

CHILDREN OF DARKNESS ©

Crimson Tide

A STORY BY AIDAN, AKA THE ANTI-VALENTINE.

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PROLOGUE

The City is always in constant turmoil. As much as the Hammerites or the Baron and his City council like to think they have control and that order prevails, the reality is contrary to their beliefs. It has always been politics versus religion, and it always will be. The war on crime sometimes isn't as reliable as the civil wars between the Order of the Hammer and the City Guard. Even though the Hammerites do what they are supposed to, and go beyond the call of duty, the people don't like their fanaticism and zealously. Society doesn't like to be deprived of its rights or freedom. And then some commend the City Guard when clearly they don't do their job as devotedly as they should. There are so many different and largely opposing factions, groups, and guilds, and rightly so, the city is rich in diverse cultures and everybody is entitled to have their say. Unfortunately, not everybody appreciates those differences, and that is why the true ruler is no heir, but chaos.

CHAPTER 1

The harsh bitter cold could rip through a person like a blade fashioned like an icicle. It was particularly frigid down by the docks, the jetty decorated with frost. But that was not the only feeling of coldness in the air. By the tavern near the water, two shadowy figures were mercilessly dragging another on the wooden deck. Pleads and sobs were ignored as the death blow was finally dealt. Then, silence. The body was flung over the one figure's shoulder and carried over to the edge. A loud splash as the person was tossed into the sea, and the episode was over. The two hurried off and disappeared in to the night. The town barely stirred as it wrapped its dark blanket around itself, continuing its rest until dawn.



It was a typically miserable winter's night. A thunderstorm overhead echoed across the City, so loud it disrupted thought. Anyone with good sense would be indoors and probably in bed; after all, Aidan was counting on it. He, like any other of his profession wouldn't let a bit of bad weather stop him; in fact, it was only to his benefit.

Aidan was crouched beneath a window sill, looking inside the manor he was about to visit. The coast was clear, and so he waited. An ear-shatteringly loud rumble followed, and Aidan smashed the window with his elbow. Aidan had always loved thunderstorms, and now, even more. He waited, perhaps five minutes, to see if anyone at all had heard the window break, but he doubted it. It was just enough to put a small hole in it, so that he might put his hand through and open the latch, which he did so. He was in.

He quietly closed the window after he settled properly on the carpet. Aidan didn't have the luxury of a fully drawn out map with him, but after a little snooping around, he had been able to draw parts of the place, especially the outside. He was in the east wing on the ground floor, and by the look of things, he was by the stairs.

He carefully surveyed the surroundings, and to the left, out the corner of his eye, a guard walked into the foyer, stumbling around.

"Drunk as a circus bear", Aidan muttered under his breath. The guard was too far away to worry about at that moment, so he started towards one of the doors

along the hallway. He listened, then opened it gently, and peered inside; “Nobody in sight, time to get on with it”. Aidan slipped in to the room, and closed the door afterwards. A quick glance and something immediately caught his eye. A silver goblet was perched on the writing desk by the wall; then, it was gone. Aidan opened his tailored loot-bag, and plopped the goblet inside.

Many thieves in the city had been caught because the spoils of their excursion were heard rattling around on their person. Aidan had taken great care to obtain a medium sized sack, and had lined it with silk and padded it with cotton, creating pockets, so that the loot wouldn't tap around inside. The materials were free, and his handiwork paid off in the long haul.

Aidan exited the room as cautiously as he had entered and crept towards the next door, getting nearer the foyer. He opened it even more warily, now that he was a little closer to the guard. Inside, there was only some paper on the table, and there didn't seem to be anything of worth. So he retreated back in to the corridor. He entered the foyer. It was well designed; paneled oak walls, beautiful paintings hung above plush settees, and a colossal crystal chandelier hung above a lavish rug in the middle of the room. And Aidan had to be sure not to forget about the guard too. He knew that using his short sword or his dagger that was sheathed on the side of his boot would be too noisy an execution. Instead he opted for his blackjack. Carefully he drew it from his side and snuck up behind the oaf, stood up slowly; hoping the bones in his legs wouldn't give him away, and came down hard with a mighty swing to the back of the head. There was the familiar enlivening glee, as the recipient crumpled in a heap on the parquet. Aidan grabbed hold of the body and dragged him off to the room he had just come from. The room wasn't as empty as it had been before, although there was still nothing of worth in it, as far as he was concerned.

Through the double doors, it seemed like another dimension. Such opulence, brilliant hues strewn across the room, which looked like what Aidan would dare call a living room. It really did come alive; the animals mounted on the walls might have had something to do with that. Aidan felt a childlike spark as he mingled and danced among the shadows, a quick step to the right, to avoid the light from the fireplace; like stepping over moss in between the cobblestones, a great game that children would play. He spotted a couple of silver tumblers and a carafe set on the table in the middle of the chairs sorted in a circle like a meeting place.

“Would you like me to take your vessel Madame?” Aidan uttered amusedly. That meant a few more things for the fence which fit snugly in to the pockets in his bag. Then suddenly, a guard passed by on the far side of the room, Aidan could see him through the arcade that led in to another hallway. He ducked behind one of the chairs, and started to make his way over to the bigger seat to

the right nearer the other side of the room. Then to his distress, another guard approached from the other direction.

“Arrh, oh”, the one guard yawned, “I can’t wait until my shift is over.”

“It’s going to be a lot longer than you think taffer. Lady Tame is out for the night, remember?” The other guard replied irritably.

They stood there together for a while, but Aidan had to think of how he was going to get through and into the rest of the ground floor.

“I can’t stand these long shifts; can’t she...stay at home like everyone else?”

At this, Aidan started moving very carefully towards the wall to the left of their presence, blending in with the shadows.

“You know how she can’t be without some charming man beside her, she’s like mutton dressed up as lamb.”

Aidan sneaked across and in to the kitchen as the guard nearest him stretched out his arms, a perfect distraction for the one facing his direction.

“Ho Ho, you’re gonna get it soon, with talk like that. I wonder if I should get something to eat, maybe that would keep me awake?”

Aidan flinched and felt the blood being drained out of his face; he quickly looked for a place to hide.

“Don’t you dare! Remember last time when the Lady came home and found her sweet-meats were gone? Both of us nearly lost our jobs because of you!”

After that, there was a pause, and then they both resumed their patrols along the corridor. If he timed it right, Aidan could get out and between them and see what was further along. He listened to the footsteps, and judged, as he moved towards the door, if they were going to be going off in the opposite direction. He poked his head out slightly, and saw both of them retreat back along their routes. He crept out and turned in to the hall between the kitchen and what must have been the larder. He observed patiently, that beyond, there was the dining room, and chandeliers, candlesticks, and cutlery were abundant.

He made a move forwards, in to the square room, not very big, that led to the doors. The light that radiated from the room was immense, definitely requiring a plan of action. Aidan tried the doors; they were locked. He retraced his steps in to the shadows. “How am I going to get in without those two noticing?”

He did have water arrows but unfortunately, the light source was on the other side of the doors, which were locked. He didn't have a gas arrow, the elemental crystals required to make them were very hard to come by. He had some broad heads; they would cause too much commotion.

"Ah! A noisemaker arrow!"

He took his bow in his left hand, and reached in to the quiver. A shaft, with a tin casing with holes in it was produced. Inside the casing were ball bearings that made whistling and rattling sounds until the arrow landed. He nocked the arrow and pulled back on the bow string. The arrow flew through the air, across the living room and in to the foyer.

"What the heck was that?"

"Hello? Who's tauffing about?" both guards said almost synchronously.

"Who is...whistling at this hour? Isn't that against the law?" the one guard said, obviously very confused.

"Let's go have a look; it might be the Lady home early. She might be at the front door." The other guard reasoned.

Aidan used this time to get to the doors again. He took his lock picks, which were concealed on his left gauntlet, out and proceeded to pick the contraption. In the background he could hear the two buffoons making a scene, raising their voices and arguing. He had plenty of time. The tumblers were clicking, and then it finally unlocked. He opened the right door, and slipped inside. The first thing he had to do, was launch a water arrow in to the fireplace, which, even though warmed up the room splendidly on a harsh winter's night, was going to cost him if he left it burning. A quick aim, and next thing, it was out, the light in the room was significantly reduced. He got on with taking the gold candle-holders, and the silver crockery, at least, the knives and forks. The bag was getting a little full, so Aidan placed the next layer of padding over the other goods, sort of like one of those chocolate boxes that the wealthy had, except these contents were a lot more 'rich'. After he had pilfered most of the valuable items on the table, he noticed that in the corner to the right behind him, there was another of those spiral staircases leading up to the first floor. "How convenient; at least now I don't have to backtrack." He whispered with a smirk.

