn and face the creature head-on soon. He had hoped to outrun it but knew that had been a mistake now. Possibly a fatal one.

His mind reeled as it processed what had happened. The creature had dropped down on his platoon and killed half a dozen of them within the span of a few minutes. Fully trained men. Men whom he knew and trusted. Men who had been trained from childhood lay dead, dying, or running like scared rabbits in all directions, all semblance of discipline lost. Malach was no exception. He had looked back and gotten a glimpse of Daziar standing his ground with his spear and losing his head for it. Malach would never forget the sight of Daziar's head hitting the ground as his body slumped onto its side, the lifeless eyes staring out at nothing.

That one pause to look back would probably cost Malach his life. He had been spotted by the creature at that moment. He looked it in the eyes, and it was going to kill him. The creature stood well over ten feet tall, mostly black, with large, bat-like wings; it stood on two legs to fight and had large, razor-sharp, clawed hands and feet with spikes sticking out of its elbows and knees. When it spotted Malach, it dropped to all fours and gave a wicked, spiked-toothed grin that made Malach's blood run cold. Malach had mentally screamed at his legs to move and they had finally responded.

Now it was almost on him. He must have run five miles by now, and Malach had a sinking feeling that it was playing with him. Staying just behind him to keep this sick game of cat and mouse going. But why? Whatever the reason, Malach was done with it. He wouldn't play its game anymore. He mustered his courage and strength and reached up, grabbing a low hanging branch, and swung up onto it, climbing swiftly and nimbly up a few more feet and waited for the creature to run by. He planned to get behind this creature to become the hunter instead of the hunted and kill this thing once and for all.

Malach forced his breathing to slow and become normal while he waited. He couldn't hear the creature breathing or running anymore, and for a second, he thought he might have actually lost it. Then it came into view, as silent as the night. Slow, cautious, like it knew something was not quite right. Like it knew that its quarry had changed tactics. It started toward the tree that Malach was hiding in and he held his breath. He readied his staff weapon and prepared to leap down on top of the giant monster. He prepared for the end.

Looking at the creature he realized that this monster was a demon. The bat-like wings and horns that were visible from the back of the demon's head

were unmistakable. Malach knew if the creature turned around, he would be able to see the glowing red eyes staring back at him. His strength almost failed him at the realization. No one had seen a demon in over two thousand years. . . at least no one he knew about. They were the stuff of legends. Something grandparents would tell their grandchildren to make them behave. Malach pulled his thoughts back to the present and the task at hand. He would be the first to kill a demon in over two thousand years, or he would be one of the first to die by its hand. The next few moments would decide that.

The demon was almost under him now and he would have a clear path to drop onto its back and run the blade of his staff through the creature's brain. All of a sudden the demon snapped its head to the side, or rather turned it almost all the way around behind it without moving its body, as if it heard something that Malach couldn't and then took off at full speed in the way it had come with a flurry of wind from its wings. Malach didn't dare relax until the sound of its retreat had faded into the night entirely. He sat down heavily on the branch he had been crouching on and let out a sigh of relief. He had to tell someone what he had seen. He had to get out of here before that demon came back.

He climbed down from the tree, but before sliding all the way to the ground, he looked around cautiously and listened for any sign that the demon was still around. Hearing and seeing nothing, he dropped soundlessly to the ground and stood upright. He heard a deafening roar and at the same time, felt a searing pain in his chest. He was being lifted off the ground. He looked down to see a long black claw protruding from just under his ribcage, blood trickling from around the claw. The beast shook him off into the bushes like he was no more than something distasteful that had gotten attached to its claw and stalked off into the night in search of something else to occupy its time, leaving Malach to bleed out in the unfamiliar woods.



Malach woke with a start. He looked around the room he was in. It was his room in the little cottage that had belonged to his parents. It was a simple

room made of wooden walls. There was a bed with a wooden chest at the foot of it where he kept his clothes, two pegs in the wall where his bow hung, a square container with the top open that had several fletched arrows sticking out of it. There were also two doors, one leading out to the rest of the cottage, one leading to the washroom. He looked down at his chest. No wound. He tore his shirt over his head to get a good look at his bare skin. No, nothing; not even a scratch. He let out a breath he hadn't realized he was holding.

Just the dream, he thought, but he still checked his chest again.

It had felt so real.

The fear.

The pain.

Even now, he could remember every detail of the dream as if it had been a recent memory not a nightmare. Malach again checked all over his six and a half foot, muscular body for any wounds, scrapes, or bruises but could find nothing that hadn't already been there the night before. Malach was taller than most in his village, standing a head above most men and head and shoulders above most women. With jet-black hair and a darker complexion, he stood out like a sore thumb against the fairer skin and lighter hair of most others in the area.

He hated sticking out.

The kids growing up had made fun of him for being different until one took a swing at him and Malach had beat the bully and his two friends in an unfair fight. The older boys had ganged up on him, and all three had left with multiple bruises and black eyes. Malach didn't mind the verbal attacks. Those could be ignored; however, if someone wanted to do bodily harm to him or someone he cared about, they would be met with an unyielding and complete defense. More often than not, they would leave wounded in some way or another.

Malach, in many ways, had the same childhood as most kids in the area. He had been trained for war from infancy and taught to handle several weapons proficiently. At age twenty, his body was lean and fit and even though he had a taller, lankier build than the other boys, he could best them in

strength, speed, and agility. Every child was required by law to be trained in the way of combat from five years old until they were eighteen. After that, they, or more often than not their parents, could choose what they wanted to learn and many let their fighting skills lapse. This had been set up since the fall of man to sin in The Garden of Eden, when war had come to the earth. When Satan, the lord of the Demons, brought his army to earth to cut the race of men, God's creation, from the earth and the hosts of heaven had responded. Since then, Demons, Angels, and men have been locked in combat for thousands of years. At least that's what they had been taught. There had been peace for more the two thousand years now, and many questioned if the war was finally, truly over.

People had a choice to make once they came of age at twenty-one; side with the Demons or side with the Angels. They were required to live in a neutral zone, an area where war was not allowed, for a minimum of two years. After that they could make their choice if they desired or stay in that zone. This had been set up shortly after Cain made his choice and killed Abel and man joined the ranks of the demons to kill the angels and march on Heaven's Gates themselves, or so the story went. Once that choice was made, there were very few who changed their mind, and Malach wondered if the ones that did convert had ever actually chosen or if they simply said they did. They had all been taught these stories by their parents. However, for the last two thousand years, there had been no sightings of either angels or demons, and there had been relative peace: aside from the normal crimes of men.

This choice had been on Malach's mind since he turned eighteen, and the dreams had started. He was still considered a kid: and he imagined rightly so, since the average person lived to be around seven hundred years old. He was a little more than a week from turning twenty-one, and his whole world was being turned upside down. . . again.

Malach sighed heavily, got up, and went to the washroom. It was a small room with a tub and an elevated basin for a sink. He splashed the room temperature water on his face to clear his mind. He had lived in this cottage for most of his life. First with his parents until they had died when he was twelve, that was the first time his world was turned upside down, and then returning when he was eighteen to live here on his own.

His father and mother were good parents while they lived. They had moved here from a faraway place before he was born. He didn't know where they came from, just that they had settled here to raise him. This town was all he knew. When he was younger, on his days off from training, his father would take him deep into the woods for days at a time teaching him how to survive; hunting, trapping, herbs, shelter, and crude weaponry, you name it and he knew it.

A week before his thirteenth birthday, he had gone to Daziar's house for the night. Daziar was his best friend and, in many ways, the brother he never had. Daziar's birthday was only a couple days away, and they were going to celebrate their birthdays together. A large storm hit that night, and they had to take shelter with the rest of the town in the underground bunkers that were dug into the ground for just that purpose. He had never worried about his parents because he knew that they would have done the same, but when his parents hadn't come for him, doubt crept in, which led to fear. By the third day, Daziar's parents, Daniel and Jennari Wervine, had decided to take him back to his cottage that was a few miles out of town. When they got there, the outside of the cottage was almost untouched, but the inside was a wreck. It was as if the storm had hit the inside of the house, not the outside. His parents were nowhere to be found.

He didn't understand then, but he knew now that something other than the storm had driven his parents from the house: though there was no evidence as to what. After that, he had stayed the next few days with Daziar while the villagers had searched the area. They had never found his parents' bodies, they assumed that wild animals had taken them. They held a vigil the next day since there was nothing to burn at the funeral pyre. The next few years were the hardest of his life. Daziar's parents took him in and treated him as their second son. Daziar had two sisters who were much younger than them. Emmeline, who was now twelve, and Marletta, who was now ten. They had become like Malach's sisters, and he made sure to watch over them.

Now Malach lived alone in his cottage, though there were very few nights where he slept at the cottage. Most nights he spent out in the wilderness, even in the winter, finding that more comfortable than any bed. He knew that some of the villagers talked about how odd he was and spread

wild rumors about him being part wolf or at least was raised by them. The only basis of truth in those rumors was that his closest companion was a wolf.

Her name was Skie. He had met her the winter of his fourteenth year. She had sprung one of his traps that was set up for a wild dog that had been taking a farmer's sheep. When he had seen her, he knew it wasn't her who had been hunting in the area. She was a ragged, bloody mess. It was hard to tell that she was even a wolf under all the gore that coated her pelt. Malach pulled her out of the trap and took her back to his cottage. He would go up to the cottage every day and feed her by hand and change her bandages. She very nearly died.

When she was awake enough to lift her head and look at him, he would talk with her about hunting and whatever else came to mind.

He felt that they bonded over that time, which is why he was a little heartbroken when he found one morning that she had left in the middle of the night. He hadn't seen her for two years when he was out one evening at dusk, tracking a doe that had one of his arrows in her. He knew he had made a good shot, but despite that, this doe fought on through the underbrush, seeming to stay just ahead of him. He had heard a wolf howl to his right, then his left, and a third directly behind him; a hunting pattern. Either Malach or the deer was the prey. He moved then, leaving the trail of the deer, hoping they were hunting the wounded animal for an easy kill. He ran out into a clearing and into the main hunting pack. There were five of them, hackles raised, growling and snarling menacingly. He recognized the scars on the face and side of one of them and he knew it was the wolf he had saved. He had saved her just to be killed and eaten by her, hopefully in that order.

He notched an arrow; he wouldn't go down without a fight. He drew and took aim at the scarred wolf, but just before he fired, she leaped. . . onto the wolf closest to her, tearing at its jugular. The other wolves were caught off guard, and Malach let loose his arrow into another's chest as it turned to attack Skie. The arrow dropped it immediately and Malach notched a second with practiced ease. He never got the chance to fire it as the other two wolves fled, not wanting to end up like their companions. Malach burned the wolves' bodies, as he would have any humans, with reverence and silence while Skie looked on.

Since then, she had stayed with him but was by no means his wolf. She was her own creature and would do as she pleased. He tried several names before she chose Skie. She was a large wolf with her head coming up past his waist. The name Skie fit her. She had almost a blue tint to her fur with silver mixed in. She had three long scars where no hair grew. They started small at her snout and grew wider as they went down her left side at an angle; they finally stopped at her left flank. She looked fierce and rugged, and Malach didn't blame people for being afraid of her. She was, however, quite gentle and, in fact, good with children. She would even let the small children ride on her back for a few moments. Malach thought often that they were much alike, and he liked the companionship she brought when she was around. She would also hunt with him, bringing most kills to him, letting him dress the animal before taking her portion. Malach always gave her the choice meat from her kills. After all, she did the work for it and let him take the fur to sell. This was their relationship; mutual trust, respect, and loyalty. Even Daziar got used to having her around when they would spend time together.

Malach moved back out to his room, peeled his sweaty leather breaches off, and let his legs dry. He moved out to his pantry to find something to eat. He grabbed an apple and a strip of dried meat and tore into them hungrily. He heard someone call the meat "jerky" and say it was all the rage in the big cities down south. Malach had been drying his meat for years. It helped it last much longer and if you seasoned it with salt and some of the edible plants in the area, it tasted rather good. It was one of his bestselling meats, and he could make it out of the lesser cuts that people didn't want as much. It had done wonders for his trade. He guessed the areas that were farther north could use the ice and snow year-round to preserve meat. As far as he knew, no one had settled that far north yet. Brightwood was as far north in the known world that had been settled.

There was a sudden and insistent knock on the door that jarred Malach out of his thoughts and back to reality. He realized he was wearing just his underwear and he had an uninvited visitor, possibly someone who had come to ask for his services. He jumped up from the little table he had sat down at and rushed to his room.

"Just a minute!" he called as he went.

He grabbed the first pair of pants he could find and pulled them on; they were covered in old animal blood. He winced. That wouldn't be a great first impression, and he'd look barbaric. Realistically though, how many new clients did he get?

Too late now, he thought to himself.

He moved quickly to the door and pulled it open. It was a rather nervous looking man. Although, who wouldn't be nervous under the watchful eyes of Skie, who was laying as nonthreatening as a four-foot tall muscular wolf with nasty looking scars could lay. When the man saw Malach in his blood-streaked pants and chiseled upper body, his courage just about failed him. To his credit, he didn't run; just stood up a little straighter. Malach took in the man at a glance. He was a skinny man with fair skin and a soft face. The man was tall but not as tall as Malach. He wore a tailored suit that was ill-fitted for the hike the man had to take to get here. He was either a rich man or someone who was used to being rich. Malach knew this man was not from the town or the surrounding area. He tried to flash a very disarming smile and broke the silence.

