

Veriax

The Chronicles of Iiosia:

Twisted Fates

Chapter 1 – All In A Night's Work

Draven always had been half an inch away from death. Now, death awaited forty feet below him, on the hard cobbled street, as he hung precariously on the trellis that was nailed to the wall of Lord Elgeros' Palace. He saw it as something of an occupational hazard, being what he was: a thief, some would say; a knight of the post, but he preferred to see himself as an agent of stealth, a shadow, unseen and unnoticed. As far as he was concerned, if those who possessed the valuables he took were careless enough to let them be taken, then they shouldn't have them in the first place. Regardless, it wasn't a life he had chosen - it had chosen him.

He watched the guard meander slowly from the guardhouse below him, and up the wet stone steps to the walkway. Draven's green eyes studied as the guard nibbled absent-mindedly upon a piece of crusty bread, and looked out upon the dark, sleeping town of Port Grimveil. The guard's mind was on other things than his duty it seemed, and once the guard turned away Draven deftly hoisted himself up onto one of the balconies of the tower. His breath steady, he lay flat, and moments later peeked towards the guard.

Below him now, he could see the guard in the dim torchlight make his way carelessly along the walkway around the courtyard, oblivious to his presence. He hoped that all the guards were as lax in their duties, but didn't count on it. Rising into a crouch he was pleased to find the maps he had studied earlier were

correct so far, as the stained glass windows of the chapel were just a few feet away from him. Moving silently towards the nearest, he peered in to find that the chapel was as dark and empty as the night outside.

The small door that led inside was locked, as someone of his profession would have expected, and such things he planned for ahead of time. A piece of metal, very thin and no more than a few inches long, appeared in his hand and he inserted it into the lock. and twisted it around inside. He heard a quiet click as the lock yielded, and he slipped through the door and inside. His lips curled into a smile as he closed the door behind him – this was going to be easier than he thought.

As he scanned his new surroundings, he noticed that the chapel was to the Goddess of Light, Aurora, and he found the irony of how dark it was in there somewhat amusing. Upon the dais a single lit candle stood, and the light it emitted was swiftly being swamped by the darkness which surrounded it. Draven knew little of religion or the Gods, but it was unlikely that the candle had been left lit by accident and its wick was almost gone. In fear of someone coming to replace the candle, Draven hurriedly moved along the left hand side of the pews towards the opposite end of the chapel to where another, larger wooden door lead further inside the keep. A warm looking light cast its glow under and around the sides of the door, and he stopped and listened for several long moments. Hearing nothing, he tried the heavy iron handle and, finding the door unlocked, he slipped out.

He emerged into a passageway. Closing the door behind him he moved to the left, anxious to be away to somewhere that offered more places of concealment. He came to a spiral staircase and, after a moment to pause and listen for any sounds, Draven darted up them. His feet made no sounds on the cold stone steps. No man would have been able to hear his breathing (no human, in any case), and the tools and short sword which he had concealed within his dark clothing were carefully wrapped to avoid them hindering his movements or banging against any objects. He was good at what he did – he might even be called a 'professional' thief, if there was such a thing. He was used to keeping to

the shadows; they were his friends and his home. He'd only ever been caught once.

He came to the fourth floor of the tall keep; his keen eyes darting this way and that as he searched for any signs of movement. It was eerily quiet in the keep. He might have even felt better had he heard distant footfalls, or someone cough from some room somewhere, but there was nothing to focus his senses on, and it made him uneasy.

He found himself at the end of two corridors and he went to the left, past a few doors, until he found a corridor which branched to the right and, when glancing down it, he saw that at the end of this corridor was a set of re-enforced double doors.

Two guards were stationed before them.

This came of little surprise to him; what kind of Lord would leave his valuables unguarded in the middle of the night?

Crouching down against the wall, he reached under his shirt and produced a pair of nose filters. After swiftly fitting them, he next took out a small green pellet and deftly tossed it down the corridor. The tiny thing went totally unnoticed by the guards, who were busy quietly talking with each other, and when it hit the ground between them it broke. Almost instantly they both collapsed.

A second later Draven was there, but he could only steady one of the men as he slumped. The other fell back with a thump, the hilt of his sword clanging against the stone wall behind him. It wasn't much of a noise, but it was one that made Draven grit his teeth and tense up. Sounds travel at night. Still, nothing happened afterwards, and Draven lowered the other guard from his arms and let him slump next to his companion.

They weren't dead - Draven had never been so crude; these men had wives and families and were just doing an honest day's work for honest coin. Taking extra care to breathe through his nose-filters he cleared up the remains of the seed - a seed from a plant which would be found deep in the wild forests of some distant place. The origin of the thing mattered nothing to him, but the sleeping drug within, which was one of the most effective natural sleeping drugs in the world,

did. They hadn't come cheaply into his pockets, but they were well worth than their weight in coin.

Thinking of coin, he thought briefly to go through the guard's uniforms to see if there was any loose change he could pilfer, but decided against it since loose change was well below what he was looking for on this particular heist, and he had neither the time nor the motivation to do it.

Now he was examining the door. It looked to be a well made lock, but not one that he couldn't... *What's this?* He saw, within the lock, a strip of metal which was most certainly the trigger for some sort of trap. He had no intention of finding out what kind of trap it was, be it an alarm or a poisoned dart to his neck. After brief inspection found that by first moving the trigger out of the way, taking take care not to move it in an upwards direction, and then overcoming the lock itself, he was able to overcome this obstacle with little difficulty.

The door to the Strong Room opened, and he entered and closed it behind him. It was a tall, hexagonal stone room made from large blocks of granite. The roof was some twenty feet above him, and there were no other apparent ways to get into or out of the chamber.

His first impression of the room, which was illuminated by a single oil lantern which hung above him, was that it was a bit excessive considering the shabby security, but then he realised that the keep (which was now laughably officially called a 'palace') was much older than the current occupants and would, at one time, have held treasure much more valuable and in greater bulk than what was stashed there currently.

Large iron chests were against some of the walls, no doubt holding the bulk of the riches Lord Elgeros had collected. It briefly occurred to the thief, in a flight of fancy, that he should take as much of the wealth as possible and redistribute it among the poor, overtaxed, overworked and underpaid people of Port Grimveil – pouring the wealth out of the windows of the palace, showering the slums with gold... And then he dismissed the idea, not just out of its utter impracticality, but because if the people were too stupid to follow the rules and let themselves be trampled all over then let them do so.

Besides, the coins were not what he was there for either, nor the gems. It was easy to get greedy - easy to take too much and put yourself at risk. *Stay focused. Stay on task.*

Hanging on the wall opposite from where he stood, was a small, curved, ornate scabbard, embroiled with gold and silver which formed archaic symbols and, within the scabbard, a dagger of the finest steel, enchanted so that its blade would never break, and, it was said, the blade was also imbued with every poison on Iliosia. He was somewhat doubtful of this, but knew for a fact that this was what he had come for. It was the Serpent Fang.