At the foot of the staircase, Aidan felt apprehensive as he could hear talking coming from upstairs. He daren't trudge up there just yet unless he wanted to join in the conversation; it was doubtful that the guards would appreciate his

company. He hid under the steps instead until someone finally got tired of chatting.

“For guards, they’re a bit too social.” Aidan commented to the darkness.

Footsteps went off in their separate ways, Aidan on the brink of frustration, but kept it well under control. He had to keep thinking about what treasures he might find upstairs. Slowly he ascended to the apex, being sure to keep to the sides of the walls before finally settling in to the dark. The room he was in seemed to be a bathroom, from what he could make out in the blackness. As his eyes began to adjust, he cautiously opened the door leading in to a study. In it, there was a set of drawers, and a writing desk, with a chink of light from the window, illuminating what was on it, a bag. Aidan took it, and felt it; no doubt it had coins in it. He slipped the string knot at the neck; there was easily a hundred pieces.

It was great when Aidan found gold, simply because it was finders, keepers. With goods, they had to be taken in to town, and traded with a willing, independent fence, and even then if the items were too hot, or if they simply didn’t like you, you lost out, and the haul would be for nothing. Since Aidan was alone, and didn’t belong to one of the wardens in the city, things were a little harder, but of course, any profits he made minus the commission, were his. The poor old boys who belonged to the stables or guilds, they got practically nothing, most of it went to the wardens, not to mention, they had restrictions on where they could go, and steal from too.

Aidan picked up a piece of parchment that was under the bag of coins, which he had taken the liberty of placing in his loot-bag. There were names listed, as well as amounts of gold pieces next to their names. All the names seemed to be male.

“Perhaps Lady Tame isn’t entirely lady like after all.” Aidan grinned.

It wasn’t uncommon for nobles and the rich to get involved in some lucrative if...illegal endeavors. Prostitution was rife in some areas, like the docks, but up in high class New Quarter, it was scandalous.

She at least had her standards; most of the names on the list had addresses, but he could hardly make most of the writing out. For a lady, her handwriting was atrocious. It was all very interesting and not to mention incriminating if it fell in to the wrong hands.

“That’s how she affords all of this, hmmm.”

Aidan put the parchment back on the table. He figured she would accuse one of the guards of stealing the gold, seeing as they got a pittance, unless she noticed that a lot of things were missing downstairs too. She would no doubt worry about who would have seen the parchment when taking the gold too. If word got out, she would probably be hauled off to jail and a fate worse than death, being cut out of the city's upper crust.

After his intrigue had worn off, Aidan decided that he should start wrapping the heist up. As he emerged from the study and tip-toed across the hallway, he noticed that he was approaching a balcony overlooking the foyer. He would remember it in case of an emergency. He carried on until he reached a large, sturdy door. He guessed it would be the Lady's private quarters. When he tried the handle, it moved but did not open. He reached for his lockpicks, and worked his charm. There were a couple of guards patrolling the area. They weren't an immediate threat, but it made for some motivation.

"Finally," Aidan grunted as the lock clicked, and he was able to move in to uncharted territory. The room was shrouded in darkness; a window ahead only cast a faint glow through a thick curtain. If Aidan didn't know any better, he'd have thought the Lady was in, but earlier the guards talked about her constant trips at night and that tonight she was out; whether they had an inkling of the truth behind the trips wasn't clear.

Aidan had to somehow find his way around the place, so he made his way over to what he had made out to be a window. He slowly opened the curtain bit by bit, seemingly taking ages, but rather that than alert the guards. After all, they might notice a very sudden change in the amount of light seeping from under the door. Everything was a tad more visible, with a slight blue tint, but beggars couldn't be choosers. Then a most dreadful sight plagued his eyes! He had to hold his mouth, shocked and repulsed by the image. It was a...body, lying in the bed; the sheets ran red with blood! Aidan had no idea what the Lady looked like, but he guessed since he was standing in her bedroom, and the door had been locked, that it was her. Upon closer examination, he could make out it was a woman; pale skin, blonde locks, cold blue eyes. She had been cut from ear to ear, her head barely hanging by a thread, tilted back in to the pillow. Aidan didn't understand; there was no way that they could have missed her if she came home early, there were guards downstairs and outside her quarters and study.

The thundering continued outside, as the clouds burst and rain fell, almost to mark the severity of the situation. The house was still and time had passed considerably since the beginning of his mission; Aidan had no idea when the lady was killed, or how long she'd been lying there. He noticed a book on the

bedside stand, and proceeded to pick it up and open it. He figured it would be relevant if he started from the last page.

It read, "The last few weeks have been very profitable if not tiresome. I don't know how much longer I can go on. I feel as though I'm not safe anymore. Oh, Harold! If only you were here, I wouldn't be in the mess that I'm in. Please forgive me."

From reading the entry, Aidan thought it looked as though she was depressed, maybe suicidal. Maybe she had done it to herself. There was no clear indication of what immense trouble she was in or why she wasn't safe. He figured that 'Harold' must have been her husband, possibly deceased, and she meant that if he were here she wouldn't have to resort to whoring to keep her possessions and lifestyle.

Aidan had sharp eyes, and he couldn't see a knife or dagger on the bed or in her hands to suggest she killed herself. He checked on the floor, then from there began to comb the room; nothing.

"Perhaps someone else did this to her." He said to himself, "How did that someone get in?"

He thought the obvious answer would be the windows, but they were sealed, probably for show just like everything else. They weren't broken either, so nobody could have come through. As he placed the book which he had been cradling in his left arm back down beside the bed, it opened and revealed something. It was an outline of a square key, but the key was missing.

"A key; but which door does it open?"

There was definitely another door that the key would fit; it could have been somewhere else on the other side of the mansion for all he knew. He poked around the room for a start, figuring it would be on an unoccupied wall. He came to a tapestry on the wall; it was very beautiful and evocative; almost like a primitive type drawing. He figured it could be worth some and decided to take it. There was a keyhole behind it, with the key in it, and the wall section was hollow, maybe painted limestone, so it was easily movable. Aidan wedged his hand in the gap, and shunted it to one side.

Concealed within was a secret passageway, massed with cobwebs and damp. As he peeked inside, there was a stairwell at the end that led to the ground floor. As Aidan was about to walk on through, he thought about the parchment with the names on it, maybe one of her 'clients' could be the culprit. Several minutes ago it was worthless although interesting, now it was so important; it was

so ironic. When the guards or servants found the body, they would no doubt get the city guard to investigate, and that piece of paper would be gone.

He went back to the door, and peeked through the key-hole. The coast looked clear, and thought that perhaps the shift was over. So he opened the door, and attempted to quickly go over to the study across the way. Just then a guard came around the corner, but it was too late to do anything. The light from the window gave him away.

"Hey! I see you there! Now you're gonna get it!" he shouted.

Aidan got back through the door and slammed it, hitting the guard square in the face as he tried to pursue him. He dropped instantly, unconscious. Aidan thought about making a rush for the study, but then more guards could be heard on the upper level, searching.

"I see a body over there!" one yelled.

Aidan realized he had to move, there were too many in the entire manor to take on. He fled in to the passageway, took the key from the lock and sealed it behind him so the guards couldn't follow. He locked it too for good measure and slipped the square stone key back in to his pocket. Then he walked along the way to the stairs and proceeded down. It seemed like a dead-end; and it was dank and dusty down there.

"What good is a secret passageway if there is no door on the other end?" Aidan said worriedly aloud, trying to compose himself.

He started frantically feeling along the wall, and came across another key-hole. He took out the stone key and put it in and turned. He pushed and gradually the night-sky could be seen, and the smell after a storm was all too welcome. After he exited, he pushed the wall back, and locked it from outside. He was out in the gardens, hidden from the light, near the front gates. Of course, there were guards gathering there, so he had to find another way out of the grounds. He slipped off quietly towards the far wall and saw quickly saw that there were no other exits. He looked around and noticed that underneath the roof exterior there were wooden beams protruding out, near enough the wall too. He reached in to his quiver, produced a rope arrow, and without slowing, he fired it in to the wood above. The grappling hook head wood ensure that it stuck firmly, as the quick release mechanism loosened like clockwork, and a rope sailed down towards the earth. He jumped on and began climbing up, as the guards started coming his way. He jumped and landed on the wall. He was too illuminated for the guards to miss.