"Good morning, friend! How are you this brisk autumn morning?" Malach said in a purposefully cordial and proper voice. He smiled again.

"Um. . . fine. . . thanks!" the man managed to stutter out. There was an uncomfortable silence as each one waited for the other to talk.

Malach again was forced to break the silence. "Can I help you with something?"

"Oh! Ur, yes! Umm. . . my family and I just move into the area." the man finally got out, and his accent stood out like a sore thumb. He most definitely was not from around here. "We are starting a farm on the south side of town. I was told this was where to find the best hunter in the land. Um...is your father home?"

Malach bristled. "Sir, do you think me too young to be the best hunter in the land?" he said, echoing the man's words. He continued without letting the man speak. "I'm who you want. My late father taught me much in the short time he had, and I've only added to that knowledge since he passed."

Malach could tell the man was caught off guard once again, “They sent me to a boy?” he asked as if Malach wasn’t there.

“They sent you to the best hunter in the land!” Malach was starting to get angry now and a little hurt. “If you wanted someone older, you should have gone to the tavern in town! The *older* hunters will be there getting drunk off their wages! When you want someone who actually knows what they are doing, you can come back and be a little more cordial!” Malach went to slam the door, but the stranger got a boot between it and the jam, stopping it from shutting.

“Please, excuse my rudeness and careless words,” the stranger apologized. “I simply was told the best hunter would be here. I was not told your age. I trust the word of the man who sent me, and your age will not be a problem for me.”

Malach opened the door again, still peeved at the man. “Who sent you?”

“The general store owner. As I understand it, you have done work for him in the past and done a good job,” He replied.

“I’ve done work for almost everyone in this area,” Malach said, and then asked, “Are you kin to anyone around here?”

The man continued, “My brother has a farm on the east side of town. His name is Arjun Reybella. He has a daughter around your age, her name is Honora.”

“Oh!” It was Malach’s turn to be a little taken aback. “You’re Arjun’s brother? You look nothing alike.”

“Yes, well he got all the muscles in the family, and he never was one to slow down,” the man mused, “but where are my manners? My name is Jecrym, Jecrym Reybella, and like I said, my wife and I are settling into a farm on the south side of town. We are needing someone to come and hunt something that has been taking our animals. We are just getting started, you know, and can’t afford to lose too many.”

“I’m Malach. Are you and your wife going to be handling and living at the farm?” Again, Malach couldn’t keep the surprise out of his voice.

“Unfortunately, yes.” Jecrym seemed a little put out at that. “Our third brother, the oldest, spent most of our wealth and now it would seem I’ve almost run out as well. We are having to start this. . . farm so that we can live.”

Malach looked at the man. He said the word farm in such distaste that, personally, Malach didn’t care for the man at all. But he was the brother of a good man, and on that merit alone Malach would take the job.

“I’ll take the job. My terms are that I take the fur and meat of any animal caught unless you pay a fair price for it, and I charge two copper coins per animal.” Malach knew he could probably ask for more, but that was the price he gave everyone else. “If you need to trade instead of paying coin, we can discuss a trade when the job is finished. Also, I will not pay for any damage done by any animal to your land or property.” Malach put his hand out to shake on the deal.

Jecrym looked at Malach’s proffered hand and then back up at Malach.

“You don’t want anything in writing?” he asked.

“A man’s word is his bond around here.” Malach warned him. “If you break that trust, word spreads fast in a small town. People will be less likely to deal with you the more that trust is broken. I will meet you tomorrow morning at your farm.”

“Duly noted.” Jecrym took Malach’s hand, and they shook on it. “Do you know where my farm is?”

“As I said, word spreads fast in a small town. And I already know where the old farm south of town is.” Malach pulled his hand back. “Now I must begin my day. Too much daylight has been burned already.”

Jecrym looked confused for a moment and then took a step back from the door. “Very well, tomorrow morning then. Good day.” He turned, jumped at the sight of Skie again, and hurried off almost at a run as she loosed a playful growl at him.

“Skie,” Malach reprimanded, “I know you have to give off your persona of vicious and dangerous, but you don’t have to scare *all* of my customers.”

She came over to him, and he squatted a little to be eye level with her. She licked him once in the face.

“Alright, alright, I forgive you,” Malach chuckled and scratched behind her ears. “I have to get dressed now. Have you eaten breakfast?”

He looked around her to see the remnants of an animal she had killed and eaten. “I guess so, and you didn’t even leave any for me.” He pushed her head to the side playfully.

She excitedly growled and nipped at him in response.

With this Malach changed to a fresh pair of pants and pulled a brown wool shirt over his head. He grabbed the belt with his knife and quiver still attached and put it on. Some archers preferred their quiver to be attached to a sash on their back but Malach much preferred it by his side. When the quiver was attached at the back, it required a half quiver, or one would never be able to pull the arrows. Unfortunately, that means that if they had to run, they were more likely to lose their arrows. No, the side quiver was the way to go. The draw was more fluid, and a new arrow could be drawn much faster without the danger of losing them if the archer had to move to a new cover or tactically retreat.

After he strapped on his belt, he moved to the wall where his bow hung, strung it and set it against the wall next to the arrow container. He selected three arrows from their wooden holder and checked that they were still in good firing condition and put them into his quiver. He was good to go. He grabbed the rest of his uneaten breakfast and headed out the door, pulling it shut behind him. Skie was waiting, and Malach could swear she had an impatient look on her face. Skie didn’t like going in any building, even for a few minutes, though she would make exceptions sometimes. Malach never tried to make her either. It was against her nature to do that. She had a cave nearby that no one knew about. She slept there when it was too cold or too hot for her liking.

“Alright girl, I’m ready.” He told her and she fell into step with him. Today was Malach’s day for a supply run into town. He headed for his cart. It wasn’t big; just a small, simple thing that used manpower. He didn’t have a horse or mule just his own two legs and Skie, but she would never stand to be

hooked up to it. Going down into the valley wasn't the hard part. Getting back up to the cottage with all the supplies he needed, that would be the challenge. The path was just a worn, winding trail and had a few potholes in it, but Malach made sure they never got too large. Malach had been slowly making the trail straighter. As he needed firewood, he would select the next tree that was in the way and fell it with his saw. Then he would cut it into small pieces and haul it back up to his house to split and burn for heat. It was a bit of work, but he hadn't found one that he couldn't cut down yet.

As Malach grabbed the cart, he threw his pack and bow onto the cart and started down the hill. The cart had four short, wooden walls to it with one side that slid in on grooves. This was so he could load it easily and then secure the back so the cargo didn't fall out while he was rolling it uphill. Skie jumped in the back and laid down. Placing her head between her legs, she looked at him.

He feigned exasperation with her and said, setting the cart down and turning to look at her, "Really, first you make me do all the work, and now you're going to make me carry you too! You've gone too far this time." He wagged a finger at her nose. "I have a mind to turn this cart around, young lady." She just snorted at him and closed her eyes.

"Fine. You just stay there and see if you get any of Mr. Reybella's honeycomb candy." At this, Skie's ears perked up and she opened one eye at him. "That's right, you heard me. We are headed to the Reybella's farm, and if you aren't nice to me, I won't buy you any candy. This will be the last batch of the season, you know. It will be too cold for his bees soon if it isn't already."

Skie growled menacingly at him as if to say, "You wouldn't dare."

Malach continued, undaunted by what would sound to most people as anger in the wolf's growl. "Oh yes! You must remember who is holding the coin purse around here, but," he let that last word hang in the air for a second for dramatic effect, "I guess you can stay in there on the trip down. Just not on the way back; you're getting too fat for that."

Skie jumped to her feet in indignation and barked once in his ear.

“Alright, alright, I meant muscular. Don’t get your tail in a knot.” Malach chuckled as Skie huffed once more and flopped down, jarring the cart.

Malach plodded along in silence, leaving him to his own thoughts and plans for the day. As they came out of the trees onto the open, they could see the town down in the valley about a mile away; they could even see tiny people moving around within the tall, wooden walls, going about their normal day.

This was Brightwood. There were too many people for Malach’s liking, even though this was just a small town. With a population of couple hundred people residing within the walls, it was one of the smallest towns in Angel Territory. Around Brightwood, there was a large wooden wall about twice as tall as Malach. They had catwalks on the inside of the walls for guards to walk around, unseen by any enemy looking at the wall from below, although, those walkways haven’t seen a guard on them in well over a thousand years. Mostly, they are used by lovers and children, taking a leisurely romantic walk under the starlight or used in some game, respectively.

Malach lived on the Angel side of the Divide. The Divide was a large valley between the Demon and Angel Territory. It was where the first battle between angels and demons was said to have been fought. This valley formed a V toward the northern side of the continent and had a land mass in the middle of the valleys. This natural formation of the land gave them an obvious area to put the neutral city. On the demon side of this neutral ground was a swamp. Malach had heard a few stories about it but not many that he would believe. On the angel side were some gently sloping hills where the farmers would take their livestock.

Malach caught movement ahead, which pulled him from his thoughts. There was something else on the road, something unseen by those in the city. Three bandits waylaid some poor traveler that had happened along this way unawares. Malach immediately backed into the woods as to not be spotted and set down his cart. Skie lifted her head at the sudden jolting and jostling.

Malach put a finger to his lips and pointed along the road. He held up three fingers in front of her face and whispered, “Highwaymen.”

Skie’s hackles raised. She was genuinely upset this time.

He stopped her from charging in and motioned for her to follow as he grabbed his bow. There were some bushes along the side of the road and he used them for cover, pushing his quiver around his belt so that it rested on top of his butt as he crawled low on his stomach behind the underbrush. He finally got to where he could hear voices and chanced a peek between two of the bushes.

There were definitely three of them. Big, burly men, all armed with a number of weapons, but Malach didn't see an archer among them. He could probably make a decent shot from here, but he wanted to be a little closer in case things went south. He continued crawling to the end of the bushes, and he could just make out the voices. They were raised and angry; probably whoever they had waylaid was not cooperating. That was good and bad. Good because it took them longer to steal whatever they were after, so Malach could line his shot up without having to rush things. Bad because the highwaymen would be getting angry, and they didn't think particularly well when they were angry. Malach might have to kill one, maybe even two for them to survive the encounter. It also put the innocent man at risk when things got serious.

Malach peered through the bushes as he notched an arrow and judged the distance to the highwayman who had his back turned to Malach. Then one of them drew their sword.

So much for getting to line my shot up, Malach thought ruefully.

He stood up, drew back his arrow, and let it fly. The arrow zipped through the air, just grazing the ear of the thug standing with his back to Malach and embedded itself in the shoulder of the man who had drawn his sword on the traveler. It caught everyone by surprise and stopped the man's attack cold. All four men turned to look at Malach, the two uninjured highwaymen drawing their swords. He already had a second arrow notched and the bow drawn.

"Now, I could have killed any one of you I wanted but I took a wounding shot," Malach called to them.

Skie growled next to him for extra emphasis.

He continued, "I could easily change my mind and put both of you down before you could make it to me."

The highwaymen looked at each other.

"I suggest you sheath your weapons, drop those belts, and walk away," Malach called.

The two uninjured bandits were more than happy to oblige and started backing up.

"Wait!" The third bellowed at them and they paused in their retreat. He was obviously the leader. "This loser can't stop us all. Why are you backin' down?" The leader then spun the traveler around and put the sword to the man's throat. "Now, drop *your* weapon and back off.

Malach saw that the traveler was, in fact, Jecrym, and started to lower his bow. The bandit took his eyes off Malach for a second to look triumphantly to his comrades, who had stopped moving. Malach snapped the bow back into place, drew and released the arrow with one swift, fluid motion. The arrow flew, and as the bandit returned his focus to Malach, the arrow pierced through his left eye. The man screamed, dropped his sword, clutched the arrow, and fell to his knees. Malach notched his third and final arrow but it was a needless action as the two bandits that had dropped their weapons ran for it. The third one got up and started running as well but he had a harder time seeing where he was going and stumbled several times as he ran. Malach put the arrow away and moved forward to the shaken Jecrym.

"Are you alright?" Malach asked, not looking at Jecrym, but examining the weapons and belts that had been left behind.

Jecrym didn't respond.

Nothing spectacular, though there were a few silver coins in one of the purses still attached to the belt. He collected those and put them away in his own coin purse. He picked up the best of the swords and tossed it at the still stunned Jecrym. It landed at his feet, bounced once, and smacked into his shin. That seemed to snap him out of his silence.

"Wha. . . you. . . shot him," he stammered.

“Yep,” Malach replied calmly. “Didn’t give me much of a choice, did he?”

“You could have killed me!” Jecrym raised his voice, suddenly shouting.

Anger boiled in Malach’s stomach, but he pushed it down, opting for the calmer response. “A simple thank you would suffice.”

“Thank you?” Now Jecrym was shouting. “If you ever point that. . . *thing* at me again, I’ll go to the local authorities and report you!”

Malach couldn’t stop the angry reply this time. He stood up and advanced on the hapless man who seemed to shrink. “I saved your life, technically twice, in the span of a few moments! Next time I’ll just leave you to them! Oh, and good luck finding the *local authorities*. The only person keeping the peace around here is you and me.” He motioned to the sword still on the ground at Jecrym’s feet. “You would be smart to take that sword and get someone to re-train you to use it.”