Draven's trained thief eye noted that the dagger was hung upon a hook which, when the dagger was removed, could well spring up and set off another alarm or some devious trap. But the dagger had to be removed occasionally for ceremonial purposes and so on – Lord Elgeros liked to have it on his person when he greeted foreign nobles to his abode as a sign of his wealth and power over this slum of a port. There must be some sort of switch to prevent the trap from being triggered.

Maybe it would be located elsewhere in the 'palace' he thought, and could only hope against it as he looked hurriedly round the chamber.

He suddenly heard a gruff voice outside the room: 'Ranolor! What in the Hells do you think you're doing?!

A set of footsteps came marching towards the room, and Draven froze, his hand on his sword, fearing that the door would be flung open and he would be discovered.

'You're asleep!' boomed the voice. 'Wake up you curs! Rouse and drag yourselves to the guardroom while I find some other men to fill your posts. We'll see what Lord Elgeros has to say about this in the morning!'

With that, a set of footsteps marched off and were eventually followed by the shuffling of four other feet as the men tried to shake off the effects of the drug.

'Do you remember falling asleep?' one of them said.

'No... Gods! My head...' replied the other, their voices fading down the corridors of the keep.

The thief let himself have a small sigh of relief but he didn't have much time now. Soon new guards would be posted outside and jeopardise his escape. He did his best to quell the feeling of panic rising in his gut and then by chance he spotted that one of the stones by the door was slightly... off. Inspecting, he saw that it was in fact a fake. Pushing it inside, he found it hid a secret compartment in the wall, in which he discovered a lever. Pulling on this he heard a *click* and dashed across the room to remove the dagger in case the disarming mechanism was on a timer.

He waited a heartbeat, then there was another click as the trap reset itself. He tucked the dagger safe and secure into his clothing and left the strong room, closing the door after him and leaving no trace of his passing... save a missing, highly valuable dagger. With any luck, it would be days before they even realised it was gone.

No guards were about – at least not yet. Moving as quietly as before he jogged along the short corridor, turned left, and started to head back the way he'd come. Then a voice: 'I never thought Ranolor would fall asleep...', which was coming from down the stairs.

And another: 'Aye, I understand he supports his whole family with this job.' Sweat uncharacteristically beading on his forehead, Draven realised he was trapped at the end of two well lit corridors and his only options were to chance going through a door to his left or to make a dash for the stairs and climb. 'They'll have a hard time of it now...'

The guards were nearing fast. He decided. He dashed for the spiral staircase and he must have got out of sight just before the guards rounded the bend in the staircase, but their footsteps didn't stop and the guards continued to climb towards him. Cursing silently, Draven had no option to climb too, into an area he had learned nothing about in his planning of this heist. He found himself on the top floor of the keep. If he climbed any further he would be on the battlements where more guards would be stationed and from where there was no escape. He dashed out along the corridor that presented itself before him, which was just as

long straight and well lit as the rest, and could still hear the men unwittingly following behind him.

There was a door before him, offering him escape from the corridor and sight of the guards. He knew nothing of what may lie behind it but had no choice at all and had to trust in the Fates that some solace awaited him on the other side. He tried the handle and it turned, and darkness greeted him beyond. With the voices of the guards coming hauntingly after him he went inside and shut the door.

Moonlight penetrated the gloom through a tall window which had been left slightly open, causing the curtains to move in a ghostlike manor. It was a bedchamber, dominated by a large four-poster which was set against the centre of the far wall. It was a lady's bed-chamber, with a full length mirror, two fine oak wardrobes, a dressing table with cosmetics ordered neatly upon it, and a changing screen. The scent of delicate perfume would have drifted up his nostrils had he not still been wearing the nose filters. It also had what looked like an alchemist's bench, and a large bookcase with all six shelves filled to bursting with texts. Dying embers glowed in the fireplace, casting a flickering amber light over everything, and sending shadows dancing over the walls. In the corridor outside the room, he heard the guard's footsteps echo past. He was safe for the moment at least. As he stood in the darkness there his nerves calmed and heartbeat slowed slightly.

Asleep on the bed was the lone occupant of the room. She slept on top of her bed covers, which he found odd since it was not especially warm in the room. She lay on her back with her hands across her stomach, as if dead, and wore a long, white silk nightdress. Her hair was long and blonde and straight, and he couldn't help but admire her features; a defined jaw, small nose and mouth and, despite them being closed, eyes which he could tell were a little too big for her face.

Not daring to leave the room just yet, he crept to the window and discovered that it opened out much like a door would onto the second balcony. Lord Elgeros had

had the two balconies built around the third and fifth floors of the keep to make the fort look more like a palace, and had hung banners and flags from them to make the building look more grand. And while he did this, the population scraped a living, and did nothing to help themselves by being all too easily subdued by propaganda and lies. The thieves were blamed, as were the pirates, the mercenaries, the mages, even the merchants. Everyone except grand Lord Elgeros who kept the peace and made the laws.

'Who are you?!

He whirled round, brought sharply from his thoughts. The woman was sat upright in her bed, awake, and looking straight at him with wide blue eyes.

'Guards!' she called, her mouth turning into a sneer.

He grabbed another of his sleeping capsules, intending to use it on the woman to silence her, when the door to her bedchamber burst open and the two guards tumbled in; 'Miss Elina, is something...?'

The guard didn't finish his sentence. The sleeping capsule broke against the wall right by his head and he and his fellow fell into the drug-induced slumber.

And then something lithe, flowing and white flew at Draven, and he found himself wrestling with the woman, a dagger in her hand.

The momentum of her unexpected attack propelled them out of the glass door, onto the balcony, and sent them both tumbling over the rail. The woman screamed as they fell, and held onto him tightly, instinctively, invoking protection. Draven's back was sliding against something and he tried to grab onto it. It was cloth – it was one of the banners that were hanging from the balcony. He caught hold of it, a good firm grip with both hands, and it tore, and ripped, and sent them downwards and inwards, but slowed them down. Just a little. He slammed into the wall and something clicked inside his shoulder sending agonising pain ripping through him. He yelled, his grip on the banner lost, and they fell together with her still clinging to him. They fell a full three feet and then landed on the balcony below and collapsed in a heap.

It took them several seconds for them to get their bearings. He was the first to; the pain in his shoulder making his brain work, and he scrambled to his feet,

tearing himself away from her clutching hands. He looked out over the port; below them, some forty feet or so, was a market place which was as deserted as the streets that lead from it. This was where he had entered the keep from! The women gathered her wits and, despite having lost the dagger attacked him again.

'Thief! Scum!' she snarled, her fists and nails flailing at him. She hit him on the shoulder making him cry out in pain once again, and then thumped him on his chest where he kept the rest of his sleep capsules, broke them all, and she slumped onto him straight away. He tried to close his mouth and breathe through his nose filters, but was too slow and caught a whiff of the drug. It was just enough. His equilibrium went to Inferis and he toppled and fell over the rail with her.

Chapter 2 – Honour among Thieves

You can't breathe.