“Hey, there he is! Come back down here you taffer!”

Aidan thought quickly and jumped off the other side of the wall, and executed a break-fall maneuver to reduce the impact that a drop of that size would have on a body. Tumbling onto the grass, he regained his upward stance and started sprinting along the cobblestone street, not even caring to look back.



CHAPTER II

Above his heavy breathing, while dashing down the street, Aidan could make out shrieks and cries, making it known that there had been a murder. Lots of commotion could be heard behind, but he dared not look back or it would surely cost him. He kept on, ducking in to side streets, alleys, until he reached one of his designated hidey-holes, a crawl space underneath one of the houses. It was rare for such an inconvenient failure of foundation to exist in such an up market part of the city. Of course it was probably home to all kinds of insects and rodents; it was either that, or be caught. There was a multitude of footsteps jogging along nearby, armour clanking and swords being drawn.

“Where are you? I know you’re around here somewhere!” a guard declared.

“I was pretty sure I saw him go this way, don’t know where he is now.”
Another answered.

“No, no! It was more of a rhetorical question, you taffer!” he retorted.

Aidan just lay there, knowing he was quite safe and completely hidden, and if kept perfectly silent he would not betray his whereabouts.

After well over a half-hour, things seemed to quiet down and the guards must have headed back to their posts. The City Guard would be on the way by now. Aidan decided to make his move, and retreated out of the dark little hole and headed on towards Auldale. There was a fence there that he could visit, and unload his goods. Carrying all that on his back couldn’t be good long term.

After he had made it to the gates entering Auldale, he crouched behind a wagon filled with crates. There were some guards up ahead, and he had to be careful not to let them see him, especially since he had a full sack on his bag which they would notice. He had to use a different way. He hadn't approached Auldale from the north before; he mostly came across the bridge from Old Quarter. He looked at the wall of the building near him, and then glanced upwards, and saw that the roofs could take him across and he could easily make his way to the park at least, and from there he could make it to his fence. He dug his fingers in to the stones, and pulled himself up until he was able to mantle up onto the flat roof. He stepped lightly right to the opposite end, and when he was sure he was unnoticed, he jumped to the other roof. He was sure to listen to the guards and would time his movements exactly.

As he took a shortcut through the Auldale Park, he saw two figures huddled on a bench. Getting nearer, he could see they were intimately stroking each other, he could also see a big purse full of coins, resting on the seat. He knew they would not even bat an eyelid; they were so engrossed in their play. He snatched it and made off with it, exiting the park. Aidan made it a policy to never let emotions get in the way of things. His father had always told him that.

After a short while, Aidan confidently emerged from the shadows and strolled to the side door of the fence's residence. He knocked softly in a rhythmic pattern, a sort of password. Old Barry was always careful. A thief's pawn would not be subject to favourable behaviour if caught. The ongoing disagreement between The City Council and The Order of the Hammer meant that they disputed over whom would try and punish criminals and their associates. The City Guard would most likely put you in prison, probably Pavelock. The Hammers would take you up in to the mountains, to Cragscleft, and you would stay there, working in their factories. A few of Aidan's acquaintances over time had been arrested, some by the City Guard, others by the Hammers. All were never seen again.

Barry opened the door ajar, peeking through, "Just a second", he muttered.

The door came open and he motioned for Aidan to get in quickly.

"So, you again eh? How goes the thievin'?" he asked with a slight smile.

"Not bad." Aidan responded, and at that he loosened the straps and put the sack on the table, as he sat down on the wooden chair.

"Let's have a look." Barry said, as he got his spectacles on, the lenses reflecting the light from the candle in the background and highlighting Barry's grizzled, craggy features. He sifted through the bag, "I've seen some loot-bags, but

never as smart as yours you know." He commented. "Where did you get the stuff to make it?"

"Borrowed it, I guess." Aidan said with a smirk.

Barry looked over at Aidan and let out a slight laugh. Everything he did was slow, meticulous and drawn out, even his laughter.

"Nice haul. Some gauntlets, silverware, a carafe, a couple of candle holders, ah, aren't you a romantic." He chortled.

Then he lifted out the tapestry that Aidan had nabbed from the wall in Lady Tame's room.

"Wow, this is something." He said with his eyes widening. "I like thieves who appreciate fine art like this."

"So, are we in business?" Aidan asked, holding out his hands.

"Oh, absolutely; as always, lad," Barry said assuredly. "I can give you the usual for the goods, say fifty gold each for the goblets, a hundred for the silver, another hundred for the candle holders", he paused, "As for this thing here, I'm sure I could give you a fair price", as he held up the tapestry in the light. "Four hundred." He said as he glanced back at Aidan.

"Sounds good", Aidan agreed.

"Good. Well, here we are", as he quickly sorted some coins in a large drawer and placed them in a small bag, shunting them over to the awaiting hands. "Make sure you get some food with that eh."

"I will." Aidan said, as he took his loot-bag, and headed out the door, back in to the street.

Aidan was hardly up for the long trek to South Quarter, where he had an apartment, but he felt tired as it was, and if he slept in an alleyway, he would be robbed, arrested, or killed.

Four hundred seemed like good enough payment, plus the other two hundred and fifty meant he could have enough for food and some equipment, if he needed it. And he also had the money from the lovebirds in the park, and of course, the bag from the manor, all in his loot bag. He hadn't opened his mouth about the murder. Word got around, and he knew it. He'd known Barry for a while in the trade, always thought it odd that he resided in Auldale. Of course he, like anyone in the trade, had another little place to go to if he was in trouble. He was obviously well-off, enough to own a place in Auldale, and he'd

probably made all that money doing what he did best. But even so, Aidan had learned not to trust anybody; a restless cynicism that had plagued him for many years and at some point had persisted so relentlessly, tearing him apart, and he had gone in to hiding for several years when he was younger, before resorting to thievery.

Even though knowledge was valued, and it always had been throughout history, in certain circles, it only led to bad things. It was best to just stay out of it. There were plenty of murders in the city anyway, and Aidan tried to convince himself that this was just another victim.

South Quarter, home. It had been quite a walk, but the sight of his room up ahead, made it a bit easier to keep on. He got through the door of the inn, and stomped up the stairs, all care for silence was gone now, and Aidan was overcome with sleep. He unlocked his apartment door and staggered in, closing and relocking it. The sounds of the city were starting to rouse. By that time it was nearly dawn; Aidan slept during the day, and worked the night shift so to speak. It was sometimes painfully lonely; having no friends, no relatives close by, he was alive, but yet, not living. He was looking to change all that one day, if ever he had enough money or sense to move on.

The bed creaked as he fell onto it and was instantly swept away, in to oblivion.



The docks were getting mighty busy now, ships coming in to port, shipments being transported to the warehouses. The overpowering smell of sea-salt and noxious fumes permeated the morning air. Roland had arrived early, before most of the others, and had gotten stuck in, determined to make a decent morning's work before going off for his break. After hours of heavy lifting, his back was in knots, but he endured it, knowing that many were just waiting to take his place if he was laid off. He couldn't let that happen. If he lost his place at the docks, he lost out on making something extra by helping smuggle items for certain shady, but generous types. Most of them were foreign, which he tolerated; he didn't much care for the people in the city. Just lately, he had seen some new faces, very secretive, minded their own business. But then, Roland had guessed that if you were smuggling goods, you weren't going to tell everyone anyway. But their crates only ever came in, none ever went out. He was very observant, but never told anybody about his business on the side.

The whistle blew, and he emerged from the crates and walked over to the jetty, while the others all headed straight for the tavern.

Roland watched the ripples dance in the water, the noise of the drunken sailors and dockworkers perpetuated in the distance. Often the two groups would get rowdy and fight one another. Roland preferred to sit quietly and look out to sea. He'd always wanted to be a sailor, have his own boat. Those dreams wouldn't come true in the city; neither the Navy nor the local merchant ships would allow him on because he was foreign.

He looked in to the water, gazing at his reflection; dark hair, even darker eyes due to lack of sleep. There was something wrong with the face though; contorted and swollen, putrid; and as he was leaning to closely forward, he lost his balance, and fell in. As he came up for air, swinging wildly with his arms, the thing that had allured him so, was now bobbing violently in the waves; a person floating dead in the water. He swam urgently for the nearest ladder that would allow him to climb back to the deck above. All the commotion had attracted some of the other dockers, and eventually, the Harbourmaster, who was recently put in charge of the docks.