Who does this guy think he is? A king? Malach thought in disgust.

Malach grabbed the rest of the stuff off the ground and headed back toward his cart. Skie fell into step with him, shooting a venomous look toward Jecrym.

Jecrym quickly picked up the sword and ran to catch up, “You’re not just going to leave me out here alone, are you?”

“I don’t make it a habit to keep cowards as company,” Malach retorted, still seething inside and not slowing down even one bit. He made it to the cart and Skie jumped back in the back but didn’t lay down. Instead, she stared Jecrym down.

“What if they come back?” He stopped short of the cart, watching Skie.

Malach said nothing.

“I apologize for what I said earlier.” Jecrym tried, seeming to calm down a bit.

There he goes, apologizing again, Malach thought.

"I was scared, and it was rude of me. Let me pay you for your trouble." Jecrym reached for his coin purse, which jingled loudly. It was full of coins.

"I don't want your money. That's what made you a target in the first place," Malach said. He really didn't want any of Jecrym's money. "Don't you know only to carry a small amount of coin with you?"

"I . . ." Jecrym started to say something, but the words died in his mouth. He let his breath out and inhaled again. His voice was better under control when he spoke again. "To tell you the truth, I don't know much about the rules of this land. I am used to living in a city with men whose job is to keep the peace. Please, let me at least replace the arrows you lost when that brute fled?"

"Fine," Malach replied. He still wasn't happy with the man but would let the matter drop. "If that's what you wish, I'll accept, though I make my own shafts and fletching. All I need is the arrowheads."

"Then you will have half a dozen of the best heads the blacksmith makes," Jecrym beamed at him as if they were the best of friends.

Malach sighed and pulled the cart out from where he had hidden it before. Skie laid down so she wouldn't have to balance on the moving cart. However, she was not as relaxed as before, but instead watched Jecrym. He could tell she really didn't trust their new traveling companion.

They walked almost half the distance to the city before Jecrym couldn't take the silence anymore. "So, may I ask you a question?" he asked warily.

"I can't stop you," Malach replied tersely. He hoped the man wasn't going to try to pry into his past. He didn't necessarily have a hard time talking about it; he just didn't want to get into it with Jecrym in particular. "I don't promise an answer though."

"That's fair," Jecrym replied and looked over at him curiously. "Why didn't you kill the bandit?"

"What would that have accomplished?" Malach asked.

"Well," he started, "for one, there would be one less bandit in the world, but I think it would have just been a more strategically sound action."

Malach thought about what he should tell the man. He decided to play with him, "I would have had to bury him if I killed him," he stated flatly. "Or at the least drag him from the road."

Jecrym's jaw dropped, and he openly gaped at Malach.

"What did you think I was going to say something like, 'everyone deserves a second chance' or 'I couldn't take another man's life'?" Malach said, in a mocking tone.

"As a matter of fact, yes!" He was still shocked.

"I'm not sure if he did deserve another chance," Malach explained. "He had his chance to leave, and he didn't take it when the other two did. They will think twice before they try something like that again. Besides, not many men change their ways once they are set."

"So, your reason for not killing the man was truly so you would not have to deal with a body?" Jecrym asked, verbally pushing for the true answer.

"The truth is that I don't take a life unless there is a need. I knew he would not kill you once he had enough incentive not to. He was a coward," Malach set the cart down and turned to look the man in the eyes. "His kind prey on the weak, projecting strength by making his prey cower under his presumed power. He, in fact, is weaker than the men he preys on. I saw it in his eyes. When someone comes along who stands up to him, he will hide behind someone else. What I've learned is that you can't trust anyone to protect you. Willing or otherwise. There is always a way around them."

Malach flexed his hands before picking up the cart, and they started moving toward the city, "Once they see they aren't as safe as they perceive they are, they will flee. While we are being truthful though, I missed. I had intended to scare him, which is what happened, but I intended to scare him by taking a small chunk out of his ear." This drew a small, shocked look from Jecrym and he opened his mouth to object but shut it without any sound coming out.

Good, the man is learning to think before he speaks, Malach thought.

“Lucky for him I didn’t pull my full draw, or we *would* be burying a body,” Malach mused.

They walked for a while in silence once again, Jecrym obviously mulling over what had been said.

When they had gotten to within a stone’s throw of the main gate of the town, Jecrym spoke again to Malach; this time a bit more curious. “How is someone your age so full of wisdom?”

Malach said nothing to this. He didn’t want to explain his past to this man. Malach had great parents that taught him a lot before they passed, including the value of a life. However, he had done a lot of growing up in the years that he was on his own and had decided for himself what he believed and how to live. He supposed he had grown up more than many his age; though he never thought about it much.

They passed through the gates in silence, and it seemed like Jecrym had decided to drop the subject. He turned toward the blacksmith’s shop even though that was not originally going to be his first stop. He wanted to be rid of Jecrym and his questions.

As they approached the blacksmith’s shop, Jecrym tried to pry once again, “So, where are your parents?”

“Dead,” Malach replied shortly and refused to say anything else to the man’s many questions that followed.

Chapter 2

They made it to the blacksmith's shop none too soon for Malach, and they went inside. The blacksmith was a big, burly man with a large, jet-black beard and a bald head. The man, Togan Ravenbard, had been a good friend to Malach for a long time. Malach thought it was because the man had lost his wife and son a couple of hundred years ago to a fire. He always said Malach reminded him of his son, and he had taken to the boy. Malach made sure to visit the gruff man every time he was in town, even if he didn't need anything from him.

Togan looked up as Malach and Jecrym walked through his door. He had been sharpening one of the blades he had on display. He stood menacingly, brandishing the weapon, he looked from Malach to Jecrym and back to Malach.

"Everythin' alright here, Malach?" he asked, eyeing Jecrym again. "This man botherin' you?"

"Yes," Jecrym gave a startled squeak and Malach amended his statement. "But I'm here to do business, nothing else, Togan."

Togan sat, picking up the whetstone and starting to hone the blade in his hands again.

Malach continued, "Togan this is Jecrym Reybel, Arjun's brother. I came upon him with a couple of *friends* on the road into town. I seem to have lost two of my good arrows in them, if you know what I mean. Jecrym wanted to return the favor and replace my arrowheads for me."

Togan nodded but still didn't say anything, he didn't even take his eyes off his work.

Jecrym spoke up now with a little annoyance edging his voice, "Could I get a half dozen of your best arrowheads?"

"Uh, just my normal heads, please, Togan," Malach corrected quickly and turned to Jecrym to explain. "If I get the different heads, I have to adjust my aim and make of the shafts since they are a different weight. They make the arrow act differently."

Togan pulled out three arrowheads and set them on the counter, "I only have three now. You can pay for 'em all, and Malach can pick 'em up next time he's in town."

Jecrym looked at Malach and Malach nodded. "That's fair."

Jecrym pulled out two gold coins from his purse and placed them on the counter.

Togan raised one eyebrow at him. "They're two silver coins each, so you're short two silver pieces."

"Oh, sorry my good man." He reached into his purse again and proffered two more gold coins. "You can keep the change."

Togan's eyebrow went up again and he looked at Malach who shrugged in response. Togan slid the four coins off his counter and put them behind it. He sat back down, grabbing a sword off its display and began sharpening again. Malach and Jecrym turned and left the building.

When the door had shut behind them Jecrym spoke, "Cheery fellow isn't he?" It was a rhetorical question.

"He'll warm up a little once you get to know him, but yes, to most he doesn't talk much." Malach explained. "Well, this is where we part ways, I think. I will see you in the morning at your farm."

Malach again offered his hand as a parting gesture and Jecrym took it and then turned and walked away. He watched Jecrym until he was out of sight then turned and went back inside the blacksmith's shop.

Togan had his feet propped up on the counter now, obviously finished sharpening the sword he had out just moments ago, "How'd you end up saddled with him?" he asked.

"He asked for my services hunting out at his new farm. Since he was kin to Arjun, I agreed." Malach walked around the other side of the counter and sat in a chair opposite Togan. "Could you believe he didn't think I was a hunter?"

"Malach, you're still young." Togan took a fatherly tone with him. "You're not even twenty-one yet."

"What's your point? I'm the best hunter this side of the Pangor River, and you know it," he objected.

"Malach, you know better than t' be prideful," Togan admonished. "You know people outside the valley don't know a thing about you. You're a great hunter, but just a hunter, and you've never been out of this area. He's new to the valley. Cut him some slack."

"You're right," Malach conceded. "I just wish I didn't have to leave the valley. I mean, it's all I know. Can I count on you to check on my parent's cottage here and there? Make sure it's standing when I get back?"

"Of course, but I thought you had the Reybellas and Wervines watchin' over it," Togan asked, confused.

"I do, I just thought they might not have enough time to check on it, and a third person with eyes on it would be a good idea," He replied.

"Malach, you're too worried about leavin'," Togan shook his head at him and chuckled, a chuckle that rumbled through his chest low and warm. "You're not gonna miss much, and nothin's gonna change while you're gone. In fact, you'll probably meet new friends and have a good time in the Neutral Territory. You might even meet a girl who could put up with you for more than five minutes."

Togan slugged him in the shoulder and guffawed loudly at the look of dejection on Malach's face, and Malach couldn't help but smile at the man's laughter. Then he had a mischievous thought.

“What about you? I mean, you’ve been making eyes at Marena for almost a year now. When are you going to start doing something about that?” Malach gave him a half smile as Togan pretended to be confused.

“Oh, you’re talkin’ ‘bout the waitress at the tavern? Humph.” Togan crossed his arms. “I haven’t been makin’ eyes at her. Just think she’s pretty, that’s all.”

“Well, you better make a move before someone else does.”

“Git out of here, you little whelp!” Togan took a playful swing at him and Malach easily ducked out of the way and hopped out of the chair.

“You’re getting slow, old man,” He laughed again and vaulted the counter.

“Eh, you’re not worth chasin’,” Togan got up slowly and put both hands on the counter. “Did ya need anythin’ else before you go?”

“Yeah. Do you happen to have any whetstones for sale?” he asked with his hand on the door.

“Nah, the only ones I got are the ones I use.” Togan held up the one that was in his hand. “But I heard the general store got a shipment in. You might check there and see if they got any left.”

“Alright, thanks, Togan. Oh! One more thing,” Malach whirled, jogged back out to his cart, picked up the two swords and carried them back inside. “Do you recognize these swords?” He set the two swords on the counter and the big blacksmith picked the one up that wasn’t sheathed.

“This is not of my makin’.” He flipped it over and looked the other side over. “I don’t see any marks identifyin’ what blacksmith crafted it, but it’s not well made, I can tell you that.”

He looked it over one last time and then set it back down on the counter, “My guess is it’s from a different town, crafted by an apprentice blacksmith. I can give you two coppers for each for the metal itself, but they aren’t worth wieldin’ or repairin’.”

“Deal. I don’t want them.” Togan handed him four copper coins. “Also, do you have any hunting knives made at the moment? I need to get one for

Daziar's birthday. He's turning twenty-one after all."

"You know I do. He's had his eye on that ten inch one with the redwood handle. It's one of my best." Togan pulled out a wooden box and handed it to Malach. "Since it's one of my best, I'll part with it for the meat from the next deer you get."

"That's overkill and you know it!" Malach exclaimed pretending to be upset with the deal and looked the knife over. It *was* one of his best, almost as good as the one hanging from Malach's own belt. "Half the meat of the deer."

"Fine, half of everythin' else but the whole rump," Togan bargained.

"Togan." Malach paused their bargaining by holding a hand up.

"You know I might not be able to bring down a deer before I leave, right?"

"Then you'll pay me when you get back," Togan said simply. "Business is good, and it won't hurt me any to wait."

"Fine," Malach agreed. "Then we have a deal."

They shook on it, and Malach picked up the box that held the knife. "You know, your love for venison will drive you out of business." He turned and walked outside bidding farewell to the blacksmith.

The knife hanging off of his own belt was an early birthday gift from the blacksmith. He had given it to Malach early as he ended up snapping his other one in half when he was facing down a wild boar. When he had taken it to the blacksmith to get it repaired, Togan had handed him this new knife and told him he had intended it to be Malach's birthday present but didn't mind giving it to him early since the one he had was broken.

Malach stuffed the box into his pack so that Daziar wouldn't see it when he got to the Wervine's house. Daziar's birthday was in two days, and the day after it he would start his journey to the Neutral Territory to live and learn there for two years. They had planned to meet up at the town of Newaught and possibly live together. Newaught was the only city in the Neutral Territory. Unfortunately for Malach, he would have to get used to the big city.

Malach looked at Skie. To anyone passing by, she would have looked half asleep, not paying much attention to the people around her. Malach knew, however, she was tense and nervous. She didn't like the town, but she would always go with Malach anyway. He knew she was poised and would spring into action if the occasion demanded. She had never attacked humans unless provoked, but sometimes Malach worried about her doing something when they were in town because of how on edge she always was.

He picked up the cart and headed toward the general store. He got the few things he needed, including the whetstones, paying for them with the money he had taken out of the highwayman's purse. After that, he headed toward Daziar's house, which was on the opposite end of town from the gate where he'd entered earlier. It didn't take him long to cross town, however, and when he got there, Daziar opened the door before Malach even set the cart down.