Wake up.

You're drowning. You'll die. Wake up. WAKE UP!

Draven woke up, finding himself in a dark and murky world which robbed him of sight and air. He struggled against it, his feet found something and he pushed against it and thrashed upwards, pulling his head from the water. He took a huge gulp of air and coughed, hard, throwing up filthy liquid. Breathing heavily and shivering with deep cold he looked around, finding himself up to his chest in water which filled a disused fountain sitting beneath the keep. To his left the unconscious woman was floating on her back, her head barely above the surface. She had tried to kill him, yes. She would have gutted him when she first saw him. He knew this, but he did not blame her for it, and waded through the water to her, only now remembering the pain in his shoulder where it had become dislocated.

He could see her breath on her hair as it was plastered over her mouth and her face, and supported her head with his good arm as he pushed her against the side of the fountain and managed to wedge her torso up onto the rim of the wall. Distracted as he was with everything, he hadn't heard the group of six short, shadowy figures approach until they were only a few feet away.

'Did you get it?' one of them asked in a low, matter-of-fact tone.

Draven looked at the group incredulously. Halflings always meant business - it was all they seemed to care about beyond filling their bellies with wine and food. He nodded.

'Who is she?' another one of them asked. Draven recognised him as Jynx, who was one of the few of his race that Draven actually had a liking for. Jynx was short even for a halfling, and he wasn't so crass or eager to kill you for whatever you had in your pockets

'I don't know... she attacked me. We fell.' He gasped out, barely able to speak for his shivering, pain, and his drowsiness.

'Draven, get out of there. Quickly man!' hissed another one of the halflings.

Draven didn't know this one, nor did he really want to. He seemed to be leading the group, though. 'Bring the woman'

By the time Draven had managed to pull himself from the water, the halflings had dragged her out and bundled the woman unceremoniously into a sack.

'This way, hurry. The guard is alerted,' the leader ordered, and the halflings scuttled into the gloomy streets with Draven in tow, holding his dislocated arm to his side. He gritted his teeth, his head still spinning a little. Still, he had done the last of the jobs for these little bastards, and now he could kiss this slumhole of a port goodbye!

Finally, they reached their destination; an almost unnoticeable small door in an equally unnoticeable and small house, tucked away in a maze of alleys and streets and roads. Jynx tapped out a short but complex knock on the door, and from within a number of bolts and locks could be heard being unfastened before the door swung silently open and they went inside. The outside building was a fake - there was no home here. A small room was beyond, in which they all crowded. The roof was low and made Draven have to stoop his head. He was the only one who had to do so.

Save from a chair and an ashtray, the room was totally bare. It smelled of tobacco and stale air. It was very warm in there. Three tunnels led from the room, sloping down into the earth.

The door was closed behind them by the halfling known only as the Doorman, who then addressed them all in a gruff, deep voice which belied his small frame and chubby, albeit ugly face: 'Well, I'm pleased to see you made it back alive, Draven. Though I did always say you were a little wet behind the ears!' He started to guffaw at Draven, who was shivering with damp and cold.

Like most halflings, the Doorman was just a stint below four feet tall. He was one of the halflings that earned his kin the sordid reputation of being thieves and troublemakers. His face was fat, with a boil on the end of his nose, and most of his front teeth were missing. He had also been blinded in one eye, which meant his abilities were rather limited, and so the Doorman he had become.

'And what's this you've brought?' he asked, pointing a grubby finger to the sack. Jynx opened the sack, showing the unconscious woman's head. 'Draven collected this little visitor on his way out' he said.

The Doorman shot a questioning look at Draven.

'She attacked me... but has nothing to do with any of this. You might as well let her go.'

Chuckles echoed around the small room. They were evil, horrible little chuckles, like the chuckles of children who knew they were doing wrong. It sent an unpleasant shiver up Draven's spine and struggled to hold back the grimace that was growing on his features.

'Met your match with a wench eh?' chided the Doorman. 'No matter. She's your responsibility, Draven. Take her to Hookknife.'

Draven was not an uncaring person and, though the woman attacked him and ended up in this situation entirely by her own actions, there was a little tug at his conscience which he couldn't make go away. He could, however, ignore it.

What he couldn't ignore was that a stuck-up halfling was barking orders at him, and his anger flared up. 'Hookknife may well be in charge here, but you are not. Stay your tongue. Take her to him - I care not! And let this be the last time we meet.'

The Doorman sneered back. 'Go then, I'll not be missing ya!'

He waved a dismissive hand and turned back to his chair, sat back and started smoking his pipe again.

The halflings made their way down the right hand passage, three of them carrying the sack across their shoulders. The sight made Draven uncomfortable - people shouldn't be treated like produce. Damn it, he needed to pull himself together. Yes she was attractive, and yes he may be slightly responsible for her being there. Slightly. But she'd attacked him when she could have fled. Came at him with a knife and then with her bare hands. Such a stupid thing to do, and yet what fire. What bravery! It was to be admired...

With a deep breath he followed them into the bowels of the thieves guild.

Draven had learned that the Thieves Guild had been made decades ago by halflings and thus it had been made for halflings to use. It was a network of tunnels that stretched throughout most of the underground of Port Grimveil. It had entrances to the sewers, to cellars, to taverns, to storehouses, even to some temples and other important places. The network of the Thieves was one which riddled Port Grimveil like a cancer; it was one that could neither be controlled nor destroyed, so the authorities let it be for the most part, and in return the Guild kept to their own business of using the port as a base for drug trafficking and weapon smuggling and left the guard alone... for the most part. They provided 'protection' against thievery outside the Guild with temples, libraries, and some of the more well-off individuals who resided in the port in return for regular hard cash payments. With the Thieves Guild in place, petty crime was all but unheard of.

Draven had come to Port Grimveil two months past, not willingly but through necessity. Deciding to ply his trade before moving on to better climes, his skills as a thief had not escaped the Guild's attention when he stole from one of the temples which the guild had struck such a deal with.

So when a collection of rather expensive figurines had been stolen, the Guild had been alerted, and as soon as Draven had (somewhat foolishly) tried to sell the statues within the city he was, let's say, visited by the Guild. His skill at stealing the statues was not overlooked however, and instead of having him done away with the Guild had used him to do a few tasks for them. Finding the dagger was the last of these tasks, and Draven was glad it was done.

He followed Jynx and the others deeper through the dark, musky, smoky passages. They had been lined with wooden planks and clay bricks and were at the very least adequate to move about in, though not comfortable and offering no ventilation. It was hot and it stank of halfling, but the heat warmed him and dried him out a little.

At last they came to a chamber where Draven could stand upright in. This was one of the gathering chambers where thieves met to discuss heists, do deals,

trade, barter, and relax. It was a cellar of one inn or another; one that was owned and run by the Guild.