"What's going on here?" the harbourmaster's voice bellowed, as it cut through the laughter, which fell silent as it bled out.

Roland said nothing, and proceeded to pull himself onto the deck. The Harbourmaster gave him a kick, and he fell back down in to the water.

"Swim when you're on duty, will you?"

"There's a body in the water, sir!" one of the men cried out.

The HM looked over to Roland spluttering in the water, "Are you responsible for this utter brutality?"

Roland shook his head.

"What were you doing in the water then, boy?!" he shouted angrily.

He came closer and peered over the edge of the wooden planks and saw the bloated body being swept over by the waves.

"By Karath-Din! Quickly, get that thing out of the water; we can't have that in the docks! And get that animal out and hand him over to the city guard!"

Roland was grabbed by two dockers who proceeded to drag him to the front gates. Once there, they signalled for the officer who was on duty that morning, patrolling the dangerous area that the docks or "Wayside" as it was more formally known, was.

"Hey, officer!" one docker shouted in his deep voice.

"Yes?"

"Got something for ya. This kid murdered someone down by the docks."

"Really? Well, we can't have you on the streets. Hand him over."

The dockers didn't so much hand him over as they did throw him to the ground. They walked off, eager to resume their day's work. Roland was now in for it.

"Come here!" the officer said as he grabbed him by the arm, pulling him up, and began walking, tugging him along.

"So, killed someone, did we? Well, it's off to Pavelock, where they'll take care of you!"



Alesia sat beside the brook, combing her golden hair, the warm afternoon sun softly glinting overhead. She always thought that the sun at that time of day was much more natural. It had rained heavily during the night; the grassy bank slightly dampened her dress. It was already so aged and patched together with hide that she hardly cared. She could hear the voices of the creatures filling the air in the distance and of the tribesman from her village not far off, speaking in their archaic broken language.

But yet, despite the tranquillity, she sensed a foreboding feeling of chaos. It was in her blood to detect such things. Her father was a Pagan shaman, but her mother had been a man-fool, a common city-head, which probably accounted for her looks of near normality instead of the usual look that pagans had, dirty and dishevelled. Most of her kind never ventured outside of their territory, for fear of man-fools, or being killed by other tribes. It was in their blood. She, on the other hand had gone beyond those borders, and into the city, seeing as she could easily be mistaken for just another person. Some of them were just as badly dressed and some were even filthier. She was intrigued by their society, their beauty and wealth.

She rose and started to head back to her village, the howls of wolves signalled nightfall was approaching. On her way back, there was a feeling that grew inside her. Fear; it was so sickening that she had to hold her head, pulsing ever

so painfully. Her vision became blurred, and she started to see...the village, the cries of suffering, and wicked flames.

She fell down for an instant; the bombardment of thoughts had exhausted her, as she rested against a cold rock. She had to regain her strength and make it back to the village to warn her people.

Alesia's limbs were lead weights, her spirit was willing, but her flesh was weak. She trudged through the grass, ascending the steep rolling hills. She was too late. It was as her vision had shown; destruction rained upon the settlement. The houses, weak, as they were constructed from their environment, burned and fell quickly. There were explosions, and fiery torches that emitted throughout, but she could not see the source. Stones and debris fell out of the sky, killing those that weren't caught in the blaze. They all ran, misguided, but were struck down by the magic, something she had never witnessed before; the power. She stood, horrified, tearfully watching her place of birth come to ruin before her. She had to find her father. He was always in his quarters. She raced over to what remained of the arch that led into the living quarters, dodging the falling timber and slinging vines that set alight anything in their path. As she got closer to his destination, she heard definite screams of anguish, and what was worse, she felt the pain ripple through her body too. The strong palisade walls obscured her view of the interior, and the gate was locked. Her foolish father was always demanding privacy, and forbade anybody to know the secrets of the shaman or the magic that he knew; for fear that they would be learned by others in the tribe, or worse, fall into the hands of their enemies, possibly even the man-fools. He was in there, and he was in peril. She tried to knock the gate down, not out of ignorance, but panic, it had made her lose sight of her mere normal strength for a diminutive girl.

"Father! Can you hear me?" she shouted, struggling to make her voice heard above the roaring fire, and smoke billowing throughout the abode.

"Gets you out of here, Alesia! Goes you to the city, you might be safe there!"

"Father, open the gate!" she cried.

"I can't! Leaves you now!"

Alesia did not want to leave her father at that moment, and realized that she needed to get in the room. She used all her might, and cast a spell, and watched as the vine crept all the way down from the burning rafters of the rickety old building. She began to climb, ignoring the coarse feeling of the vegetation against her flesh, and made it near the top. She looked down, but didn't see a place to jump onto to. Then, before her., as she peered over the

top of the wall, she saw her father struggling, seemingly bound to a pole in the middle of the square room.

She looked again, and saw a dark figure below.

"You think you have power? You will never know the power that my kin and I hold! No, you never will!" the figure decreed as he waved his arms, loudly reciting an incantation, summoning some force. As he did, the force knocked Alesia off her vine, and she fell to the grassy floor.

She lay in a state of semi-consciousness, her adrenaline still pumping. She heard the thump of her heart beat, and the loud crackles, followed by distorted screams. Things started to clear, and by some driving force, she sought the hatch, on the ground that would lead to the outside. She fell down the rocky slope, tumbling down and down, until being ejected on the other side, at the foot of the hill, near the river where she had been earlier.



CHAPTER III

The wind was howling and carrying on so much, that Aidan relented and finally closed the window. The fireplace crackling was the only noise in the small apartment, and Aidan liked it that way, and didn't care for the uninvited guest outside the window earlier. He sat on his comfy, old chair reading; peace and quiet. Aidan liked the early hours of the morning such as this, when there was no noise, no voices, except maybe if he laughed light-heartedly at one of his books. He could write, read or day-dream in pure tranquility. If it weren't for the fact that he would probably be mugged or murdered, he might consider going for a walk. Even though he was a thief by trade, he still had to be careful and not become a victim himself. If he went out to thief at night, it was always planned. Wondering around aimlessly on a morning walk, even with a blackjack or a dagger for protection from common thugs would probably get you noticed by the city watch anyway; how ironic. No, he had to be a lot more careful than that. He didn't lead a normal life like everyone else. At least when he was in someone's house or perhaps an exquisite mansion carrying out his deeds, he

was still safe, in a way. Guards or servants were no problem to avoid. And sometimes, just sometimes, if he was feeling rather confident and whimsical, he might 'stay' awhile at whatever place he was. He wasn't rich, far from it, but he could feel what it was like for one night, luxury. But he definitely didn't want what came hand in hand with being rich. They were all so superficial and arrogant, nobles especially. He didn't believe that just because of a stupid title, that it made them a better human being. He believed that it was only the status and the money that kept them within 'high society'. All that wealth, the balls and functions they attended, he didn't know whether he should be envious or not, until he convinced himself that it wasn't all roses. The scandal, the drunkenness, debauchery, the crowds all talked about it like they admired it all; bunch of fools. He purposely didn't pay attention and either ignored them completely if he ever saw them in the streets, or cast them a spiteful glance while head held high to mark that he wouldn't lower himself.

The town clock struck one. That morning, he planned to do a little shopping. He needed some more water arrows after the job he did the night before, and not to mention another noisemaker and rope arrow. The one rope arrow he used, he couldn't retrieve, seeing as he had all of Lady Tame's guards after him.

He suited up, and took his gear and loot-bag with him. Aidan knew the streets would be rife with city goers returning home, hopefully with their wages in their pockets, seeing as it was the end of the month. That was, unless they hadn't spent it all down at the tavern, or gambling.

Outside, the stillness was interrupted only by the smell. It had an intoxicating odour that inflamed Aidan's nostrils. There had been a massive fire somewhere. Its overpowering effect fueled him, and awakened his senses with every inhalation. He started walking down the side-streets, keeping to the shadows all the way to the black market. He could hear footsteps, some being those of the city guard, others belonging to unsuspecting soon-to-be victims. He peaked around the corner, and saw a shadow on the ground approaching, getting nearer. He waited, and then, when he was sure there were no others, he leapt out, with his dagger drawn. The figure stumbled backwards a bit, taken by surprise, but then, completely unpredicted; he charged and tried to hit Aidan with his big right fist, which he avoided with a quick dodge. The man ran straight into the wall, Aidan ran and barged his shoulder right into his back, sending him back against the wall, only to slump onto the ground. Aidan had to catch his breath. Although the altercation hadn't taken more than several seconds, he too had been caught off guard by the man's sudden dash towards him. Whoever he was, he was a big burly man, something he hadn't been able to guess by looking at his silhouette. He dug into the man's pockets, pulling out a necklace.