Daziar was a big man, muscular and tall. He was the only one around close to Malach's height and one of the only boys, when they were in training, who could take Malach one-on-one. Daziar charged toward Malach, but Skie intercepted him, jumping on Daziar and knocking him flat on his back.

He bear-hugged the dog and laughed, calling to Malach, "Get your vicious beast in check. She nearly killed me!"

"She was simply defending me. I should just let her tear you to shreds." Malach pushed Skie to the side and took Daziar's hand. He pulled his friend to his feet and into an embrace. "How've you been?"

"Good! You know, just getting ready for my journey. Mom and Dad have been helping me pack things I'm going to need. I just wish I could get that hunting knife that Togan has in his shop. The one with the redwood handle." Daziar looked a little disappointed. "Mom said they didn't have the money to buy it or anything to trade for it. Dad said he would have enough a week from now, but I will already be gone by then. Dad's overseeing the building of that new farm south of town. Or should I say rebuilding? That derelict house needed to be demolished and built from the ground up. Have you heard? Arjun's brother is building down that way." Daziar tended to

ramble a little when he was excited, or nervous, or worried... or just about any other time.

“Slow down, Daz!” Malach held up his hands as if to physically slow Daziar down. “I know about the new Reybellas’ farm. Jecrym, Arjun’s brother, came to me this morning looking to get my help hunting something that’s been taking his animals.” Malach related the events from that morning, including the highwaymen and how he had saved Jecrym.

Daziar let out a low whistle, “Wow, you really messed them up, didn’t you?”

“Just the one guy, and I didn’t mean to put that arrow in his eye. I’m just glad I didn’t pull a full draw, or I would be pulling the body into town on my cart.” Malach grabbed his pack and they headed for the door of the house. “Don’t tell your mom about the highwaymen business, or she’ll worry about us for the whole two years we are gone.”

“At least worry more than she does now.” Daziar corrected, and they walked into the house.

The house was simple, made of wood inside and out. The dining room was directly to the right inside the front door, and contained a small table that would just barely seat six people. To the left was the kitchen, separated by the counter that was waist level to Malach. Ahead and to the left around the wall was the living space and to the right was a hall that led to three rooms. One was the girls’ room for Daziar’s two sisters, one was the boys’ room that Daziar and Malach had shared while he lived with them, and the last was the parents’ room. Malach announced he had arrived and Jennari, Daziar’s mother, came out of the kitchen and gave him a death grip of a hug around his waist. Just when Malach thought he might pass out, she released him.

She took his face between her two hands, turning his head to the right and then the left, looking at him. “Ugh, I wish you would live with us where it’s safer and not up there in the cottage, all alone.” She smiled then and let his face go. “I’m glad you made it down safely. Did you have any issues on the way? There have been rumors of bad men around lately, and there were a couple of people robbed in the last week.” Jennari turned and went back into the kitchen, so she didn’t see the look that passed between Daziar and Malach.

“Everything went fine on the way down.” Malach only halfway lied. He didn’t have any problems, because he took care of his problem.

Jennari was a slight woman, short and skinny, contrasting her son, and she barely came up to Malach’s chest. Daniel, Daziar’s father was also not very tall, but still heftily built, like Daziar. Malach didn’t know where Daziar’s height came from, but they always joked that he had simply been trying to keep up with Malach as they grew up together. Daniel came in just then from one of the back rooms with Daziar’s two sisters on his heels. Both of the girls looked almost exactly alike, though they weren’t twins. The biggest difference was one had brown hair and the other was blond. They both had the build of their mother and probably wouldn’t get too much taller.

“Mal!” They both shouted and ran around their dad to hug Malach. Malach knelt down and hugged them both, one in each arm and then picked them up, turning it into a bear-hug. He set them down after a couple of moments.

“Malach,” Daniel said in his gravelly voice. “It’s been too long.”

They clasped each other’s arms in greeting.

“I can’t stay long,” he said, drawing a disappointed groan from the girls. “I just came by to bid Daz a safe journey and give him his present for his birthday. I won’t be able to see him again until I get to Newaught.”

Malach pulled the box with the hunting knife out of his bag and handed it to Daziar. He took it and looked at his family excitedly, then back to Malach.

“You know you didn’t have to get me anything, right?” Daziar said, though Malach knew he was saying it to be cordial.

“Oh,” Malach said with a mischievous grin. “In that case, I’ll just return it and get my money back. Open it, you little softy.”

“Fine, fine, you don’t have to be rude about it.” Daziar pulled the box to his chest as if Malach was going to try and take it from him.

He set in on the table to open it. Once he saw what was in the box he looked up with wide-eyed excitement.

“Well, what is it Daz?” Marletta asked, almost as excited and he was.

“It’s that knife I was wanting from Togan’s shop!” he almost shouted with excitement. “Thanks, Mal!”

“It must have cost you an arm and a leg,” Jennari said in her normal concerned tone. “How did you ever pay for it?”

“You know how Togan likes his venison,” Malach stated.

“Mal, you are the best brother I never had!” Daziar clasped his arm and pulled him close.

When he pulled back, Malach said, “Well, I have to keep moving. I’m already behind, and if I want to get back to the cottage before nightfall, I need to go.”

“Let me make you a sandwich for the road,” Jennari said and hurried into the kitchen.

“That’s really not necessary,” Malach protested.

“Nonsense,” Jennari said and continued pulling out things to make a sandwich. When she was finished, she poured him a flask of water and put the sandwich into a small brown sack before handing it to him. “Here you are, Malach.”

“Thanks, Jennari. I really appreciate that,” Malach responded.

He bid all of them farewell and gave Emmeline, Marletta, and Jennari each another hug. He was sad he had to leave, because he didn’t know when he would see them again, but he didn’t want to be late for two reasons. One, it was harder to see the path in the dark, though he had managed several times in the past; and two, he didn’t know if those bandits might be waiting for him to get a little revenge. He was more worried about the second than the first, but he didn’t want to tell the Wervine’s that and make them worry.

His last and longest stop for the day was the Reybella’s farm. Arjun’s farm that was. North of the city and a couple of miles up. He would be pushing it just to make it in time and get the things he needed.

His trip to the farm was uneventful, and as he approached the farm, he marveled once again at the size, thinking to himself, *how much land did one man*

need?

Arjun Reybella was a rich man with a large belly. He was kind but hard. He would help someone who would put the work in to help themselves, and he employed many people. Unlike his brothers, he didn't squander his money. Instead, he used it, and coupled with hard work, he multiplied it. He had built the largest farm in the valley and he continued to expand.

Malach wondered what it must be like to be that rich and thought that it could easily make a man stumble. Money seemed to make men do evil things or become afraid and paranoid. He thought he would probably be happier living the way he did, having enough for what he needed and maybe a little extra here and there.

The sun was low in the sky and had already started to turn orange. It gave the farm a very peaceful look. The hired hands had already gone in to clean up for dinner that would be served within the hour. In fact, the only person that Malach could see was Honora Reybella. She was out in one of the fields riding her horse. Malach smiled to himself. She rode that horse of hers any chance she got. He knew it was her even from this distance because she was one of the only girls he knew that rode. Sure, most of them had been taught, but most people didn't have their own horse. She was a day older than Malach and a week younger than Daziar.

Honora would start the same journey as Daziar, but a week from now and Malach would follow just a day later. Arjun had asked Malach to find her and keep her safe on the week's journey to Newaught. In return, he had told Malach he would provide food for both of them on their journey.

Malach didn't mind, he enjoyed Honora's company and though she wasn't much for fighting, she could hold her own. He wouldn't have to worry too much about her. She had been trained like the rest of them until they were eighteen and preferred a bo staff over any other weapon.

When Malach got a little closer, she spotted him and steered her horse toward him, waving. He waved back, though he kept walking. It took her just a couple of minutes to cross the distance on her horse. As she got closer, he could tell she had been riding that horse pretty hard. It was covered in sweat and was breathing harder than normal.

“You’re really working the poor girl, aren’t you?” Malach remarked.

“Eh, she’ll be fine. They are designed to carry people and other heavy loads for a while, and besides, she enjoys running,” Honora said in response and reigned in her horse to walk next to him.

“She does or you do?” Malach quipped, knowing the response.

“We both do!” Honora said defensively. She always got so heated about her horse that Malach couldn’t help but poke a little fun at her. She caught sight of his grin and realized what he was doing. “Cretin! Just for that, I won’t let you ride back to the farm with me.”

“Not like I could anyway. I have to pull the cart to the house one way or another.”

“Fine,” she sighed. “Have it your way. I’ll tell Father you’re coming.” She kicked her horse into a gallop and raced toward the house.

The truth was, Malach didn’t care for riding. He had had a few lessons, but he didn’t enjoy it in the least. He figured it was because of the lack of control. It’s true, he might have some control over the horse, but if it decided it really wanted to go somewhere, he wouldn’t be able to get it to stop. At least not easily. So, he mostly left the riding to other people. Not that there were many horses in the area anyway. The Reybellas were one of the only families to have a horse and were the only family to own more than one.

Honora was an only child, and they pampered her a little. She had her own room, her own horse, and she even had what people called a mirror. Malach thought it strange to have such an expensive thing just to look at your reflection in. Why not just go to a lake, or pond, or even a little puddle right after it had rained?

Even though Honora was spoiled, she was not stuck up. He was always impressed by that. Even when they were younger and in training, she would share some of her food with him and Daziar at lunch or she would let them, mostly Daziar, ride her horse whenever they wanted, and so on. She didn’t look down on anyone and was always putting others above herself. She was as close as someone got to an angel these days, Malach mused.

When he reached the farm, the sun was starting to get low in the sky, and he knew he couldn't stay long. He had just long enough to collect, load, and pay for what he came here for. The Reybellas grew food as well as raised animals, and they even had an orchard. They produced most of the vegetables and fruit for the whole valley. There were a few other, smaller farms that provided a few certain things, but the Reybellas had a little of everything; at least that's how it seemed to Malach. He always tried to buy from them when he needed anything. Since the apple he ate this morning was the last of his produce, that's what he was here for.

He set his cart down just outside the barn where he would have to load the produce, hoisted his bag over his shoulder, and whistled for Skie. She fell into step with him and they made their way to the house. Arjun came out of the house and waited for them to arrive.

When they made it to the house, Arjun clasped Malach's arm and hauled him close. "How ya been, boy?" he asked in his gruff but not unpleasant voice. "You been taking care of yourself and this mutt of yours?" He knelt down and ruffled Skie's ears. She gave a playful growl in response and he chuckled.

"Surviving," Malach replied. "It's been good hunting so far this season. I got a boar a couple of weeks ago, a few squirrels, and a raccoon just the other night."

"A raccoon, eh?" Arjun asked looking around Malach to see if he could see it on the cart.

"Don't worry. I promised you the next raccoon I get, and you promised me some honey."

Arjun chuckled again, "That I did, that I did. I have some in the house."

Malach pulled the packed meat out of his bag and followed the man inside. Arjun still chatting as they went. Malach could see a small resemblance to his bother now that he looked a little harder, and they both liked to chatter nonstop. The difference was Arjun's conversations were about the harvest or hunting or things that Malach could and wanted to talk about. Arjun left the

personal questions out of his speech. He knew that Malach valued his privacy and respected that, not to mention he already knew most of it.

“...since the harvest is over, don’t you think?” Arjun finished, but Malach had not been paying attention.

“What was that last thing?” Malach asked. “Sorry I missed it.”

“You need to get your ears looked at, boy!” Arjun laughed. “That’ll cost you your life in the woods. I was saying that things were going to slow down here, and you might think about taking one of my workers to help you hunt since the harvest is over.”

“Arjun, you know I can’t afford to pay someone. The only thing I have in abundance this time of the year is meat. And because of the Journey, I can’t take anyone with me.”

“I know, I know, it’s that time in your life. Maybe one of my men wouldn’t mind going with you and Honora if paid?” Arjun fell silent, knowing the answer to his question.

“I know you’re worried about Honora and me as we make the Journey, but you have already offered your men more than I could ever pay them and none of them are willing to leave the valley just before winter.” Malach reasoned with him.

“Malach,” Arjun turned around suddenly very serious. Malach knew what came next. It was a conversation that they had had many times in the last couple of months. “You protect her. She’s my life. If anything were to hap-”

“Yes, Arjun. I know you and your wife would be devastated. And you already have had me swear four times that I will do everything in my power to keep her safe. I don’t intend to break my word. You know that.”

“Yes, yes, I’m sorry ma’ boy,” Arjun looked very old and tired for a second. “It’s just, I’m her father. I’m supposed to worry about her.”

“I understand,” Malach said. “Nothing is going to happen. We will spend two years in Newaught, and then we will be back here. Before you know it, you’ll have her riding around the farm again and home for dinner every night.”

"I pray you're right, though I'm afraid she will want to stay in the city," Arjun said, but a little life returned to him anyway. He stood up straighter and turned back around, barging through the doors to the kitchen. "How many jars do I owe ya?"

"Does four sound fair?" Malach knew that was too steep a price, but he knew that Arjun always enjoyed a good barter.

"Four jars!" Arjun was almost shouting but with a smile all over his face. His wife rushed in to see what the commotion was all about and smiled when she saw Malach.

"Mrs. Reyb-" Malach started to greet her.