Not one head turned to stare as the troupe of halflings came in with the sack of obvious contents slung over their shoulders; it was all usual business. There were mostly halflings and humans there. There was a dwarf, and a few elves too, but the Guild was made up predominantly of humans and halflings. Draven listened to the babbling of chatter as they made their way through the room, and heard the usual mumblings and grumblings between the two main factions. He'd heard, during his time there (which was effectively house arrest) that there was something of an underground power struggle going on between the Guild founders, the halflings, and their stronger, human counterparts. Yes, the Guild had one leader - a halfling calling himself Hookknife, but there was a human woman called Yallinia who had recently come to have a lot of influence and some said now really ran the Guild. Draven didn't really care either way, but it helped to know things.

He followed the halflings up the stairs and passed by the kitchens where the chef was busy barking orders at his staff to get the meat cooked and prepared before customers started arriving. The mixed smell of cooking meat, gravy, and beer made Draven suddenly feel very hungry, and he realised as he glanced out of the window that dawn had come and he hadn't eaten since nightfall. He'd been hungry before, though. He could even say he was used to it.

They climbed up some more stairs and through a door, which Jynx had the courtesy of opening for them as they went to hold audience with Hookknife. Draven shot him a smile as he passed him, and it was returned genuinely. Since Draven was planning on leaving soon - perhaps even today - that smile may well have been their farewell. It served well enough, since they were little more than acquaintances. Still, he knew that he liked Jynx. In fact Jynx was the only halfling he liked at all, and his dealings with the little buggers had left Draven feeling that most halflings were a nasty sort all round and he wanted nothing more to do with them.

Draven had met Hooknife just once before, when their little 'deal' had been explained to him, and since then his dealings with Hooknife had transpired only through Jynx and other halflings. Now that the dagger had been recovered he hoped this business would be at an end so he could leave this stinking port and find somewhere a little less flea-infested.

'Ah!' Hooknife greeted, looking only at Draven, 'Sit sit!'

Hooknife was sat at a large desk as if he were some sort of lawyer about to begin negotiating a contract. He was, like Jynx, small even for a halfling, though he was not particularly nice to look at; his bald head had a scar which ran deep along the right side of his head above his ear. Draven assumed that his name had had something to do with that scar, but had thought better of asking.

'I see you brought along a friend' Hooknife stated as the halflings lowered her to the ground and pulled the sack off her. She moaned weakly, but wasn't conscious.

Draven hadn't sat down. 'That was an accident,' he attempted to explain. 'We fell... it's a long story.' He ran out of words for reasons he couldn't put his finger on.

'I see, I see.' Hooknife said dismissively, uninterested. He motioned to the five halflings to leave the room, which they did so, and the last closed the door behind him. Hooknife was looking at Draven all the while, and it was a look which made the thief uneasy. Finally, Hooknife asked: 'Do you have what I asked for?'

Draven was about to reach for the dagger, then stopped himself. 'Once I give the dagger to you, our deals finished. We're through.'

Hooknife smiled, showing many gaps in his yellow teeth. He said: 'Why Draven, you insult me. That was our agreement and I will stick to it as you have. Once you give me the dagger we will go our separate ways and we will not see each other again.'

'I look forward to leaving this 'town', as you call it.'

'And indeed you shall, I'm sure.'

Satisfied, Draven took out the dagger and placed it on the table. Hooknife grabbed it with his little hands like a greedy child who has just received what it wanted for its birthday. 'Yes, yes! This is the Serpent Fang!' He unsheathed the blade. It was the cleanest, sharpest blade Draven had ever seen. It seemed to have a green tinge to it which made him shudder inwardly.

Hooknife then looked straight at him and spoke in an even, dead tone. 'And now for your reward.'

The wood panelling that covered the walls was flung aside, and from the tiny hidden rooms beyond many halflings sprang towards him!

Draven managed to grip his sword and draw it before the mass of bodies crashed on him and pinned him down. His sword was forced from his fingers. Pain raged through his shoulder. He could feel their fingers searching through his clothing even now looking for things to take from him. Then Hooknife appeared above him with a bludgeon in his hand.

'I can't have you running around knowing all the things you do Draven. But, as I can't kill you because of our deal, I'm sending you off to be a slave with your friend here. Like you said, you will be leaving this 'town', as we call it.'

'You little bastard'

Hooknife struck him, and then there were flashes of light and stars, and then there was blackness and nothing.

Hooknife had Draven and the woman taken off to the slave train bound for the mines, and ordered that she be dressed in something more common so that she wouldn't attract undue attention. Then he made his way back down the stairs and through the kitchen into the bar room.

Despite the fact that the day was just beginning it was already crowded. Port Grimveil was one of the busier thoroughfares into Orondor, and it wasn't somewhere people tended to stay for long but its position made it a valuable supplying base. Hooknife had no interest in these groups of sea-farers and travellers. He went over to a small round table in a corner near the unlit fireplace.

At this table sat an attractive woman with long dark curly hair and full lips. She wore a suit of quality leather armour and affixed to her belt hung a row of deadly looking throwing stars. On the table in front of her was a mug of some kind of ale which she would sip from occasionally, as if she was thinking, or waiting. She had *presence* in the room, an aura of danger, which told people to stay away from her unless they had a very good reason. Hooknife had a very good reason, and she watched the little man clamber onto the set opposite her with clever dark brown eyes.

'Yallinia,' he greeted, then said: 'It is done, we'll not see him again.'

She reached for the mug and brought it to her ruby red lips; she was left handed.

'He had promise,' she said, almost to herself. 'But he is not like us. He would betray us if he felt the need to.'

'I have ordered him sent to the mines as planned.' He avoided mentioning the girl; she was of no consequence, and telling Yallinia would only complicate matters.

She suddenly looked up at the halfling as if noticing him for the first time, studying him with dark, depthless eyes. 'What are you thinking?'

Hooknife almost jumped – such was the tone in her voice. He sometimes thought she was reading his mind. 'Nothing,' he said. 'I'm just glad to be rid of him. Not to be trusted that one.'

She nodded, drinking again from the mug. 'He'll not like it in the mines... not at all,' she murmured, and then the matter was gone from her mind. 'Now, you'd best give me the dagger. I'll keep it safe.'

Hooknife handed her the dagger, now wrapped in dark cloth, across the table without question.

A halfling Guild member, who had been watching the pair from across the room, mumbled his disapproval to himself. Loyal to the Guild as the halflings were, it was clear that Yallinia was really calling the shots.

Chapter 3 – The Slave Caravan

For the second time that day Draven awoke from unconsciousness with a start; his head pounding like the beating of a war drum. He put his hands to his head to stop the swaying motion he was experiencing and licked his dry lips with his dry tongue. He felt just like he would have if he'd had too much ale the night previously. Before he even opened his eyes he realised that, while sore, his shoulder had been popped back into place.

How nice of them - I suppose they don't want half-crippled slaves, do they?

Secondly, he realised the swaying motion he was feeling wasn't in his head at all, and his eyes popped open. He was in a simple wooden carriage which reminded him of those which he had once seen the circus use to hold captive wild animals. It even had straw covering the floor. The swaying was caused by the movement of the wagon as it was pulled through barren grasslands.