"Either he was bringing it back to his wife, or he was trying it out for himself."
Aidan remarked as he walked off.

Minutes later, Aidan stuck to the shadows and entered the door leading into Fenwick's. Fenwick was a quiet sort, not really cheerful or forthcoming like Barry, but he always had what any thief was looking for; although Fenwick was also a careful sort, a trait which he did share with Aidan's pawn. He had a front, a perfectly legal tool shop, even with a stable where he would tend horses that were about to throw a shoe, or mend saddles. He kept all of the 'tools of the trade' in the back, and the door to it was under lock and key.

Fenwick looked up, as Aidan strolled towards him.

"Oh, hey" he said.

"Hey Fenwick, I need some tools."

Fenwick glanced again and then set off to get the key. He opened the door to the 'vault', as Aidan liked to call it, and ushered him in. He locked the door behind him.

"I've heard things about you lately." He said grimly.

"Like what?" Aidan asked, turning around.

"Word has it you murdered someone."

Aidan's stomach went in knots, thinking about what his reply would be.

"That's a lie."

"Maybe so, but, the fact is, the city guard are looking for you."

"How do you know all of this?" Aidan replied rather irritably.

"Come on. I'm involved with all sorts of types coming in here all the time. I hear them talking."

"Look, there was a murder, but I wasn't the one who did it."

"Doesn't really matter, only option you have right now is to hide for a while. They're going to search your place, you know."

"Shite!" Aidan cursed.

"Better take what you want and go." Fenwick said, before unlocking the door, and tending to the shop.

Aidan took some water arrows, rope arrows, and a noisemaker, plus some broadheads. It looked to him as though it was an emergency, and he needed more than he thought he would initially.

Back in the store, Aidan put a bag full of coins on the table, and Fenwick took them and slipped it inside and locked the drawer.

"Now, go!" he said, waving him off, obviously wanting to get rid of the notion that he was aiding and abetting a criminal; a thief, and now a murderer.

Aidan hadn't a clue where he would go. He didn't have another home, like some of the more prosperous thieves or fences. If it was true, that they were looking for him, he knew he couldn't stay on the streets, couldn't run for long. Since he didn't belong to one of the wardens' stables, he couldn't rely on bribery to get him out of the situation.

For killing a noble, the punishment would no doubt be execution. He kept on moving, keeping it in the back of his mind. For one thing, if he was to survive, he needed money.

"I think it's time for some retail therapy."

Aidan walked past the houses, despite the open windows. Thieving in South Quarter was quite pointless, because even though it was densely populated, most of the people who lived there were low income earners, or even thieves themselves, and the thieves definitely kept their 'possessions' locked up tightly, and if they were smart, in a hidey-hole not easily located. He knew that he didn't have time to waste, and had to get as far away from South Quarter as possible.

The ever present smell of fire overhead created a foreboding sense of apprehension, quickening the steps, instilling urgency in him. He saw the gate leading to the Stonemarket district, and promptly headed through. Plaza was full of taverns, and inns with rooms to let, and Proper had businesses, many of them entrepreneurial, instead of industrial, which of course meant easy access to lots of loot on the premises. Aidan knew there were also plenty of alleys and side-streets; perfect for losing any city guardsmen. It was virtually in the centre of the west side of the river too, which meant it had many exits leading to other districts.

He sidled up to the front entrance of one of the local inns, 'The Jackpot'. Aidan smirked, and thought that with a name like that; it sounded more like a gambling den. Making sure his hood completely covered his head, masking his features; he walked in, and was suddenly caked in light from the chandeliers and candles. At the counter, the innkeeper nodded as Aidan approached.

"I'd like a room for the night."

"Sure, that'll be twenty gold."

Aidan sent the few coins he had left sliding over to the other side, appearing from under his leather gauntlet.

"Up the stairs and to the left, yours will be the one at the end."

"Away from all the civilized folk." Aidan thought, finishing his sentence.



Inside Aidan's apartment in South Quarter, several city guardsmen were rummaging around.

"How's it coming men? Find anything?" Captain Manning's voice boomed above the racket.

"No sir."

"Well, come on! We are in the living room of a murderer! How clean can he be?"

The men carried on, when he suddenly exclaimed, "Hang on! Stop! We've searched this bloody place over and over. Try something different. He must hide something somewhere. In all my years in the service, I know these characters like my own sons. Try turning items, look for switches, damn it!" he shouted, most likely waking up the entire block of houses.

Several minutes later, he went on a tirade, stabbing almost everything in sight save for the officers in the room, and during the process, poked a sizeable hole in the bookcase next to the fireplace. He could see something through it, and threw the case to one side, spilling all the tomes onto the floor.

"Ah! Look here men! It's his stash. Look at all this, arrows, little devices. It's our man. I want him found now."

The officers left the house, Captain Manning at the helm, as he asked several tenants of Aidan's whereabouts.

"I haven't seen that man for days," said one infirm woman, "Come to think of it, I've never seen him in the daylight at all."

"I'm pretty sure he was here earlier. You might try Stonemarket if you think he's trying to flee," said her husband.

"Right men, we'll go through the rest of South Quarter, and then try our luck in Stonemarket like that man suggested," he commanded.



Roland lay in darkness. He had no real recollection of the past several hours, since he couldn't see throughout that time. He'd been blindfolded, beaten, and then eventually, when they had grown tired of their games, they kicked him in to a cell. His entire body ached and wrenched with pain, as he got onto his hands and knees, feeling his way around, trying to find the limits of the pitch black room. Then there was the sound of keys rattling, and the cell door opened, letting in a dim light, which closed soon after, but the light was still visible. A hand grabbed his head, and took the blindfold off. There was a lamp carefully perched on the stone slab that was meant to serve as a bed in Pavelock. After the quick glance toward the lamp, he was grasped harshly by the guard and slammed against the wall.

"You are going to die in this place, you know! You bloody murderer, you killed that man down by the docks! By thunder, if it were up to me, I'd have killed you on the spot if I'd been there!" He shouted angrily.

He booted Roland right in the ribs, and spit on him as he left, leaving the lantern on the slab, and the door slammed shut, the lock turning afterwards.

"They probably left the lantern just so I could see how horrible this place is." He said quietly to himself, as he wiped his hands on his shirt, looking at the appalling condition of the floor, covered in feces, and cringed at the bitter smell that accompanied it.

He sat up and listened to all the sounds within the place. Groans came from the neighbouring cells; people that were left to rot in there, treated like animals, and fed like they were less. Roland recalled nearly been thrown in prison before; he'd had plenty of close calls, like when a night watchman by the docks had discovered him pilfering some of the cargo before leaving to go home. The

chase was long and tiring, winding through the streets, until he finally gave up and used the vase in his grasp and smashed it over the pursuer's head.

But those things were nothing as serious as this. Even though he hadn't touched the man in the water; he would pay the price for it.



Alesia walked mournfully towards the city's borders. It had been a terribly long walk, and the pain in her body was not the only kind she felt. Her heart was aching. To think that her father, her family, the whole tribe had been murdered by whatever it was that dare commit such atrocities. Up ahead, the stone walls towered above the lake nearby, casting a reflection, like a mirror. If only their civilization had been so well protected, if only they had been so cautious, and mindful of danger. All along, they had laughed at the manfools, calling them ignorant because of their fear, when in reality, who were those that were ignorant and suffered in the end? She wiped her eyes, and carried on. It wasn't long before she would be inside. Her father had said she would be safe in the city, almost as if he had known that for many moons. Perhaps this would be her new home.

She found her usual place, a small hole, behind some bushes and large stones that led into what the city-goers called Old Quarter. She got on her hands and knees and began to crawl through, onto the street on the other side. Many large, old buildings surrounded her, and it was easy to get lost if it was a pagan's first time there, but she come many times before, mostly to sample what life there was like, to be civilized. The taste of the food was one memory that she would always hold.



Aidan was half asleep in his room at the Jackpot, knowing full well that soon he would have to get moving. He only had a little time to rest, and that wasn't good, seeing as he had hardly got any rest during the day. When he had returned from New Quarter, he tried to sleep, but the constant bombardment of thoughts regarding the murder, and his pumping adrenalin had kept him up right through the day. He was battling himself, trying to stay awake, and yet the linen was remarkably comfortable for such a rundown, shoddy looking room. He could hear the sounds of the city in the background, the activity never ceased, especially on the west side of the river.