"This boy is trying to get four jars of honey from me for one raccoon, Zahra!" Arjun interrupted.

Zahra just smiled a little bigger and said, "Well, darling, if that's too outrageous of a price, you should kick him and his raccoon out."

Arjun's face was a picture of shock, but he gained his composure quickly. "Well, don't be too hasty. That raccoon is a pretty big one." He turned toward Malach again, chewing on his cheek as if he were thinking hard. "I'll give you two jars of honey for it."

It was Malach's turn to play the indignant part. "Only two jars? I've put a lot of work into that animal, and if you're going to swindle me like that, I'll take my business elsewhere."

Malach started to walk around Arjun and the man got in his way, "Fine, fine. You're a hard man to deal with, but I'll give you two jars and," he paused for dramatic effect, "I'll throw in some of the Honey Comb Candy I made from it."

This was the outcome Malach had intended to reach. It was fair, and both parties had a good time getting to this point of agreement.

"Deal." Malach put out his hand and Arjun took it with hesitation.

"I'll go get the honey out of the pantry." He turned and started walking away, still giving directions as he went. "Give the meat to Zahra and she will

put it away.” His voice was pretty distant now, but he could still be heard. “I assume it’s already preserved?”

“Yes! With my blend of seasonings as well,” Malach called in answer, handing the package to Zahra.

“Someday you are going to have to tell me what you put on that meat to make it so good,” Arjun called again from the pantry.

“Oh no, I don’t. That’s my blend that I’ve come up with, and a herd of wild horses couldn’t pull it out of me!” Malach shouted back, winking at Zahra who smiled back, amused with her husband.

“Fine,” Arjun conceded. “I guess I will just have to continue to do business with you.”

Malach looked out the window and saw that the sun had almost set. He turned back to Arjun as he came back in with the honey.

“I also need these.” Malach handed him a list of Items that he needed to buy from him. “And if you have any chicken feathers, I need to make some more arrows.”

“No problem.” Arjun called for one of the hired hands and handed him the list telling him about the addition. “Johm will go get the things you require. That’ll be five silver coins.”

Malach handed him the equivalent of five silvers and looked out the window again. He might have half the light he needed for the trip home. “Well, I must be off. The sun is setting, and I have to get home soon. The woods aren’t the safest place to be after dark, so the earlier I leave the better.”

“Are you sure that you will be safe by yourself?” Zahra asked, worried. “You’re right, it’s dangerous out there. You could just stay here with us and head back in the morning.”

“No, no. I wouldn’t want to intrude, and besides, I have a few things to square away before the morning,” Malach politely declined as he took the honey from Arjun. “I will be headed to your brother’s farm in the morning. Thank you for your kind offer though, and I always have Skie to protect me.”

“My brother?” Arjun asked. “What’s he got you doing?”

“He’s had a few animals taken,” Malach explained. “I’ve got to find out what’s taking them and kill it.”

“Huh,” Arjun grunted. “I wonder why he didn’t ask me. Well, no matter. Be patient with my brother; he is used to the easy life and being on top. He won’t take kindly to bein’ ordered around. To tell you the truth, he is a little rude at times.”

“Really? I hadn’t noticed,” Malach retorted dryly.

“You’ve spent some time with him?” Arjun raised a brow.

“I saved him from a couple of bandits on the road and walked to town with him,” Malach explained. “Would you believe that he yelled at me after I saved his life?”

“I’d believe it,” Arjun said, but Zahra looked shocked. “Though, it was probably because he was more scared and powerless than anything. How can I repay you for saving my bother?”

“Oh, not you too!” Malach lamented. “Your bother practically wanted to buy me a whole store in town! I would have done the same for anyone, and I don’t want any payment for it.”

“Alright, fine,” Arjun said holding up his hand in surrender. “Well, let me get you a third bottle of honey at least. I know how much trouble my bother can be.”

“Fine,” Malach conceded. “But you don’t owe me anything, alright?”

“Well, just take it as an early birthday present,” Zahra said, and then her tone turned to one of warning. “And you be careful. I don’t want to find out in a few days that you got killed by those same highwaymen. They might be looking for payback.”

“Don’t worry, I will.” Malach put the third jar of honey in his sack and said his goodbyes.

He walked out the door just as Honora was walking up to the front porch. Skie was lying to Malach’s right, lazily looking between them, not bothering to raise her head.

“Are you leaving so soon?” Honora asked in surprise.

Malach briefly recounted the story of the bandits as his reason for leaving. “I don’t want to be out too late or they will have more cover to ambush me, if that is their plan.”

“Fine,” Honora looked disappointed, “I just wish you could stay through dinner at least.”

“I have to be up early tomorrow to help your uncle track, and hopefully kill, whatever has been plaguing him,” he replied. “Or I might have stayed.”

“Well, be careful. I don’t want you getting hurt before we head out on the Journey.”

“Don’t worry. I haven’t met anything yet that I can’t handle.”

Honora’s face turned from worried to playfully aghast in the blink of an eye. She shoved him and started berating him. “Malach Tresch, you’re getting too big of a head. Soon you’ll think you can take on a demon and win!”

“You never know, maybe I can!” Malach gave her a playful shove back.

“You boys and your egos. Well, fine then, get out of here. And you better come back in one piece to see me off!”

“I guess I might be able to make it to that, but you know that I’ll be making that trip *with* you not a day later, right?”

Honora rolled her eyes, “Yeah, I remember. Those are going to be an insufferable two weeks to be sure.”

“I agree, since I’ll be protecting this innocent, little damsel who seems to enjoy whining.” With that, Honora took a swing at him and missed, as he had already turned and bounded off the front porch.

“Malach! Come back here and take your medicine!” she yelled after him as he and Skie ran to the cart.

He arrived at the cart just as Johm was setting a second large bag on his cart. Johm had worked for the Reybella family for as long as Malach could remember. He was almost a part of the Reybella family, even taking meals with them at their table. The man didn’t say much, but Malach liked him. The

first of the two bags that Johm had set on the cart would be flour and the second would be the fruit and vegetables for his week. He still had plenty of oil at the house. That seemed to run out a lot slower especially since he could substitute it with some of the fat from the animals he killed.

“Thanks!” He shook the man’s hand and headed out. Skie now walked beside him. The road forked not far out from the Reybella’s farm and he took the right branch that would cut through the country toward his cottage and skip Brightwood. This would take off about a half hour and the trouble of getting them to open the gates. As he headed up the hill to his cottage the sun had fully gone behind the tree and darkness was falling fast. He tried to keep up a good pace, but he was headed uphill, so he was forced to slow down. He also had to be careful as he approached the tree line, as he couldn’t tell who might be hiding there. He was well aware that the highwaymen from earlier that day could be waiting there.

As he passed under the first tree, he was breathing heavily and soaked with sweat, despite the cold nip in the air. It was fully dark now, and under that canopy of trees, the light of the moon and stars were snuffed out. He stopped for a moment to let his eyes adjust and to take a drink of water from the flask he had gotten from the Wervines.

The sandwich was long gone by now and he was starting to get hungry again. However, all his senses were on high alert for any signs of danger. Skie was sitting next to him and was on high alert as well, though she hadn’t made a sound, which was good. He gave her a drink of water, then picked up the cart to move on. They walked for a way without a sound, save for the crunching of Malach’s boots, the silent padding of Skie’s paws, and the creaking of the cart as it rolled along behind him.

As they got closer to the cottage, he started to hear something. A few steps closer and he recognized the sound as muffled voices. Skie’s hackle raised and a low growl emitted from deep in her throat. Malach put his hand out to his side in front of her, letting her know to wait. He set the cart down as quietly as he could. He came around a bend to see the outline of the cottage. There were torches flickering in the windows. He stayed close to the trees, hoping to hide his presence until he was at the cottage. As he got closer, he could see that the cottage door was open, but he still couldn’t see anyone. He

almost laughed when he realized whoever was in his home had not bothered to leave a lookout.

As he reached the cottage, Skie beside him, he could see the shutters to the main living space and kitchen were open, so he snuck around the clearing until he was under one of the windows. He peeked up and over the sill and saw one of the three highwaymen from before. He was going through Malach's cupboards. He pulled out the container of jerky and opened the jar to pull out a strip of meat. He sniffed it and then hungrily tore at it.

"Hey, guys!" he shouted, turning around abruptly. Malach was forced to duck quickly so he wouldn't be seen. "I found some food. Good stuff too! Dried meat!" Malach could hear the man almost stomp out of the kitchen. Malach realized now that he had left his bow on the cart. He silently berated himself for his lack of foresight. He would have to get to his room and get his father's old sword out of the chest at the foot of his bed.

He peeked over the sill once again, and seeing no one, he vaulted through the window and into his kitchen. Skie followed as quietly as the night breeze. Malach looked around the house again, not seeing anyone. He moved quickly out of the kitchen and into the sitting room. His room was off to his left and his parents' old room, which he had turned into a workroom, was straight ahead. Both doors were open with light flickering in each one. If he could get to his room and get his father's sword, he could take them.

"Hey, Bray!" one of the men called from the workroom, and Malach's heart nearly jumped out of his chest. "Come here and look what we found!"

The man that had been in Malach's kitchen, stepped out from his room and spotted Malach. Malach acted quickly, more on instinct than anything. He moved across the room with as much speed as he could muster, pulling his knife as he went, holding it in a reverse grip. He swung his knife hand up and pulled the knife across the man's throat and put his hand over Bray's mouth before he could make a noise. Bray collapsed with a small gurgle. Malach caught his body and pulled him back into his room.

"Bray?" the voice shouted again.

Malach could hear the two men moving out of the workroom and heading his way. He moved to the chest and tore it open, not worrying about the noise. He dug around furiously trying to find the sword. He couldn't find it! It wasn't here!

"Hey!"

Malach spun to see one of the men fill the door. He had just run out of time. He pulled his knife up and crouched into a defensive position. He remembered that he still had one arrow in his quiver. The man drew a sword, and Malach realized it was the sword he had been looking for. The man grinned evilly and the flickering light on the man's one eye only made it look worse. Malach heard a bark and yell as the second man found out how untamed Skie was. For a split second, the man's smile left his face, but it returned as he heard his companion was still up and fighting. He took a menacing step forward.

"You are outmatched, boy," he spat. "Now you will pay for taking my eye."

Malach was poised to meet the man's first attack when a deafening roar shook the house. It was like time had stopped. No one moved an inch. Everyone listened for any clue to where the roar came from and what had made it. Malach thought that there was something familiar about the sound but couldn't place it. After almost a minute, they didn't hear anything, and the man started to advance again. The roar came again, and this time, it sounded like it was right outside of the cottage. Malach moved, using the man's distraction to his advantage. Rushing forward, he pulled the last arrow from his quiver and stuck it into the man's good shoulder. Malach sidestepped around him but held onto the arrow as he did. Once behind him, Malach levered the arrow up, causing the man extreme pain. He put his knife to the man's throat and turned him around, steering him by pulling on the arrow. The man howled in pain and dropped the sword in his hand. Malach silenced him by digging the knife into his throat, drawing a trickle of blood.

He took the man into the sitting room and found that if he had moved any slower Skie would have been killed. The second man had gotten the upper

hand and was standing over Skie's unconscious body about to plunge his knife into her side.

"Drop the knife!" Malach commanded. The second thief looked up before he finished his blow. He saw Malach and the knife at his leader's throat and dropped his own weapon.

The door to the cottage blew inward with such force, it was ripped off its hinges. Malach capitalized on the distraction by pushing the man toward the door and running to Skie. He kicked the second man away from her as he sheathed his knife and hoisted her onto his shoulders. He didn't know what was going on, but he wasn't going to stick around to find out. He ran through the workroom and kicked open the shutters. He heard a scream from behind him, which only made him move faster. He climbed through the window and ran to his right, moving toward the road and the front of the house. As he rounded the corner, his feet stuck fast where he stood, and he froze as fear gripped him. He couldn't move! All he could do is watch as the demon from his dreams stood pulling the one-eyed man out of the cottage, clutching his body in its claw.

Chapter 3

Amara crouched behind a cart in the alley, waiting for her chance to strike. She had a small knife on her, but she hoped she wouldn't have to use that. She was watching the man on the other side of the street as he sold food from his stall. He was her target. She saw a group of people approaching his cart and knew this would be her best chance. She stood up and as they passed the alley she was in, she fell in behind them.

As they walked up to the man's cart, she pushed up into the middle of the group. One of them protested, but she ignored them. Instead, while everyone was busy talking with the vendor and each other, she grabbed an apple from the cart and slipped it into her bag without anyone noticing. She pretended to study the oranges picking one or two of them up before pilfering one of those as well. Just as the crowd was starting to disperse, she spied the man's coin purse. He had left it unguarded on his cart and was talking with another customer on the far side of the cart from her. She cautiously looked around to make sure no one had already noticed her and slipped the purse into her bag as well. She turned and started walking away with what was left of the group she had walked up with.

"Hey!" The merchant called.

Amara forced herself not too look back or bolt. She had to appear calm. She might still be able to get away. The merchant didn't know who had taken the purse. A hand fell on her shoulder and spun her around.

It was the merchant.

“Girl! Did you steal my purse?” he said heatedly.

“No!” Amara replied a little too quickly. “I didn’t steal nothin’!” She tried to look shocked and confused but ended up looking startled and guilty.

“We’ll see about that!” The merchant was not going to let her get away.