He wasn't still in Grimveil. That was certain. His weapons and equipment had been removed, but he still wore the same clothes he'd used for the job at the Palace for that damned dagger. They were dry now, though, which made him ponder; how long had he been unconscious for? The sun was high in the sky, so at least a few hours - more so if he'd been out for an entire day, but he doubted it.

He was not alone in the cage. He shared it with two others: the woman he'd accidentally abducted, now dressed in more common clothes and huddled as far away from them as she could get; sobbing quietly to herself in the corner, and a halfling, who lay at Draven's feet and seemed to be genuinely asleep. Draven glanced at the woman, but she would not return his gaze. He was partially glad that she didn't.

Draven gave the halfling a shove with his foot and he grunted and looked up angrily. 'Who do ye think ye are? Waking people up like that? I let ye sleep soundly enough I did!'

True enough, Draven's initial treatment of the halfling may have been harsh, but the thief's opinions of halflings had just dropped a few notches still and putting his boot to one, albeit one whom he'd never seen before, wasn't something he could resist.

The halfling was dressed in purple and black cloth, but his clothes had been torn and dirtied. Draven thought it may have been dried blood that stained down his front. His bronzed, stubbly face had a few small battle scars on it, but they didn't make him ugly in the same way as Hookknife or the Doorman.

'Tell me who you are and what you know about what's going on.' Draven demanded.

The reply came readily enough. 'Mentillio be my name, and we're on our way to the Mines of Ironshaft to be sure, to spend the rest of our days there in hard labour.' The way he said this so was matter-of-fact, and so calm, that for a second Draven thought he was joking.

The woman, though she was looking more and more like just a girl to Draven; and a far cry from the lady he'd seen asleep in Grimveil Palace, whimpered louder: 'Oh by Aurora this can't be happening?!' she sobbed.

Mentillio turned to her. 'Now now lass, don't ye be fretting about anything. Your only job will be to please the slave-master when he gets the urge, along with the rest of his harem.'

She looked at the halfling with a face of utter horror, her mouth forming a perfect O.

'I'm sure ye'll be fine,' Mentillio said. 'Though... there's rumour that he's half-ogre ye know. Won't that be an experience for ye? They don't call them mines "Ironshaft" for nothing ye know!' He reached over and grabbed her thigh, laughing sardonically.

'No! Leave me alone!' she protested, struggling to get away from the horrible little man.

Draven's boot found Mentillio's shoulder again, shoving him back against the cage and away from her. 'Get off her.' he told him, and Mentillio grinned. 'You seem quite calm about all this,' Draven snapped, anger flaring up for a moment

once again, and once again misplaced on the halfling. Why did she have to be here? He knew nothing of her, but he felt responsible for her.... her Fate.

'I try to keep a brave face on things. Ye never know what may turn up. And it may not be all that, bad. Ye know?'

Draven was already sick of the number of times Mentillio had said "ye know".

'And how did a halfling end up on a slave wagon?'

Mentillio shrugged casually. 'I be a thief by trade, which may not be surprising to ye, but I can also swing a blade pretty good. So when I arrived in Grimveil I swiftly became a member of the Thieves Guild who put me to good use and gave me a roof and a full belly. Been a member for four years I have, but no longer. Ye see I stuck me nose in where it weren't wanted, a few nights back. Didn't hear much, something about a dagger and some other gobbledegook about a grave I think. Well, I didn't hear much, but I hear too much, so I got meself beaten and thrown in 'ere wi' ye lot. Reckon there's something she wants kept quiet ye know.'

She? Draven thought.

'I don't want to go to the mines!' howled the girl. Draven had decided she was a girl, even if she was on the verge of being a woman. 'I want to go home! This is all your fault!' she spat at Draven.

Mentillio glanced at Draven. 'Feisty 'ent she? Where'd ye find her?'

'He didn't "find" me! I'm Princess Elina Vandez, Lord Elgeros's niece and Priestess to the Goddess Aurora! Bastard!' her voice became high-pitched – hysterical. Mentillio chuckled at her.

Draven's ears pricked when he heard the word "Vandez" - there was something familiar about it.

Draven's head hurt and he had Elina looking daggers at him, and he once again regretted that day when he was five and he'd stolen his first apple from a street vendor. He suddenly became very, very tired, and drifted into sleep.

The slave caravan wound its way slowly but surely towards its destination. It was made up of three cages and a dozen or so slavers who rode their horses

alongside the cages in silence. The sun was high in the sky and the day was uncharacteristically cloudless and warm. In the cage the heat was worse, unable to escape through the solid roof, and there was little wind to push any breeze through the bars.

Draven woke once, hearing the sloshing of water and becoming painfully aware of how dry his lips were and how empty his stomach was. He turned his head towards the sound to see the slaver riding alongside them emptying the decanter he was carrying over his face. The clean water glinted in the sunlight like diamonds as it fell, wasted, to the dry earth. The slaver then shot a wide grin at Draven, droplets dripping from his beard, before spurring his horse onwards and out of their line of sight.

It took another three long, hot, thirsty hours to reach the mines. They went into the hills in the hinterland of the port, and onto a road which ran between a cliff face and a deep gorge with a white-water river flowing at its base. Several times they felt as though they were going to lurch off the narrow path and fall into the gorge, but the slavers knew the way well, and eventually they neared a crude but effective iron gateway built into a messy looking but equally as serviceable stone wall which stretched from the cliff wall to the chasm below. They passed through it, and then they came to the mines.

The path widened and became something of a plateau. The gorge ended at a high narrow waterfall, fuelled by the water that flowed from a large cave at the far end of the plateau. The cave was the entrance to the mines; and the plateau before it was where the slavers made sure none escaped. Where the river flowed across the plateau slaves worked at processing the ore; heating it in huge stone furnaces and using the flowing water of the river to power crushing and grinding machines, and there were several large wooden pens where men dressed in mucky, tattered rags lay on filthy straw mats.

On the far side of the river, which had a single bridge, were wooden huts of varying sizes - homes for the slavers, storerooms, stables and the like – and one much larger structure which was clearly the home of the Slave Master.

The whole place was a natural prison – the only escape being through the way they had come, or climbing the cliff walls. The caravan stopped near the pen, the cages were unlocked, and they were ordered out.

The first thing that hit Draven was the cold, which was in sharp contrast to the journey they had just been taken on, and the dampness in the air. He realised that the sun would rarely, if ever, reach this place. Spray from the river and the waterfall was saturating everything. As his cage was opened and he was urged out he almost slipped on the wet stones, despite being well away from the river. He could hear the workings of the mines, echoing against the bleak stone walls, the grinding of machinery, the cracking of a whip.

The slavers wore no uniform save from a red bandana and/or a red piece of cloth tied around their waists like a belt. But even with this crude attire they could easily be told apart from the slaves. The slaves were starving, filthy, dying, the slavers, well fed, clean and all bearing weapons.