As he drifted off, his legs occasionally kicking, waking him up, the noises became louder, closer. He heard the door to the inn being barged through, and instinctively he knew to get moving. He jumped out the window and onto the balcony, hopping onto another, whilst hearing the shouting going on.

"Nobody move! A murderer is amongst us!" came the typically overdramatic hollers, followed by the inevitable rushing, crashing and panicking that usually accompanied a raid, and completely went against the guards' orders.

The distraction of people getting in the way would allow him to escape cleanly. He decided he would resort to using the thieves' highway to evade capture on the streets. They might see him up on the rooftops, but they wouldn't be able to touch him, and even if, by some miracle, one of the clods was able to scale up there himself, he'd be long gone, and no doubt he'd be laughing at the sight of some desperate city guardsman clad in heavy metal climbing, or trying to climb. He'd have difficulty getting up stairs alone.

And sure enough, as he got to his feet on top of the Jackpot, there were shouts by the same folk that had been inside earlier, accompanied by pointing fingers, and the eventual arrival of the bulldogs to investigate.

"I'll get him!" one of them shouted, as he raised his bow.

Aidan started to leg it, but didn't get too far, as he felt a searing pain in his right leg and crumpled. He heard shouting, but it was as if he was deaf, and only felt the building pain in his body. When things came clear and he could all of a sudden hear again, he realized that it was he who was shouting loudly. The arrow had gone in deep, in the blood was starting to pour, filling up the cracks in the stone like tributaries, all converging at one point and rising, bubbling over to form new streams. He tried to make a grab for a healing potion, but another arrow flew towards him. He got up and limped to the edge of inn, and dropped down gingerly onto the balcony on the other side of the building opposite the entrance. He contemplated a bold leap to the awning of the store across the way, but he couldn't run in order to make the jump. Instead, he fired a rope arrow, one that he had just bought earlier, as he heard the footsteps getting closer below. He wasn't safe up there anymore; it looked as if they were ready to kill him if he didn't come quietly, and he had to hurry.

"Damn this leg!" he grunted. He didn't have the time to take a healing potion now, and as it was, the wound wouldn't heal as long as he kept moving. He ran and made a lunge for the dangling rope, but misjudged and fell right from the second story, landing in the grassy bank next to the street.

"Where is he? He was on the roof!" a voice shouted.

"I don't know, maybe he took off and flew up, up and away!" another guard replied sardonically.

"I hate you!" the other one shouted back, "And I hate you too you murderer!"

"Enough, you oafs!" Captain Manning said as he rounded the corner, "What's that rope doing there?"

"I don't know your captainship."

"Well, look you fool, look around you, take your helmet off so you can see!"

The guards started searching, as Aidan lay quivering and cold nearby, and happened to move by mistake.

"I heard that. Do that again." One of the guards asked.

He got closer and closer, Aidan could see him vaguely through the haziness.

"Caaawww!"

"Aaaargggh!" the guard shouted as all the others ducked.

"It was just a taffing crow, now get on with it!" Manning said impatiently.

"I know you're around here somewhere."

Aidan sat up against the wall, and just bided his time, until there was even the slightest opening that he could make a run for it to the entrance to Stonemarket Proper. He got up and anticipated the gap, where he could get away. The guards were going all over the place.

He could hear Manning say something to the archer that had put an arrow in his leg. Aidan didn't dare pull it out; if he did he was even more likely to perish, the blood would start to flow uncontrollably, and healing potions couldn't replenish what blood would be lost, only heal up the area of penetration. He would need plenty of water as well. He had always assumed that the archers in the city guard couldn't hit the wide side of a barn, but some of them were veterans that had actually seen combat, they'd even been in the city army. As for the ones before, they had most likely come from the city circus.

The archer drew back on the bowstring, and Aidan ducked as a flaming arrow was launched into the tree. It burst into flames, and the grass surrounding him

was burning at an alarming rate. They were forcing him into a corner, or more likely, out of it. He didn't have a choice, it was either run, or be burned alive. He felt the heat, and then noticed that his leg was alight. He ran out onto the stones and tried to make it to Proper, but it was no use, there were guards ahead, and they were ready, and the fire was starting to become unbearable. He dropped, and rolled. The one guard came with a bucket of water and drenched him, as they quickly surrounded him. He knew what would come next. The bulldogs had a penchant for beating their suspects into submission. And right they did. They put the boots to him, as he shielded what was left of his body, by curling up in to a ball. One guard grabbed the arrow, and to Aidan's chagrin, twisted it, which made him kick and flop all over the place like a fish. He got up, and out of desperation and anger, he clocked the one guard with a right hook from his gauntlet that had metal rings on the knuckles. That sent him reeling into another and they both fell to the ground, sprawled out. He reached for his short sword and made a swipe for the other one to his left. Manning made a charge, and knocked Aidan down with the hilt of his sword, and that was that, he was out cold. He'd hit his head so hard on the cobbles that he might as well have dived head first off the roof and saved himself the trouble.



Alesia continued down the road, while people carried on, oblivious to what she was. If one of the hammer-heads was to see her, then she would be in trouble. She would be able to recognize them by their trademark sledgehammers that they carried around on their backs, or sometimes used to prop themselves up while they walked, like a cane, and their red tunics, with shiny silver bracers, cuirasses and greaves. And not to forget the red hammer symbol proudly displayed on their chests. They walked with a sense of arrogance and pride that would betray their livelihood, even outside of their uniforms. There was a hammer-head meeting place nearby in Old Quarter called the "cathedral". She had seen the stairs leading up to the foreboding place at the top of the hill. Of course she hadn't dared to trespass on their holy ground as if they would hold no quarter for her, they would smite her down; no magic could hold them off for long. She had even heard from her father in past times, that the hammer-heads also had magic, that some of them used pure magic, even to run some of the city's machinery. Why they had such an inherent hatred for her kind then was not understandable. Were they so different in the end? She wanted something to eat, and tried her usual trick of snatching a piece of bread off of one of the many carts that littered the streets. Just as usual, she was too small and quick amongst the crowd to be seen. She traipsed along, looking at the many shop fronts and interesting people around her, deciding what to do now that she was here. She wished she had some sort of place to go, but she was too afraid to be in any place for too long because of the aforementioned

hammer-heads, that would find her for sure. They were like bloodhounds, once they got her scent, they would turn the place upside down looking for her.

She turned a corner and ended up staring down into the dark alleyway ahead. There were voices echoing from within. Before she could turn and go back the way she came, a form emerged from the shadows.

"Hey, you!" he shouted, and looked to his friend, "Look what we've got here, fresh meat!"

"Look at her, she's pretty!" the other mumbled like an ogre.

They came towards her, taunting her, trying to scare her. She held out her hand.

"Aaawww! Do you want to hold my hand?" He said mockingly.

A bolt shot out in front of her and instantly floored the one thug, and left the other one startled, looking down at his accomplice, with open mouth, exposing his poor dentistry.

The one down on the ground started crying out, grimacing in pain. It attracted the unwanted attention of a nearby metal-head.

"Hey! What's going on over here in the dark?" he shouted.

He bolted over to investigate, and after him came another figure. It was what she had dreaded, a hammer-head out on patrol.

"Leave this heretic to me; I shall end its pitiful existence!" He exclaimed as he shoved the other tin-man out of the way.

The metal-head got back in front and held out a hand.

"Now, now! I saw her first! You can't just go and murder someone like that anyway."

"She is impure! And you are assisting her in keeping her life."

"Listen, the city guard are the ones in control, you hammers should go back to your cathedral, or cragscleft and stay there!"

And at that, a fight between the two broke out, as the hammer came down and hit the other atop the head. His helmet went down over his eyes. The other had his sword drawn and was swinging about blindly, as the crowd either cheered on or hurled insults, mostly at the hammer-head.

“Stick that hammer up your arse!” one shouted, which drew his attention away from the fight.

“What?!”

Next thing, a successful blow was dealt by the other, as the hammer-head winced and fell to his knees.

Alesia tried to start moving off down the alleyway, but then more guards came along.

“Oh no, missy! I think you'd be better off not running.”

Two each grabbed her, as she was frozen, and carried her off through the city-fools, who whistled and called her names.

“So much for civilization”, she thought.