“I didn’t!” she exclaimed again, thinking quickly. “But there’s someone stealing it now!” She pointed at the empty stall behind him.

When he turned to look, she kicked him hard in the shin and took off down an alley. She could hear the man’s angry shouts behind her, but she knew she could outrun him. He was fat and slow. She just hoped that the city guard wasn’t around to catch her. She just had to make it to the guild, but if she was being chased by the guard, she would have to lose them first.

She chanced a glance behind her and didn’t see anyone. *I’m free!*

She thought as she grabbed a storm drain and shimmied up to the rooftop. She hopped along the rooftops until she was right at the entrance to the Shadows of the Earth’s den. She climbed down from the roof and opened the cover to the sewers. She jumped down onto dry ground. This part of the sewer, diverted by the Shadows of the Earth, Shadows for short, still smelled like a sewer, but you didn’t have to slog through waste to get around. Whoever had come up with the plan was smart. Instead of just damming up the sewers, they rerouted and diverted all of the sewer lines away from this area and then set up a series of pipes to take the waste from each house and push it to the main lines that hadn’t been diverted. All of them emptied into the river that went out to sea.

The short run and climb had her sweating, and she slipped off the rags that she had on over her head. It was warm outside, as it was all year round in Caister. She had on a small, black, tight-fitting shirt and shorts, like most of the women of the Shadows wore. They were easy to move in and covered all the important parts, while allowing the most ventilation. She had worn them ever since she could remember.

She wore the rags over them to sell her street kid look. Sometimes she would get coins or food from passersby just by begging, most of the time she had to steal it though.

Amara moved toward the main chambers of the Shadows. She had a good haul today, which meant she would get to eat. This was the first time she had stolen money, so she didn't know what her cut would be. If there were enough coins in the purse, she might even get to eat tomorrow too. She found her handler, Lawdel, and walked over to him, pulling out the fruit and coin purse. He looked at her and arched an eyebrow.

"What do we have here?" he asked, a smile playing across his face. "You going big on us? Started stealing more than just food?"

"It was there and open, so I took it. That's all." Amara defended herself.

She had never stolen a coin purse before. In fact, she had no idea what any of the coins meant or were worth. She knew that silver was better than copper and that gold was better than silver but how much each was worth was a mystery to her.

"Calm down, little one," Lawdel chuckled, he had a warm smile and a kind face. He was taller than her, but most people were.

Amara stood about five foot tall and was very thin. But that was mostly because she had lived with the Shadows since she could remember. They told her that they found her in the street in the dead of winter. They told her when they found her, her extremities were already turning blue, but that she had been wrapped warmly in a blanket. Lawdel had taken pity on her and took her into the sewers to live with them. Since then, she had been under his charge. They had said she was only a few months old when they found her.

The Shadows had just started the chapter in the town of Caister back then and didn't have a lot, but they made sure that she stayed alive. Since she was able to walk, they had been training her to steal and the art of the Shadows. She could run, jump, and get around objects much faster than most of the thieves in the guild, and she was just learning to pickpocket, which she found was much easier than she had assumed. She was almost eighteen and was still learning when and what to steal. She didn't mind stealing, and the

guild always gave its members a cut of what was stolen, but that didn't always mean that she ate every day. She was very thin and fit, but everyone in the Shadows was that way. Except Dros. He was their bruiser. If there were any problems needing muscle, he always took care of it.

Lawdel had poured out the coins onto the table in front of him. There were a couple of gold coins, but most were silver or copper. Lawdel whistled low. "Girly, you hit the big one! I think it's time for me to teach you about the money system." Amara huffed and plopped moodily into a chair across the table from him as he put one of each; copper, silver, and gold coin, in front of her.

"Do I have to do this now? I need to get back out there. I want a full stomach tonight," Amara complained.

Lawdel raised an eyebrow, "Well, guild standard for an apprentice is twenty-five percent of coins brought in and half of the food. If you knew what money was worth and how much you could buy you would know that you have the money to eat for three or four days just from this haul."

Amara's mouth dropped open.

"So, do I have your attention now?" He continued before Amara could answer. "Now, you see the little copper coin?"

She nodded.

"That one isn't worth much, but you can buy a loaf of bread for about five of those. This silver one is worth ten of the copper coins, and the gold is worth five silvers. So how many copper coins does it take to make a gold?" Lawdel had been teaching her numbers and how to read for a few years now, and he was always trying to get her to use them so she didn't forget.

She had to think for a moment but not as long as it used to take her, "Fifty! It takes fifty of the copper to make a gold."

"Correct! Now I want you to count out your coins and I'll help you find out how much is yours. Do you still remember how to do percentages?"

"Yes, Lawdel," she said, exasperated that he thought she might have forgotten. She counted fifteen copper coins, six silver, and three gold. Lawdel

taught her to break all the coins down to copper coins and find out how many she got and then take the correct coins out.

This was usually done by the handlers, but he said he wanted her to know, so she always knew people were dealing straight with her. She would get equal to fifty-six copper coins. Lawdel gave her sixteen copper coins and four silver coins.

“Why didn’t you give me one gold and six copper?” Amara asked curiously.

“Because you aren’t going to be buying anything that is worth more than a silver,” Lawdel patiently explained. “You don’t want to carry that many coins on you. I would carry no more than a silver and five copper unless you have something in mind to buy that is more. You don’t want to make the same mistake as this guy and leave all your money in one purse. He got all of his money stolen.”

She nodded in understanding, “But where do I keep the rest? I don’t have one purse, much less two of them. And if I leave it in my room, there is no guarantee that someone won’t steal it.”

“That is a good point.”

He handed her the now-empty purse that she had stolen and walked to the room where extra equipment was kept. She followed as she slid her coins into her new purse. He opened a crate and Amara saw a pile of purses in it.

“We keep all the extra purses that have been taken and sell them with the rest of the things we pinch,” he told her. “Pick one.”

She looked through a few of them. Some were thin and wouldn’t last long, and some were so gaudy that they would be stolen within a day of her having it. She picked a medium quality one with good stitching and a beautiful rose etching on the leather. Something that looked nice but wouldn’t stand out.

“Good pick.” Lawdel smiled down at her.

She poured the coins out from the first purse and picked out a silver and five copper and put them into the one with the rose on it. She replaced the

rest of the coin in the first purse. She put both purses on her belt for the moment and followed Lawdel out of the room and back to the table.

“Now you have to figure out where you will keep your money and what to do with all of your extra time,” Lawdel again smiled at her.

“I think, with my extra time, I will find where to put my purse. I don’t trust some of the thieves here.” She stood and grabbed the apple for her half of the food she had taken.

“Good girl!” Lawdel stood with her. “Glad you haven’t forgotten all of my lessons. It’s still early, and you don’t have any reason to take a job, but there is a job tonight that would be ideal for your first one. If you want it, we would need to go over the details this afternoon.”

Amara thought about it for a long moment taking a bite out of the apple. “What’s the job? I won’t kill anyone.” She warned.

“Lord of hell girl, we aren’t assassins!” Lawdel exclaimed. “The number one rule of the guild is ‘kill only in defense,’ and that’s as a last option. You should know the rules, girl.”

“I know, I know. Sorry, I wasn’t thinking.” Amara hung her head. How could she have forgotten?

“Tell me the other rules of the guild,” Lawdel demanded.

Amara sighed but had known this was coming, “Rule one: don’t hurt or kill unless your own life is at risk. Rule two: don’t put your brothers and sisters of the guild in danger or interfere with a job unless it is to protect the party involved. Rule three: get in and get out without being seen and without leaving any evidence you were there, unless the job requires it.”

Amara recited these from memory. They had been drilled into her head since she was a child. She couldn’t believe she had, even momentarily, forgotten one of them.

“Good,” Lawdel said. “Now if you complete a job successfully, you get fifty percent of what the customer paid, and if you can steal more, we get to keep the item you steal for the job. Then you get twenty-five percent of what we sell it for, if it sells. I will keep track of your items for you. As for what the

job is, you would be breaking into the mayor's house and stealing a ledger that will be in his desk. The ledger you're looking for is the one that shows all of the expenses that come in and out of the city. The manor has little security, and there will be a ball that his whole family will be at tonight. There will be no one in the office, so you should have plenty of time, and if you miss the timing on the guard rotation, you will be fine to wait for the next one."

"That sounds like it still could be dangerous." Amara put her hands on her hips. "Why would I take this job after I got enough to live for a few days?"

"As I said, this heist is going to be one of the easiest to start you out on, and we might have to wait months for another one this good," Lawdel insisted. "And it probably would be even more dangerous. However, you're right. This one isn't without its dangers. If you're picked up in the mayor's office or leaving with the items, you will be jailed for no more than a month since you have no priors. If you're caught getting in, then the punishment will be less than a week in jail. But a lot of other jobs you would be killed on sight or hanged later if you are caught."

"So, you think I should take it?" she asked.

She always trusted Lawdel. He had never led her wrong and had been more of a father to her than anyone even though he had had no idea how to be one. He had taught her everything.

"Yes," he said flatly.

She liked that about him too. No beating around the bush. Just facts and short opinions when asked.

"Fine, I'll take it. I have to go stash my extra coin and get something to eat, and then I'll be back to go over the plan."

"That's my girl!" Lawdel awkwardly hugged her, or maybe it was just awkward for her. "I already picked it up from the board." He produced the papers from inside his cloak.

"You rogue!" Amara punched him in the shoulder. "How did you know I would take the job?"

Lawdel rubbed his shoulder, wincing. "I know you better than you think, girl. I have one last thing for you before you go. I got these for when you took your first real job." He moved to a sack that he had sitting beside the table and pulled out a piece of black leather wrapped around itself. She could see metal rods sticking out of it but had no idea what it was. He handed it to her still wrapped. She took it from him and look at him quizzically.

"What is it?" she asked.

"Well unwrap it, and you will find out," Lawdel responded.

She started unwrapping it. It looked almost like a corset someone would wear under a dress, but it had four ornate, metal handles sticking out on each side. The handles angled up slightly and laid almost flush with the leather.

"What in the world is this torture device?" she enquired, holding up the thing.

"It's a hard leather-armored piece with the ability to hold sixteen six-inch throwing daggers," Lawdel said excitedly. "Unfortunately, I could only afford eight daggers." Lawdel's face drooped a little.

"Oh!" Amara exclaimed and re-examined the leather with newfound appreciation. She had never had anything so nice. She pulled out one of the daggers and tested the balance. It was almost perfect, and she knew this present had cost Lawdel a great deal, maybe everything he had.

"This is so nice! I can't accept this." She tried to hand it back.

"Oh no, you don't. I won't accept a no for an answer." Lawdel pushed the leather piece back toward her. "Besides I can't take it back. I bought it off a sneak that pinched it from a leather shop. He probably has already spent the money."

"But this cost you so much!" she pressed.

"Not as much as you would think. It's your first job, and it's bad luck to go on your first job without a present. I know how well you like your throwing daggers," he responded.

"Fine," she said. She really did want to keep it, and she loved the filigree on the handles. She hugged him this time. It wasn't even awkward for her, she

was so excited.

“Let me show you how it goes on,” Lawdel took the leather from her and walked around behind her. He helped her lace it up and showed her how to do it herself for the next time. She went over to the clean well in the center of the room and looked at her reflection in the water. When the leather was properly laced, the daggers laid almost flat against her sides. It would be hard to detect it under a cloak. Now all she needed was a cloak. She didn’t have one, and she would need one for tonight.

“I need an outfit,” she said, voicing her thoughts. “Do I have enough money for one?”

“Don’t worry,” Lawdel said. “The guild gives you one for your first job, but you will have to pay it back as you go. They will take it out of your jobs at a minimum of twenty-five percent of your cut for each job and the same if you sell something. It will only take you a few jobs to pay it back.”

He saw the disbelief on her face and guessed what she was thinking. “Welcome to the middle class where you work for everything you own but you get to eat every day.” He chuckled as she smiled at him.



Amara left the Shadows with her head held high and excitement in her heart. She had already played tonight’s job out in her head more than twenty times. She was ready for her first job and the benefits that it would bring. She glanced at the large clock tower at the center of the city. She still had a few hours until she had to be there, but she wanted to go watch the mayor’s manor and make sure the guard rotation hadn’t changed. She was dressed in her form-fitting, matte black leather armor and had blacked the knife hilts so nothing would reflect or shine in the moonlight and give her away while she infiltrated the manor. It made her a little sad to rub the black soot on the ornate hilts, but it couldn’t be helped.

She stopped at the market and picked up some cheese and bread. She actually could pay for the items and it strangely felt good to do so. She put the food into a pocket of her satchel and ascended to the rooftops again. She was moving along the rooftops toward the manor and decided she would scout around the manor to make sure their intel was correct. She knew the location of the office would be correct, but there might be a better direction of ingress and egress than they had chosen for her.

She made her way around the manor. It was a three-story building that wasn't overly gaudy, but still way too big for any one man. At least she thought it was. It was more or less square with a good size lawn and a large stone wall about fifty yards away from the building. Most of the guards patrolled the yard but there were a few inside the manor as well. There were two gates in the wall that provided easy access to the manor. One was a simple iron-barred gate, the other was a massive wooden gate that rose higher than the rest of the wall making the stone rise over the wooden door. This, of course, was for show and didn't provide any extra defense since no one could be stationed on top of the wall. There was also the smaller gate at the rear of the manor. This gate was for show and vanity only, and Amara couldn't stand it.