Draven and the others, a dozen or so, were herded towards the slave pens. They were all male save Elina, but as they were taken into the pens a slaver guard spotted and stopped the frightened girl.

‘Ere now, where do you think you’re going?’

Several other slavers came over. ‘She’s a pretty thing!’ said one of them.

‘Seregon will be pleased with her!’

‘Let me go!’ she shouted, her cheeks blazon red, and a fire in her eyes which would have befitted a warrior twice her size. ‘I’m the niece of Lord Elgeros. I really shouldn’t be here!’

‘Ha! Like we’ve never heard that one before! Come on me beauty, it’s off to the harem for you.’ The slaver swiftly slung her over his shoulder before she could react and smacked her rump, to the amusement of the nearby guards.

‘No!’ she screamed, but her struggling was futile against the large man.

Draven couldn’t help but move forwards and intervene, when he felt a firm grip on his belt that stopped him.

‘We can’t stop it,’ Mentillio hissed in his ear, ‘Ye’d be killed for sure.’

Draven stopped more from the shock that it was Mentillio that had spoken to him than anything else. Since they had met, Draven had been naught but hostile to him, and yet the halfling had just stopped him marching to certain death.

'Ye got bigger things to worry about anyway, I'll warrant,' the halfling added, and despite his words ringing true, Draven knew that he had to do something. He should do something...

He shook the growing feeling of guilt angrily away; he had himself to worry about for now.

Chapter 4 – A Noble Granddaughter and a Poisoned Knife

'I want the whole city searched from top to bottom!' Lord Elgeros stormed, marching through the great hall of the keep he called a palace and completely ignoring all of his subjects except Baranorn, the captain of his guards. 'Put the city under lockdown. Nothing moves in or out without being thoroughly checked and questioned.'

'Yes my Lord Elgeros,' Baranorn followed his Lord like a faithful dog.

'I will have her back,' Elgeros stated, seating himself on his 'throne' and throwing his red cloak around him. The years of fine living had taken their toll on Elgeros, who now boasted a considerable gut and growing double chin. His build was slight and tall, however, and his skinny legs and arms made him look, some had said, like an ill-made scarecrow. He was nearing six decades in age, yet still had energy that belied his age. 'The Goddess Aurora will be most displeased with us if we do not retrieve her priestess. It will be a bad thing for us all.'

'Indeed My Lord,' Baranorn bowed, even if he did not agree. In his heart of hearts he did not believe in the Goddess Aurora or any other Gods or Goddesses, but he dared not tell his superstitious old master. Baranorn believed in loyalty, in organisation, and in the power of cold sharp steel; put a knife to any priest's neck and you'll soon find out how unwilling they are to meet the God they serve. Also, he was a little worried about what Lord Elgeros's brother would do when he found out.

'Elina must be found,' Elgeros went on, almost to himself, and then looked directly at his captain with piercing grey eyes. 'You say there was just one of them?'

Baranorn nodded. 'Aye sir, that's what the guards who saw the intruder in your niece's bedchamber reported. The intruder used some kind of sleeping drug and escaped down the wall with your niece.'

'Then it would be a good idea for your men to enquire at the herbalist and alchemists shops as well captain, to trace who bought the drug.'

'It will be as you command.'

Elgeros sat back as if content, but his hands idly fidgeted. 'Now leave me, all of you,' he stood up again, never still. 'I will retire to my bedchamber. These concerns weigh heavily on my old bones.'

A handmaiden accompanied him out of the chamber as the occupants - servants, advisors, and money-grabbing relatives so distant that they could barely be called relatives at all – left as they were told.

Only one lingered awhile. Baranorn, Captain of the Guard, had a thought which made him wonder, and for the first time since he could remember broke his routine and headed not to the guardroom but up the stairs.

Two trusted men do not just fall sleep when on duty, especially when guarding the strongroom. If the thief had used sleeping gas on those in Elina's bedroom, then...

He went to the fourth floor where he made a left and then a right and came to the strong room.

'Captain?' one of the two guards stationed there queried his unexpected appearance, but dared not say more because of the warning look he received. Baranorn was an imposing figure. He'd always been a fighting man ever since he joined the military when he was barely a man. With twenty years of battles and warfare behind him, he retired and settled into the relatively easy life of guard duty, and had served under Lord Elgeros for five years now. Had he not had the discipline of army life drilled into his mindset, he might well have got sick of Elgeros's pompous, selfish ways and left long ago, but his sense of duty was too great to do that.

Without saying another word the two guards stepped aside as he approached. The men respected him, they respected his word and they respected him as a man. Baranorn was a man to be respected - he was honest, straight talking, and fair.

The keys to the Strongroom dangled in his hand, and Baranorn tried opening the door with them. He wasn't overly surprised when he found it already unlocked. But then, he was never surprised.

'Hmm... I was afraid of this,' he muttered to himself, and pushed the door.

The guards, not expecting this, half-drew their swords before Baranorn said: 'At ease men. The thief is long gone by now.'

He stepped inside the Strongroom and saw to his amazement that the chests of coin looked to be completely untouched! It only took another second to pass for him to see that there was something missing. though ; Elgeros's most prized possession and his niece priestess had been snatched from him in a single night by a single thief. Why they had done it or who they were wouldn't concern Elgeros, though, and Baranorn knew that whoever committed these crimes would feel a wrath they had not counted on, they could be sure of that.

* * *

People are so stupid, Mantis thought as his hand dipped into another pocket and pilfered a nice pocket watch. It was of good quality, no wear, and would fetch a few silver coins when sold.

Such things were beneath him. He didn't need to pick pockets for a living any more, but he enjoyed it, and it was best to stay in practice. The marketplace was slowly emptying and the day's business dying down once again. People were tired and thinking of home and warm food, so it was an excellent time to catch them off guard.

Truth be told, he was merely bored. He could play thief, but playing was all it was. He was a contract killer. No, he was better than that, an assassin. And the Thieves Guild had no work for a man of his talents! Lately they'd been giving all their jobs to some foreign stranger that they'd struck some sort of deal with.

Mantis was hated and loved by the Guild, because they couldn't get rid of him even if they'd have wanted to, but couldn't convince him to become an official member either – he didn't want to be tied like a dog to a post. He was important to them, but lately he was finding himself a little out of work.

Then, his keen hearing picked out a conversation among the babble:

'I heard they took her in the night.'

'Who?'

'No one knows. Just one man, they said. Whisked her out of her bed and to who-knows-where.'

What's this? Mantis thought. *Some news I haven't heard?*

He honed in on what the three men were saying as he acted like he was examining the products of a potter's stall.

'How terrible! And this happened last night you say?'

'Yes, in the early hours of the morning. They're trying to keep it quiet there at the palace but soon everyone's going to know. One of the guards who was there just told me.'

Mantis broke in: 'Excuse me gents...?'

The three of them looked round to see who addressed them. Mantis was a well defined handsome man who was dressed in dark, simple clothes, but looked a little too thin to be healthy

'I couldn't help overhearing,' Mantis went on, 'Who do you say has kidnapped?'