CHAPTER IV

As Roland lay in his cell, frigid and shivering, not only from the cold, but from the sheer terror of what he feared would happen next, there were many sounds of doors being unlocked and slammed, he felt that any minute now, there would be more torment like before with the bulldog that came in earlier. He heard what sounded like sacks being dragged; he was used to hearing sounds like that by the docks. There were more doors being unlocked with keys rattling, and the sacks were now being thrown into cells next to his on either side. Roland crept to the back of his cell, where to his discovery there were bars with open spaces between them, where he could make out a figure lying in the darkness. The image didn't last for long, as the cell door was closed and the jangle of keys echoed again throughout the still musty air.



Aidan lay on his back, limbs contorted, and his eyes open, but blank; if he wasn't blinking every now and then through the blood, one would mistake him

for dead. The arrow was still in his leg; he could tell from the throbbing pain that had made his leg go to sleep. After being shot with the arrow, he'd suffered a fall from a roof, been set alight, been beaten and finally knocked out courtesy of the city's finest. He must have had, in addition to some charring, a broken nose and a concussion.

All his life he'd avoided going to jail, and it seemed that all those years had finally caught up with him. He had finally been brought down by the system, and what was worse, was that those in the know said that the city guard was so corrupt it would have even some of the most hardened criminals taking notes. That is, if they had any paper to write on in their cells. But the truth was there were so many more criminals out on the streets compared to being in jail.

"Hey!" whispered someone to his left.

"What?" he responded, not sure if the words would actually come out.

"Come here."

Aidan dragged himself over to the grate which was barely visible in the low light, seeping in through the cell doors.

"Who are you?"

"A thief." Aidan replied warily.

"I'm Roland, a dockworker," the other man said

"What are you in for?" Aidan asked.

"They think I murdered someone, but I didn't."

"There seems to be a lot of that going around."

"You too?"

"Yes, I was framed for the killing of some rich tart. I happened to drop in at the wrong time."

"I don't want to die, especially for something I did not do." Roland said, worried.

"Well, I'm practically half-dead anyway."

"You speak like you are well-educated, for a thief."

"Probably all the reading I do."

"Eh, quiet in there taffers!" a guard said loudly while poking his face up against the bars of the cell door.

"Looks like I cannot talk anymore." Roland said sadly.

"Don't worry about them. They can't do a thing. Besides, I've taken on my share of bulldogs in the past. Except this time I lost."

"Sorry to hear." Roland whispered. The fear of being beaten by the guard was evident.

"I said..." the guard raised his voice, but was cut off.

"Victor, get up here quick!" someone shouted. There were sounds in the background as though there was some sort of struggle. Victor the guard ran off as quickly as he could move in his armour.

"Hello?" a voice spoke.

"Who's that now?" Aidan said irritably.

"Alesia, I was dragged in with you."

Roland walked over to his slab and got the lantern and brought it over to the bars where Alesia was.

"I'm Roland, and that over there is the thief." He said, with a foreign accent.

"I was thrown in here for defending myself, I don't understand."

"How did you defend yourself?"

"..."

"Alesia?" Roland repeated.

"With magic." she responded sheepishly.

"Pagan," Aidan muttered to himself.

"What?" Roland asked and went back to Aidan's side.

"She's a pagan." Aidan repeated, "They live in the woods outside the city, and sometimes within its walls too. They use magic."

"You do not like them?" Roland asked.

"They don't like us." Aidan corrected him.

"I am not like most of them." Alesia said.

"Fact is most of the city guard doesn't care." Aidan replied.

"Is that what you call these man-fools, city guard?"

"Yes."

"And the hammer-heads?"

"Builder's eyes, don't tell me a hammerite saw you."

"A hammerite," Alesia said to herself.

"Yes, very good, we'll continue with words later. Listen, hammers don't like pagans. They're sworn enemies. You're lucky you weren't arrested and 'tried' by the hammers. They tend to burn pagans at the stake."

"The hammerite and the city guard fought each other to see who would bring me here."

"Really? Who won?" Roland and Aidan almost said in unison.

"The metal-head, erm...city guard," she said.

"Ha-ha! It serves the hammers right. They won't live that down for years. You've got some pretty good names for them. What's that? Woodsie?" Aidan chaffed.

"Thank you." Alesia said quietly. They're just names I use. I didn't know what else to call them."

"I'm tired of having to shout over to you two." Aidan said, while turning his head back which had become sore from straining it.

"Yes, you don't look good anyway." Roland said, holding the lantern up to see Aidan's face.

"They beat me, I told you. I lost"

"How many were there?"

"Five ganged up on me." Aidan said, still looking disappointed.

"The new harbourmaster kicked me around too."

"New harbourmaster? What happened to the other one?"

"I don't know. All I remember is there was a body floating in the water."

"Well, there's your answer."

"Your wounds look bad." Alesia said, sounding concerned.

"You haven't seen the worst of it. There's an arrow in my leg."

"All this time you've been talking, and there's an arrow in your leg?" Roland asked amazed.

"Well, you know, I guess I left that bit out before."

"If I could get there, I could heal you." Alesia offered.

"How?" Aidan asked.

"I can heal people. My father was a shaman. I know how."

"But there are these bars near the ground. It's almost like it is to torment us. We can see each other, but not touch each other," Roland said.

"Easy there, sailor." Aidan said, obviously embarrassed.

"They wouldn't let me be a sailor, or be in the navy."

"Never mind, that's a pity."

They both heard a sound, and some glowing, and shuffling near Alesia's cell. "What's going on?" they cried.

Alesia was standing in Roland's cell.

Aidan was dumbstruck by her striking appearance. For a pagan girl, she looked human, healthy even, her flowing blond locks, and small stature, all perfectly caught in the light of Roland's lantern.

"Oh no, if the guards see this, you've both had it." Aidan said.

There was still a lot of clamouring accompanied by loud noises further up. There was a riot of some sort.

"I can get into your cell now." Alesia said, almost smugly, in her own naïve way.

"Yes, please." Aidan thought to himself.

She took her hands, and placed them on the bars, and mysteriously, vines started to grow on the bars, and began to get larger, and larger, until the bars were ripped out of the stone, and clanged noisily.

"They were weak to begin with." She said modestly.

"Whatever you say." Aidan replied, eyes wide.

She smiled and got near him. Roland came in as well, crawling on his stomach under the small stone arch that was barely a foot of the ground.

"Oh no," Alesia said, astonished, holding her hand over her mouth.

"I've lost a bit of blood. I daren't take the arrow out though."

Alesia got hands out in front of her and summoned up her energy to repair the damage. She pulled the arrow out, much to Aidan's terror. The blood began to flow out of his leg.

"Quickly, please! Or I'll die!" Aidan cried.

She pressed her hands on top of the wound, which evoked even more pain, so that Aidan had to bite onto his hood. There was a glow and a soothing feeling, as the wound began to close, and shrink, like normal, but sped up. Eventually, what would have taken months to heal was better in a matter of minutes. Aidan moved his leg around in disbelief.

"Thank you."

Alesia sat back, "I need to rest. It takes up energy, she said as she lay back on the cold stone."



Drake sat by the window overlooking the bay. He surveyed his territory, as ships came in and out. The door to the room creaked open, and in walked Walter, his aide. He had a slight limp, from fighting in the territorial wars against Blackbrook. That injury had been his ticket home, with compensation.

“Walter, come here.” Drake beckoned softly.

Walter went over to the desk, and looked at Drake, who had his back turned to him.

“Yes, Master Drake.”

“It’s come to my attention that there is a way to tie up some loose ends. We don’t want certain people getting a hold of a particular item of importance.” He picked up his chair as he moved to face Walter, and handled a piece of paper.

“You must go to Pavelock Prison, find a thief named Aidan, and give him this,” he said as he handed the letter over to Walter.

“Tell him he doesn’t really have a choice in the matter.” He shrugged as he continued with the briefing.



Aidan lay in his cell, nearly fully recovered from his wounds thanks to Alesia’s help. She and Roland were back in their cells, seeing as there would be a lot of trouble if they were seen together in the same cell. There were the sounds of doors and rusty gates opening once again, no doubt more folk coming to stay over.

“How long have we been here?” Roland whispered to Aidan.

“I don’t know, about a couple of days.” He replied as he readjusted his shoulders on the uncomfortable stone, and looked at the bars that Alesia’s vines had made short work of.

Footsteps were echoing down the passage as someone approached his cell.

"You've got a visitor," said the guard, sternly.

Aidan got up and went over to the bars.

"Yes, what do you want?"

The man stood there in the dark, holding what looked like a letter.

"Aidan, I've come to give you something," he whispered, as he handed the letter through the bars and looked to his right, to ensure that he was not seen.