I'm glad we are stealing from this pompous idiot tonight, she thought to herself.

She had heard the mayor was arrogant and haughty, looking down on everyone, even if they were not below his status. She didn't think he was evil; he just didn't have his priorities straight, though there were rumors of corruption. She thought he was the perfect mark since he wouldn't be able to admit that he had been stolen from. It would make him look bad, and he treasured status among all else.

On the ground floor of the main building were several entrances. On the back side, there was a small servant's entrance and two other entrances. One was on the side for the family to use to get to the grounds and there were some chairs and tables for their use. The other was the front entrance which was, in some ways, as gaudy as the front gate. It wasn't as massive as that gate, but it had a large set of double doors trimmed in gold and large handles that appeared to be gold but were probably just dipped. Amara doubted that the

mayor would actually have paid for solid gold handles, but they were polished and gave the appearance that he had more money than he did.

She found a good place to watch the window that had been selected for her. It was on the side of the manor that didn't have a door. That meant that the guard's rotation would take them by this side less often. There was a gutter that was attached to the wall that she was promised would take her weight. She settled in and pulled out the bread and cheese. The cheese tasted so good that she almost forgot about the bread entirely. It's not like she had ever truly been starving, but since she didn't get to eat some days, having a full belly and rich food was glorious. She sat there for about an hour, watching the guards move and noted that there was only twice in that hour that a guard passed by. And they were only ten minutes apart. That meant that there were a whole forty minutes that there were no guards within site of the window. It was perfect.

Amara decided to err on the side of caution and move to the opposite side of the manor. She found a place to sit and watch that side to use up the last of her daylight. She saw guards everywhere. The first side was the obvious choice. She figured that the other three sides were more heavily guarded because they had ground floor access. The only thing she wasn't told was the guard movements *inside* the building. They were given the guard movements on the outside from a week ago. There had been no guarantee that that wouldn't have changed by now, but they were never given the other guard rotation. That was the only wild card for the night. She assumed that most of the time the guards didn't patrol the halls as often on the inside of buildings as much as the outside.

She decided to move back to the side with the window that she would enter from and again settled in to wait for her time to move. She needed to wait until it was too dark to easily see her and just before the guards changed shifts.



Amara climbed down from her hiding spot. It was time to start her first heist. She had timed it just right, and she was a little proud of herself. She had waited for one of the last rotations of the shift and there were no guards in sight. She had a thirty-minute window to get in, fifteen minutes inside the building, and another twenty or so to get out. As Lawdel had told her, if it took her longer to find the ledger, all she would have to do is wait a little longer for the guard rotation. This was a pretty easy job as far as thievery was concerned. All she had to do was get in, get the ledger, and get out. There were only two wild cards in this gig. One, she had no solid intel on the guards' movements in the manor and two, she didn't know where in the Mayor's office the ledger would be located. It could be anywhere in his office, but she was assured it would be in that room.

She leaped from her perch and hit the ground running. Just before reaching the wall she made a jump and caught the top of it. Her fingers latched onto the edge of the wall and she pulled herself up and over before anyone on the street could see her. She landed behind some bushes that lined the wall and checked around before she moved on. There was no reason to be reckless. There was no one in sight, so she made a dash toward the wall. Again, she jumped as high as she could and grabbed the storm drain. She made sure she had a firm grip and then started pulling herself up, hand over hand, her feet braced against the wall for support.

When she reached the window's ledge, she leaned over to look inside and cursed. The shutters were drawn, and she had no way of telling if anyone was just inside the window or not. She knew that this window opened to a hall and there could be anyone walking by at any time. She had a thought and leaned a little closer, putting her ear against the window and listened. She didn't hear anything but that didn't mean much. She could open the window and run right into a guard that was stationed there and was just not making any noise at the moment.

Well, I can't sit on this ledge all night, she thought. She pulled one of her blacked knives out of its sheath. She slipped the knife in under the window and flipped the latch that held it shut.

Too easy, she thought. They really need to make these windows latches more secure.

She pulled the window open and almost lost her balance as it popped loose. Her knife slipped from her hand and she watched it fall to the grass. She cursed under her breath.

The knife had luckily fallen point down and sunk into the earth up to the hilt. She didn't know whether to go back to get it or not. It would cost her time and it wasn't sticking too far out of the ground. Nobody would notice it. She decided that she would press on and get it on her way out. She mentally kicked herself for being so careless, but it seemed to turn out fine.

She carefully pulled the curtains aside and looked in. The hall was dark, and the lamps on the wall were not lit. She was at a turn in the hallway. To her left, the hall continued along the outside wall with several doors on the right. Straight ahead the hall went for about twenty feet and stopped at another junction then turned to the right and left. There was no one in sight.

She slipped in the window and pushed it most of the way closed. She crouched down and she turned and look around a little more intently. Still nothing. She moved straight ahead to the junction and peeked around the corner to the left. Nothing. She turned and looked to the right and just about screamed. She clamped her hand over her mouth and froze. There was a figure standing at the end of the hall looked directly at her. The figure didn't move an inch. She stood there, frozen, for what felt like a lifetime, neither she nor the figure moved. She looked closer wondering if there was any way that the guard hadn't seen her. She slowly, inch by inch, moved back around the corner. Once she was out of sight of the figure she moved to the inside wall and let her heart settle. The figure was guarding the most direct route to the mayor's office. She worked up the courage to peek around the corner, the figure was still standing there in the exact same position.

No one stands that still, she thought, looking closer. She suddenly felt extremely foolish. As she looked closer, she realized that what she thought was a person was simply a suit of armor.

Who puts a suit of armor in a hallway? Amara walked up to the suit, careful to make sure there was one else around, still feeling a little paranoid. *The mayor must think this makes him look important or rich because he could never fit in this, much less carry it.*

She knocked on the breastplate and a hollow, metallic sound emanated from it. She needed to get moving though. She couldn't stand there playing with a suit of armor all night.

She moved down the hall to the left and up the stairs to the next floor. There were no windows on this floor, which is why she had to enter the mansion from the floor below. This floor housed the Mayor's personal office as well as a sitting room and conference room. The Mayor believed that having windows in the place of work distracted from work, which she thought was a most absurd belief. This also made for an extremely hot work environment. Because of that, the ceilings and floors had vents in them to allow the air to flow a little from the floors above and below it. As she walked up the stairs though, the air became hot and stifling. The vents didn't seem to help too much, though the cool night air would soon find its way into the house.

She had to be careful about any sound that she made because it would carry through the vents to the floor above and below it and bring the guards down on top of her. She moved quietly through the hall and to the door they said would be the mayor's office. She tested the handle, and it was locked. She pulled out her lock pick set and set to work.

She couldn't recall how many locks she had picked with this very same pick. This had been her first set of picks that Lawdel taught her with. Her first lock took her more than an hour to pick, but Lawdel said that she had a gift for it. She didn't believe him until he had told her that his first lock had taken him almost a whole twenty-four hours to get through. She had asked some of the other guild members and found out their first lock had taken them much longer than hers. From there, her skills had only grown.

It only took her a few moments before the door emitted a soft click and she was in. She opened the door slowly to find the cleaning closet. She stood there dumbfounded for just a moment before she realized she must just have

the wrong room, she must have been told wrong. She shut the door and move down the hall to the next door and picked its lock. She opened it to find the actual mayor's office. She let out a sigh of relief. She stepped into the room and closed the door softly behind her.

Who keeps the door to a cleaning closet locked anyway? she asked herself.

She looked around the room and took stock of everything. The mayor had a huge wooden desk that wrapped around the room and took up most of the space. It went from the back-right corner to the opposite corner, up the left wall, and jutted out just before the door. She couldn't believe what she was seeing. The desk was made of some dark, imported wood and must have cost a small fortune. There were papers stacked on most of the desk's surfaces, but a small workspace that was kept clear for the mayor to get his work done on. That's where she'd start.

There were two sets of drawers to either side of the workspace, and both had a lock set into them. She had never seen a lock like it before. There was only one lock, but all three drawers were stuck shut.

She hoped it was the same principle as the other locks she had picked and set to work on the right set of drawers. It was just like the normal tumbler locks that were set in the doors and she opened it without any issues. The top drawer held all manner of writing paraphernalia: paper, charcoal, ink wells, and a stick looking thing that had a sharp metal end on it. There were no quills, so she assumed it was for dipping in the ink and writing with. She put that into her bag. She wanted to take a closer look at that later; it might be worth something.

She moved the second drawer, but when she opened it, she couldn't believe her eyes. It wasn't the ledger, but it was something she wanted nonetheless. Two bags of coins were sitting there in the drawer. She put those as swiftly and quietly as she could into her bag.

When she pulled the third drawer open there were just papers in it. No doubt important ones for them to be locked up, but it wasn't what she was looking for, and she didn't know enough to know which papers would be useful.

Amara moved over to the second set of drawers and picked the lock on that set. She opened each one of those not finding anything useful in the first two. She opened the bottom drawer and found the ledger. She quickly thumbed through it and confirmed it to be the ledger. She stuffed it into her bag, but as she shut the drawer she noticed something odd. The bottom of the drawer on the inside was higher than the bottom of the draw on the outside by almost half the height. It was a false bottom.

She moved her hand around the inside of the drawer and found a latch that held the false bottom in place. She moved the latch and pushed on the back. The whole bottom swiveled up and revealed a second ledger and ten more sacks of coins. She almost gasped. She had never seen so many coins in one place, and she almost missed it. She almost went back with the wrong ledger. The one in her pack must be a fake to throw off any would-be thief. It almost worked.

She grabbed the coin purses and the second ledger but before she could put the first ledger back, she heard pair of footsteps coming down the hall. She replaced the false bottom and shut the drawer. She looked up as the footsteps reached the door and watched the knob turn. She looked around her for a hiding spot, but the only place was under the desk. She moved as quickly as the now heavy bag at her side would allow her to.

She heard the door open and she heard a few whispers between the two people at the door but couldn't hear what was said. Then she heard a giggle.

That's strange. What would a girl be doing up here? Amara thought. Footsteps rushed in and the door shut behind the pair.

"Dain, what are we doing up here? This is my father's office," the girl said. "If he catches us here, he will have you hung!"

"Your father is not here. There is no way he'll ever know," the voice that must have belonged to Dain said. "Besides, it wouldn't be fun if there wasn't a little danger."

At that point, Amara heard the couple kissing and wanted to throw up. It was hard to deduce where this was going, and she had no way of knowing

how long this was going to go on. She really didn't want to listen to their lovemaking. So, she pulled her pack off her shoulder and stood up.

"What in the world is going on here?" she barked as if she were the one in charge.

Her plan was a little risky, but she couldn't wait for someone to find the couple and search the office. She picked up the boy's shirt that had been discarded on the desk and started playing about with it, shouting about telling the girl's father and how much trouble they would be in. She shooed them out of the room and threw the shirt at the boy. The couple tore off down the hall without looking back.

Amara moved quickly back to the desk and grabbed her bag from underneath it. She had to get out of the manor before the couple realized they had been duped and called the guards. She ran as quietly as she could with her bag full of clinking coins and got back to the window in about a minute.

She opened the window and looked out. Her stomach just about dropped to the floor. A guard was standing directly under the window holding her dropped knife in his hand. She ducked back in the window as he started to look up but there was no way she had time to close it. He would soon see the open window and call the other guards. She was panicking now. She knew she was caught and there was nothing she could think of to get out.

Calm down and think! She told herself and forced her breathing to slow.

She stuck her head out the window cautiously, but the guard was gone. She looked to her left and caught a glimpse of him moving around the corner at a normal pace. She looked to her right and there were no guards in sight. She breathed a sigh of relief and thanked whatever god or demon that was helping her.

She sat down on the window sill and swung her leg into the open space. She pulled her bag out along with her, careful not to let herself get off balance by her heavy load. She grabbed the storm drain with her left hand and scooted herself off the ledge. For a second, she was pulled down by the weight of her bag but she caught the storm drain with her second hand and slowed her fall. She felt a sharp pain in her left hand but couldn't stop to look now.

She let herself drop the last five feet and dropped into a crouch. She thought one last time of the knife and vowed to never make the mistake of dropping one again. She looked at her hand that was now throbbing and she saw a cut that ran the width of her hand and was bleeding badly. No time to bandage that. She would have to leave it for now and clean it later.

She sprinted for the outer wall and just as she was pulling herself over. She heard the ringing of the alarm. She leapt off the wall and disappeared into shadows in the alley across the street.



Amara jumped down into the sewers and bounced into the Shadows' main chamber with all the pride and excitement of a two-year-old who just successfully acquired a cookie without being caught. Lawdel was waiting for her and the relief was evident on his face. He would never admit it but she knew he had been worried about her.

All he said was, "Did you get the item?"

She pulled out the ledger in response. He took it from her and thumbed through it.

"Any trouble?" Lawdel asked, turning and walking away without waiting for a response. He seemed a lot more professional than usual. Not as warm toward her like he usually was.

"No, Lawdel," Amara jogged to catch-up and then fell into step with Lawdel. "I mean there were a couple of small issues but nothing I couldn't handle."

"I hear the alarm was sounded at the mayor's mansion?" He questioned her, still walking across the main chamber.