'Elina, the niece of Lord Elgeros and, if I'm not mistaken, granddaughter to King Kharis himself. She was taken last night, and no ones heard anything of her since.'

'Really?' said Mantis. 'That's awful. I haven't heard anything about this before,' despite his words, his expression never changed.

'It's just leaked out. A few guards are telling everyone!'

'Are they... are they indeed?' They'd told him everything he wanted to know, and Mantis whirled around and marched away without another word to the men.

There weren't many people who could kidnap a King's granddaughter in this town, and Mantis wanted to know just who his competition was and, more importantly, ensure he wasn't implicated with such a high profile crime.

* * *

About half an hour after this, Yallinia was holding the Serpent Fang in her hands and turning it this way and that. She admired its beauty; the way the blade changed colour in the dying light coming through the window. She looked at the

tiny gems in its hilt, the gold winding itself in intricate patterns around the hilt. Yet for all this, she didn't care at all for its worth in gold.

Hooknife watched her do all this with something approaching jealousy. He should get to hold it! He'd earned it! Never had he stopped to consider why they had taken the blade. Never had he questioned anything Yallinia had wanted these past few weeks. And he thought that was because that was the way he wanted it, but in reality the charm she'd put on him had been working subtly for months now.

There was a sudden knock on the door which startled Hooknife. Yallinia whipped the dagger under the table. 'What is it?' she called, annoyed.

The door opened and Jynx poked his head round the door. 'Mantis is here,' he said. 'Says he's got something for you to talk about. He won't tell me what.' He spoke to Hooknife, but Yallinia replied: 'Show him in.'

Jynx glanced at her, and then gave a half-annoyed look at Hooknife for his submissiveness before disappearing back behind the door. Yallinia and Hooknife looked at each other. They hadn't assigned Mantis any work in a few months now because of the deal they'd struck with Draven. He'd be growing restless.

A moment later Mantis entered the room with that confident stride of his. He oozed charm, intelligence, grace. And he was a cold hearted killer. His features were clean-shaven, well groomed, square-jawed looks and brooding dark eyes that looked at everything at once. He addressed Yallinia, paying no heed to Hooknife.

'It's been a while Yallinia,' he smiled, as if they were old friends meeting after departing ways. 'How've you been?'

'You can drop your pretence, Mantis,' Hooknife told him, saying this name with some distaste and waving his little arm about flamboyantly and unnecessarily, 'State your business here or...'

'Or what?' Mantis cut him off. 'You'll put me out of work?' Without asking he pulled up a chair and sat at the table opposite them, putting his feet up arrogantly on the table. 'You've already done that.'

Yallinia was getting bored of this already and wanted to know what Mantis was doing here. He never came to them without being called unless he had a very good reason. And whatever his reason, it wasn't good enough; she had bigger things to concern herself with.

'You have something which vexes you?' she asked him, hoping to get this over with quickly. She fully expected him to ask for work, and was glad that she could appease him now that Draven had been disposed of.

He turned his attention fully back to her. 'Yes. It will be flying around the city soon but as I was in the neighbourhood I thought I'd let you know.'

'Yes yes, and I expect you're here to demand why we haven't given you any work these past few weeks as well,' Hookknife said. 'Well it's not your concern.' Mantis shot him a warning glance but kept most of his attention on Yallinia who, he knew, now really ran the place and only kept that little fool around to subdue the halflings. He hadn't quite figured out how she'd snatched power from him so easily, but it had been plain to see that over the past half a year she'd had the halfling firmly under her thumb.

He said: 'Word on the Street has it that Elina, niece of our wise Lord Elgeros, was captured last night,' he smiled his sad-looking smile. 'You wouldn't know anything about that would you?'

Yallinia's surprise only showed by her eyes widening ever so slightly. No she didn't know anything about it, and since she was, for all intents and purposes, the head of the Thieves Guild, she really should know something about a thing as big as that. Had Mantis kidnapped her? Was he planning to use this to somehow coax them to give him his duties back. Did the bastard have her locked away somewhere, playing both sides, one to get a ransom off the guards, and at the same time another from the Guild?

She came clean. 'No, I wouldn't. Would you?'

Her attention was so fixed on Mantis that she didn't notice Hookknife fidget nervously.

Unprepared for the unexpected question Mantis found himself answering: 'No, Some guards down at an inn did, though. They say they saw it all happen. A man broke in and kidnapped her from her bedroom on the top floor of the keep.'

'And it wasn't you?'

'No, it wasn't one of yours?'

'No'

'I thought it would have been, which is why I came here to have a word with you. Equally, you'd have suspected me, yes?' Yallinia nodded, almost imperceptibly, and Mantis went on: 'Then it seems we have a common agenda here, as the authorities will also think the same way as we have. Neither of us are unknown to the guard, and they'll assume we're to blame for this and will come after me and you. And your guild. With everything they have. It's in our best interests to work together on this one and find out who really did it, don't you agree?'

'This girl...' Hookknife suddenly chirped in, somewhat hesitantly. 'Do you know... what she looks like'

An unexpected question, and Mantis knew the answer. 'It's no secret that she is one of the prettiest ladies in the lands.'

'Damn it I mean details! What colour is her hair man?!'

'Blonde, and long, so I hear.'

Hookknife looked as if he'd been turned to stone. 'And she.. she is slim and and... young and pretty..?'

Mantis nodded slowly, evenly. There was a second's silence, and then: 'What have you done now you wretch?!' Yallinia snapped.

The little halfling seemed to shrink even more as he turned towards his partner in crime. 'I... I didn't mention it before...' he stuttered. 'I didn't think it was important.'

'What?! Spit it out!'

'This morning, when Draven returned, he'd brought back a girl with him too, he said he'd accidentally kidnapped her!'

Yallinia practically jumped out of her chair and pinned the little man down into his before he could react. The Serpent Fang, an object that by no means escaped

the attention of Mantis as soon as it came into view, was held hovering over his cheek. 'Are you telling me that that delivery boy of ours kidnapped Elgeros's niece – the King's GRANDAUGHTER! – and you didn't do anything about it?' 'We didn't know who she was, so I sent her to the mines with the others!' snapped the halfling who, not for the first time, was under a knife. 'He got the dagger and that was all I thought important.'

'You idiot!' Yallinia angrily slashed the unscarred side of his face with the Fang in a motion that was intended to be a painful but relatively harmless lesson – and she drew away instantly when he gave out a horrifying scream that was far too tortured to be a result from the cut alone. Hookknife, clutching his face, flew out of his chair and onto the floor where he began to flail around, still screaming the inhuman scream.

The door burst open and three halflings rushed in with their weapons drawn after hearing the cries he was giving out. Jynx was one of them; his usual cheerful features etched in dread upon hearing the sound.

It was he who demanded: "What's going on in here?"

Mantis was sitting bolt upright in his chair and Yallinia was stood with a knife in her hand. Hookknife, who had stopped screaming, also ceased moving, and for a moment they all thought he was dead.