"What's this?" Aidan asked, "Proper food, perhaps?"

"No, I was told to give you this. After you've read it, you're to follow the instructions. And Drake said to tell you that you have no choice but to do as it says or you'll rot in here forever." He said smugly as he turned to leave.

"What if I want to rot in here rather than please Drake?"

"They'll make your stay very uncomfortable; I can assure you of that."

Aidan walked back over to the bars.

"Roland, bring your lantern over here." He patted the ground.

"What would Drake want with me, apart from the usual threats to join his little stable?"

"Aidan,

I have a little proposition for you.

I know of your little deeds at the Tame estate recently. I would like to offer you a way out of your situation and into one that will benefit us both. I want you to get out of your cell by any means, and then fetch something that belongs to Lady Tame. Once you have the item, bring it to me, and I'll compensate you greatly, and not to mention, I'll get the city guard off your back. If you break out and are not here within two days, I'll send my men after you. If you decide that you would rather wait it out in prison, be my guest, but believe me, I'll have a word with the warden to ensure that your life becomes a living hell in that place.

Your time is running out.

Drake."

"Who is this Drake you mentioned?" asked Roland curiously.

"He's a city warden. Not like the warden in this prison though. It's a euphemism for 'crime lord'. They control the streets, and now it looks as though they've got the city guard in their pockets, or at least Drake does."

"What does he want from you?"

"He wants me to escape. And I have to bring him something too."

"Aidan. You never told us your name before." Alesia joined the conversation.

Aidan smirked and replied, "I've got to be careful about who knows it. Now look, I'm getting out of here, you two obviously want to come with."

He looked at them expectantly, as they both nodded.

"We're all going to have to play a part in this, and then, when we break out, you can go whichever way you want."

"So just how do we break out, I've never even seen most of the city, let alone this place?" Alesia said with a hint of panic.

"Look, I'm a natural at breaking into places, I'm sure it can't be much harder to break out. I've dealt with guards before. I'll have to find a way to get the keys to this cell off of the guard. Once I've done that, and cleared the way ahead, you two will have to follow quietly behind."

Aidan walked over to the door, and looked through the bars.

"Hey, Victor!" he shouted.

"You what? Who's calling me now?"

"In here! Someone's in my cell!" he shouted, and at that the guard came over, and saw Alesia sitting by the lantern.

"Oh no you don't!" he grumbled as he reached for his keys, nervously unlocked the door, as Aidan moved slightly to one side.

"Hey, what are you doing...", *Thunk*, "Oof!" he gasped as he fell to the ground. Roland stood in the corner having cracked him on the back of the head with the iron bar that had been bent out of place by Alesia's vines two days before.

“Good, well done! Now I have the key ring. These keys should be able to get us at least to the upper levels.” He said as he scooped to pick them up.

“Now wait here and I’ll scout ahead.” He said as he once again slipped into the shadows. These shadows were different from those in the cell, he felt powerful among them. He was in control once again.

The passage was clear as he observed for a while. He moved ahead and saw someone approaching, as he melded into the dark.

He dropped the guard with the other iron bar that he had picked up, and dragged him out of the light cast by the crackling, spitting torch about a few feet away. After leaving the body, he crept along through the rooms, until he saw a guard sitting at a table, tucking into his supper. He knocked him over the head and sent him face first into his plate full of food, spilling his mead all over the tattered rug beside the table. He listened intently afterwards, and thought the coast was clear, as he walked quietly back to the cell and beckoned the others to follow.

“Come you two, but stay in the shadows, and be quiet.”

The three of them tiptoed back up the passage with Aidan at the helm but held them back when he saw two more guards in the room.

“I can’t believe some taffer spilled mead all over that rug!”

“Um... Billy, I think he spilled the mead over the rug,” said the other guard, pointing at the guard soup sitting in the chair.

“But you don’t understand! These taffers have no respect for such beautiful things!”

“Billy, pull yourself together! You’ve had too much to drink if you think that rug is anywhere near beautiful. I mean look at it! Maybe you should sleep it off.”

“I work better when I’m drunk. It makes me fearless! If I see a bad guy, I’ll point my sword at him and saaaayyyy, hey bad guy, go home before I stick you with my sword and you go out and dead! Hahaha, Oh!” he uttered as he was cut off before he could finish.

“Hey, what’s going on here?”

“Oof!”

The other guard crumpled on top of the rug.

“Well, now Billy will have twice the hangover when he wakes up.” Aidan remarked.

On the top level, it was quieter, less guards than on the bottom level with all the prisoners. Aidan had thought about releasing some of the other prisoners to create a distraction, but it would only lead to the poor bastards being cut down by the city guard anyway, and it would make them more alert and willing to look for him. He didn't want anyone trying to interfere with what he needed to do either. The last thing he wanted was for an entire line of prisoners following him wherever he went. And who was to say they they'd leave him alone once he got out.

“Oh, but I need a place to stay for a while, come on, help a man out.”

“Fat chance,” He played out the conversation in his mind.

Aidan could see a big strong door, which looked as though it could be the evidence vault. He needed the key, and luckily, along came a guard to give it him.

After stowing away the body in a corner, he unlocked to door and walked inside brazenly. It was in there that he found his tools of the trade that had been confiscated once he was dragged through the front door.

“You two keep a look out.” He pointed to Roland and Alesia, as they turned their attention to the walkway ahead.

Aidan collected all of his gear, and cleaned out the evidence vault of all the unnecessary clutter, like gold, and jewelry. He had a better home for it all, in his trusty loot-bag, and it would soon be on its way to making a transaction, making him a small fortune.

“Now what was Drake wanted me to snatch?”

He checked everything else that he didn't want to take with him, and noticed A piece of paper lying, folded on the metal shelf.

It was the same letter with names on it that he had found in Lady Tame's estate. He put it inside his vest, tucked away underneath the leather cuirass that he wore, and walked out of the room.

They all continued along the walkway until they got to a room. It was the entrance hall, with the front doors exiting the prison, but it was guarded, and there were hardly any shadows about to hide in either. He knew that there was another way out, and led the others to the warden's office.

"You go along until you reach a ladder leading up to grates above, you'll be able to see the surface. Here..." he said as he handed his dagger to Roland.

"Don't I get something?" Alesia asked, and Aidan handed her the iron bar he had been using, and shrugged.

He walked inside the office, and looked around for something to prove that Drake was conducting a bit of business with the warden. Sure enough there was a letter with the same seal that Drake used on his letter.

"John,

I want you to be ready to carry out punishment on a certain prisoner. In two days time, go down to the cell where the thief you recently brought in is, and do what you do best. If he isn't there, I want you to relax, forget about him, and please, do not search for him. If anybody asks, tell them he was executed. I'm willing to pay you very handsomely whatever the outcome, more than the usual.

Drake."

"So Walter wasn't lying. And I was right about Drake having 'John' as one of the little puppets in his play. I knew the city guard was up to no good." He said with a feeling of accomplishment.

He rejoined the others after putting the letter back in the drawer of the desk.

"So you found the ladder?"

"We were waiting for you," Roland said as he climbed up and tried the grate. But he couldn't get it open.

"It's no use, there's a wagon on top of it! It's way too heavy!" he shouted back down.

"Hello, can someone hear me? Can you move this wagon?" he called out in vain.

At that time of night, hardly anyone would be on the streets, apart from the pickpocket-fodder. Aidan would be sure to pay them back later for their lack of concern.

“Roland, come back down here, I’m going to try something.”

As Roland scaled back down the ladder, he reached into his quiver, and produced two fire arrows that he found in the evidence vault. Whether they were his before he was mugged didn’t matter. They were his now. He took them in hand, and decided that one wouldn’t be enough. So he dismantled the one fire crystal very gently and got some fabric, by tearing Alesia’s dress.

“Hey!” she cried.

“Never mind, I’ll get you a brand new one when we get out of here. I promise.”

He said as he bound the two crystals together very carefully. He got his bow of his back, took the modified arrow, knocked it, and aimed upwards at the top of the bow sight, hoping it would go through the grate and hit the wagon, and let loose. What followed was an enormous explosion that not only pushed the wagon off of the grate, but sent splinters of wood showering in every direction, as the wagon was completely put out of order for good.

There were shouts from within Pavelock, and they all quickly got up to the grate. Aidan pushed it aside and got out first, staying behind to help the others out, before pushing the grate back over the hole. The three of them ran for the cover of darkness and didn’t stop to look back or breathe.



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