"Yes, but..."

"But nothing," Lawdel cut her off. "We've heard reports of two eyewitnesses who said they saw you and there was one of your knives found

at the manor.”

“I know but...”

“But nothing!” Lawdel said again. He turned to look at her, this time stopping her in her tracks. “If the job had gone any more wrong, you would have been caught. You’re lucky the eyewitnesses were young and couldn’t remember you very well, and you’re lucky the guard didn’t look up when you had the windows wide open gawking at him.” Lawdel began to walk again. “That guard would have looked up, but for some reason, he thought that someone was calling for him.”

“Why would he have thought that?” Amara was confused.

“Because yours truly *made* him think that,” Lawdel responded. “Some quick thinking on my part, if I do say so myself.”

“So, you were out there watching me?” Amara said, getting a little frustrated.

“Of course I was!” Lawdel sounded appalled. “What kind of handler would I be if I just let you run solo your first mission? The point is that you need to be more careful. You don’t want to have a theft go wrong like it very nearly did twice tonight. After you’re caught once, you are in the system and the guards will know your face. It could limit what jobs you can take.”

Amara smiled. She knew that Lawdel was more worried about her than he let on and was covering it by acting like he only cared about her career. They got to the meeting room and Amara went in first. Amara was shocked to see the Shadows’ leader sitting at the table.

She stopped in the doorway and Lawdel ran into the back of her knocking her off balance.

“For goodness sakes, girl...” Lawdel’s voice trailed off as he saw the master.

The master was smaller than people would expect and, most of the time, wore baggy robes with his hood up. Amara had only seen him once in her life, and he looked the same then as he did now. She couldn’t see anything under the robes, not even around his neck. The other thieves told stories

about how he had narrowly escaped a fire but had nasty scars. That's why he always wore the robes, even in the dead heat of the summer. The last time Amara had seen him, he had come to watch her train when Lawdel was teaching her to throw knives, and he had a kind soft voice. She liked him then, and he seemed to be a good leader. They said that he could steal the pants off the Captain of the Guard.

"Please come in and sit with me, Amara," he said, his voice was smooth, calm, and gentle.

Amara moved to the table and sat down. "Thank you," Amara said, and then added quickly "sir."

Lawdel took a seat to her left.

"No need for the formalities," the master replied. "We are going to be talking about your bright future as one of our members."

Amara was not sure what was going on and she didn't even have the benefit of reading the master's face to find out. She assumed, though, that the master would be able to hide his intentions even if she could see his face.

"Amara," the master was looking right at her, "I watched you during this first job that you pulled."

Lawdel and Amara looked at each other and Amara could tell that Lawdel didn't have a clue that he had been there.

"I'm very impressed." He continued. "You were a little careless with this knife though." He pulled the knife that she had dropped out of one of his sleeves and put it down on the table. "And also, you should have waited to leave the room until the young couple had finished their business or discovered you on their own. However, that was a decent plan that you had by making them think that you were supposed to be there when they weren't. Unfortunately, they were able to piece together a decent likeness of your face."

He pulled out a rolled-up piece of parchment from the other sleeve and opened it on the table. It had a drawing of her face. It wasn't a perfect likeness, but it was close enough that the guard might be able to tell it was her.

“Luckily, the guard that had this drawing will lose it somewhere and won’t be able to find it. He won’t want to admit the mistake, but sooner or later, he will have to tell the Captain and they will have drawn a new one from the memory of the guard who heard the witnesses. Time will have passed and memory fades, so you know how that will go.”

She did. The guard would only get about half the account right and the other half make up. The new drawing of her would look nothing like her at all. She was amazed at how quickly the master had moved to swipe both these items and still make it to the Shadows’ lair to meet with her after the theft. But, she guessed, that’s why they called him a master.

“So, let talk about your final failure.” Both Amara and Lawdel looked at each other confused as the master continued. “In your hurry to get out without being caught you left the window open and left a bloody trail down the storm drain. I could not both clean up after you and take the items back that would put you at risk. This means that if we ever need to get to the mayor’s office again it will most likely not be possible to use the same entry point. It will be more difficult and dangerous. You have inadvertently put your brothers and sisters in the Shadows at risk.”

“Now hold on a minute,” Lawdel said, leaning forward in his chair.

Amara cut his outburst short, “It’s true.”

Amara was ashamed. She hadn’t even thought of that at the time. All she thought of was getting out. She had put future heists at risk. She had nothing to say against his accusations, so her only course of action was to face it head-on.

“I did do that. I should have taken the few seconds to close the window and safely make the descent,” She held out the hand that she had cut. She had taken the time to clean and bandage it before coming back to the guild.

Lawdel gaped at her for a moment then let out a sigh and flopped back into his chair. “Girl, what have I told you time and time again.”

“Slow down, even when leaving with the loot. If you go too fast, you make mistakes,” Amara recited. “And I know that that’s what happened. I made a mistake.” She turned to the master, “I promise it won’t happen again.”

“I think that, in the end, it was a small price to pay for the success of the mission, but I do appreciate the honesty. It’s hard to come by in a thief. Please, show us the goods that you managed to obtain.” The Master gestured toward her bag that was now sitting on the table.

Amara undid the leather thong that held the flap down and upended the bag onto the table.

Lawdel let out a low whistle, “Now that’s a lot of coin sacks. How much is in there?”

His question sounded more like he was talking to himself rather than actually asking anyone in the room, but Amara answered him anyway, “I’m not sure. I haven’t even got to look in them yet.”

She could see now that there was a difference between the two coin purses that she had gotten from the first drawer and the ten that she had gotten for the false bottom drawer. The two purses that were in the first draw were well worn and very thin in a couple of places. The ten purses that were in the false bottom looked like they had just been bought yesterday. She reached for one of the new purses.

“Hold on, young one,” the master said. “Why do you think the purses look differently? And why do you think the mayor would have all of his purses in the false drawer and not the treasury?”

Amara thought for a moment, “The purses could be more worn because they are simply older, but I think that it is because they are handled more. Maybe because those two are the coins that the mayor is legally allowed to use in office. As for the new looking purses, I would think they wouldn’t be in the treasury and not as worn for the same reason. These are the coins that he has acquired illegally. He couldn’t take them to the treasury because he would be questioned, and he didn’t take them out often because he didn’t want anyone to know they were there.”

“I think you are correct,” the master agreed. “Now you can open them and find out how much you have acquired.”

Amara took the first worn purse and dumped out the coins.

They were all silver. The second of the worn purses held all copper, and eight of the ten new looking purses were gold coins. The other two new purses were also silver and copper, respectively. Amara's head was spinning as she and Lawdel counted the coins. She was rich. She could do anything with these coins that she wanted to. She couldn't believe it. Not only did she get her cut of the coins she had stolen but her cut of the price of the job. She couldn't fathom being that rich. In a day she went from hardly able to feed herself to being able to pay for just about anything she wanted.

Lawdel and Amara counted to coins under the watchful eye of the master. There were twenty gold coins in each bag, and thirty silver and fifty copper in each of the other bags respectively. They totaled it up to be one hundred and sixty gold coins, sixty silver, and one hundred copper. So, her cut was forty gold pieces, fifteen silver, and twenty-five copper.

The master stood and picked up the two ledgers. "Your outfit will be paid in full by your payment for the job. If I can get double for the job like I think I can, you should get a cut off of that as well. I will let Lawdel know through the normal channels. Oh, and from this day on you are no longer an apprentice. Farwell, Journeyman Amara."

The master walked out the door.

Amara looked at Lawdel and squealed, "I'm a journeyman now!"

"Not just a journeyman," Lawdel corrected, "the youngest journeyman in the history of our guild. Now you receive thirty percent of the gold taken in."

She hugged him, grabbed the three purses off the table that held her coins and ran out the door. She had to put her money in a safe place. She couldn't believe how much her life changed in just one day.

"Wait!" Lawdel called just as she went around the corner.

She turned around and popped her head back around the corner, "What?"

He held out his hand. In his open palm were her knife and a few more coins, "The extra five percent for your job since you are a journeyman and your knife."

She snatched the knife and coins from Lawdel. "Thanks!" She ran back out of the room.

She headed for the watchtower where she kept all of her important things. The watchtower was a part of the old city wall and wasn't used any more. As the city expanded, a new wall was built and the old wall left to crumble. At the top of the tower, there was a landing that was open to the elements. It had a trap door that led to the stairs that would take her to ground level. The door on the ground level was always locked.

She went there often just to look at the stars. On warm nights, she would sometimes sleep there on the roof. There was a stone under the awning of the roof that was loose, and she hid her few belongings there.

She scaled the tower and peeked over the wall of the landing. No one was there, like normal. She pulled herself up onto the wall that rimmed the landing. She stood up and, holding onto to roof so she didn't fall, leaned out, using one hand to pull a stone out of its housing. The tower's roof was hollow, and she kept three things in there other than her coins. First was the blanket that she was wrapped in when the thieves found her, the second was a pouch of her first set of throwing knives, and the third was an amulet that she assumed had been her mother's. She would have worn it wherever she went, but she lived with thieves, so she learned to take precautions.

She pulled out the amulet and hung it around her neck. And she put the purses that contained her newest coins in the hole. Pulling two gold coins and adding them to the few she had left in her purse. She replaced the stone, climbed down, and walked into the town market as the sun rose.

Appendix A

Amara: uh - m AH r - uh

Anaue: AH n - oo - eh l

Angelcross: AY n - g eh l - cr ah s

Ariel: Ah r - ee - uh l

Arjun: uh r - j UU n

Auron: AW - r ah n

Barclay: b AH r - k l AI

Bartholemu: b ah r - th AH L - uh - m oo

Borden: b OH R - d uh n

Bray: b r AI

Brightwood: b r IY t - w uu d

Broak: b r OH k

Caister: c AY - s t eh r

Camael: c AA m - ay eh l

Cathetel: c AA th - eh - t eh l

Celewen: s EH l - eh - w eh n

Daniel: d AA - n ih - y uh l

Darhian: d AH r - ee - eh n
Daziar: d ah - Z EE - ah r
Deadpost: d EH d - p oh st
Demien: d eh m - EE - eh n
Dros: d r AH s
Durvain: d R - v ay n
Dyeling: d IY - l ih n g
Elzrod: EH l - z r - ah d
Emmiline: eh m - ee - l EE n
Enziarel: eh n - z IY - ah r - eh l
Fairdenn: f AY r - d eh n
Fury: f UU ry
Grent: g r EH n t
Honora: h aw - N OH - r ah
Jarsar: j AH r - s AH r
Jecrym: j EH - c r ih m
Jennari: j eh n - ah r - ee
Johm: j AH m
Kargod: k AH r - g ah d
Kath: k AA th
Lanifair: l AA n - ih - f ay r
Lawdel: l AW - d eh l
Lindow: l IH n - d ow
Malach: M AH L - ah k
Marena: m ah - r EE - n uh

Maria: m ah - r EE - uh
Marletta: m AH r - l eh t - uh
Newaught: n OO - aw t
Pangor: p AY n g - oi r
Prinna: p r EE - n uh
Ragewood: r AY j - w oo d
Ravenbard: r AY - v uh n - b AH r d
Raza: r AH - z AH
Reckoning: r EH - k uh - n ih n g
Reybella: r ay - B EH L - uh
Reymold: r AY - m oh ld
Shasta: sh AA - s t uh
Skie: s k IY
Storm: s t OH r m
Tresch: t r EH sh
Togan: T OH - g eh n
Viessa: v EE - eh s - uh
Wervine: w R - v IY n
Westbay: W EH - st b ay
Whiteshade: w IY t - sh ay d
Xylissa: z ih l - IH s - uh
Yargate: y AH r - g ay t
Zahra: z AH - r uh

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The idea for this book came to me while I was sitting through a Sunday morning sermon. My pastor mentioned what it might be like if we had to physically fight the spiritual battle that is waged every day. As the idea for this book blossomed in my mind I have to admit I didn't listen to a word he said after that. This book has been a three-year journey for me and I want to thank all the people in my life that have encouraged me through this process, whether it was just listening to an idea that I was working on or simply an encouraging word. Also, I would like to thank my parents for instilling in me the love for a good story. There are three people that have really done a lot to help me through the writing, editing, and publishing process. First, I need to thank my editor, Jonie. She has single handedly turned this book from simply good, to excellent. She did an excellent job editing and she was so easy to work with. There were a few places in the book that would have made no sense without her help. The second person I need to thank is my good friend and fellow author Cole Fox. I met him early on when I was writing this story and he has been there to answer all of my endless questions. He even dropped everything to "talk me off the ledge" so to speak during the publishing process when I texted him out of the blue. If you enjoy SciFi look him up. I am so very much a fan of his works. The final and probably most important person would be my wife. She has done so much for my writing career. She has listened to my endless rantings about ideas for this and many books to come. She has patiently, and sometimes not so patiently, endured me waking her up in the middle of the night as I write down things that have come to me mid-dream. She has encouraged me throughout the process of writing, editing and publishing and many, many more things. I love her more and more each day

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About the Author

H. L. Walsh lives in Sherwood, AR but travels with his wife who works as a travel nurse. They relocated about every three months to a new location.

H. L. has been writing since he was fifteen but only published his first book in 2019. He is a self-employed author and enjoys reading multiple genres including fantasy, science fiction, the classics, etc.

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