And then he looked up.

The once unscarred side of his face had now turned a sickly brown colour; it had swelled up to over twice its original size. One eye, a nostril, and the side of his mouth had disappeared under a mass of puss-filled, jellified, quivering flesh.

'Kill her!' he hissed to the halflings, in a voice that was unrecognisable to what it was.

The three halflings hesitated, and then attacked.

'Mantis!' Yallinia yelled, whipping out one of her stars with her off-hand and launching it across the room. Jynx managed to partially parry it and it glanced him on the shoulder. He let out a yelp of pain but it succeeded only in slowing him down.

Mantis acted without getting up from where he was sitting. Two metallic flashes shot towards the halflings. Two dropped to the ground, making sickening gurgling noises. Jynx propelled himself at Yallinia with his short sword firmly clasped in his right hand. She dodged his swipe, and she then wildly struck with the Fang of the Serpent. Jynx cried out again and then landed on the floor behind her in a motionless heap. There was the crash of glass breaking and she whirled round towards the sound to glimpse Hookknife jumping through the window and away. Yallinia turned back to Mantis. He was calmly retrieving his daggers (which were of an odd design - a star and moon etched on the hilts) and as he was doing so he looked up at her and asked: 'What sorcery is contained within that blade?' Yallinia didn't answer him, instead she put the blade carefully back into its sheath.

'We don't have much time. Hookknife is gone, I needed him, without him, the halflings will rebel against me. Many of our kin will side with me, but it will be civil war within the Guild, the whole thing will break down." she said without pausing for breath, the adrenaline still flowing through her veins.

He shook his head. 'I care not.'

'You should. The guard and the Guild will now come after you as well as myself.' Mantis found himself smiling with his thin lips. The city guard and the halflings of the Guild both after him - he was fast becoming a popular man. He could always leave town but that would seem like he was defeated, and his ego would never allow that.

'Mantis. I have a job for you, if you would have it. Find Elina, and bring her to me...'

'Why?'

Yalliana began to explain. She gave brief details and spoke in a quiet voice, but it was loud enough for Jynx, who was quite alive and listening intently, to hear everything she said.

Chapter 5 – The Mines

Princess Elina couldn't sleep, and no one would have been able to blame her. It was only last night that she'd been snatched from the luxury of the palace in Port Grimveil, and she now found herself in a small wooden room with naught but the basic furnishings of a hard bed, stool and a small table. There were two windows which were little more than narrow slits and served no other purpose than to let in some light and ventilation. This small wooden room was one of many other small wooden rooms that composed the west wing of a building she'd heard called 'The Manor House' - the Slave Master's home. Slave Master... yet despite that being the name most people addressed him by, she had heard two slavers talking outside call him by another name: Seregon. It was a name she both feared and despised already though she had neither met nor seen him, but by all accounts he was more monster than man.

'I hope you don't please him, I wouldn't mind having a go myself!' one guard had taunted. No one had ever spoken to her in this way and it made her feel sick inside. Before last night no man had done more than to kiss her hand.

Oh by Aurora, how did she end up in this place? She was a noble, a priestess, skilled in the arts of curing and purifying. Nothing in all her life could have prepared her for the drastic change her life had just taken. She wiped the tears from her face. She didn't belong here in this...

What was that?

She heard footsteps on the corridor beyond her barred door, and they were getting closer. They were big, heavy footfalls which made the floor vibrate, and she began to have a feeling of utter dread well up in the pit of her stomach. The footsteps stopped right outside the door. She heard a bolt sliding, and he entered.

This was Seregon, she was certain. He stood over seven feet tall and seemed to fill the entire room as he stepped inside. His arms were well muscled and reminded her of old gnarled branches. His skin was the colour of granite. His little eyes looked at her from a face that was not wholly human – his jaw was too

prominent, his forehead too sloped, his ears too big. He was a half-ogre as she'd been told, and so could only assume that the rest of the things she's heard about this place and why she was here were true as well.

'So this is the fresh one they brought today,' Seregon said in a low commanding voice that sounded of rock grating on rock. She unconsciously slid back across the bed with her back placed firmly against the corner of the room.

Seregon stepped further into the room towards her, towering over her.

'Yes, I can see you will be one of my favourites,' he reached out with a huge hand to hold up her little white chin so he could see her face better, and at the feel of his rough skin she became paralysed with fear. 'You are a pretty thing aren't you?' he said in something of a softer tone. 'So young and pure...'

He toyed with her blonde hair with his other hand. He was, to her surprise, very gentle, but it did not comfort her at all.

"Please... please..." she croaked. "No."

'I will save you for later,' he said after he studied her for a moment, withdrawing his hands and left, locking the door behind him. The few seconds of joy she felt at his leaving were quickly replaced by a deep dread, knowing that when he returned the next day she would not be so lucky.

She heard him enter the next room and soon after heard sobs and cries from her unknown neighbour, and she started to sob quietly to herself.

She had to get out of there! Elgeros would be looking for her, but how could he find her out here? How could he?

* * *

Morning came, and across the plateau a long line of slaves made their way from the pens into the cave, and down into the mine. Draven was one of these men, accompanied, for whatever reason, by the halfling thief Mentillio who had decided he made good company. These and a hundred or so other men left the cold hidden plateau and went into the Ironshaft mines, to replace the hundred or so men who now filed tired and coughing out of the mines and back to the pens.

They had been given access to water and leftovers from the slaver's provisions, but that was little solace for Draven who had had a restless night's sleep, and the scraps of stale bread he'd consumed had done little to dissuade his headache to dissipate nor to satisfy his hunger.

At the back of the cave they were made to go inside a wooden cage in groups of six at a time, which took them down into the depths of the mine on a counterweight pulley system. When they returned to the surface only three men could be brought up at once because of the added weight of the ore.

All daylight was banished as they travelled underground, hundreds of feet, into a torch-lit labyrinth of tunnels carved over decades from the rock by countless slaves; a seemingly endless supply of criminals, deviants, and people who those in charge just wanted to disappear. They all had a quota to meet. They'd heard rumours of the tortures Seregon thought up for slaves who didn't pull their weight, and that served as more than enough motivation for those that worked there.

The air was thick, and heavy with dust, sweat and the stench of waste that was left down in the tunnels; even those who could call themselves used to it still found themselves choking on the air down the mines. Those less accustomed to it often vomited out what little food they had in their stomachs or fainted. No one did anything to help them, no one had the time.. A man had to make his quota, and if that meant stealing another man's ore and introducing him to the point of a pick-axe then so be it.

The mines were lit with spluttering torches which offered scant light to illuminate the blackness. Around them, Draven could hear the rocks creaking and groaning.

He was just struggling to catch his breath and his head was still spinning, when he felt a sharp jab in his back from one of the guards, Draven took a pick axe from those left behind by the last shift and herded down one of the many tunnels which lead from the cavern, Mentillio following him. Deep they went into the earth, though they had no real idea where they would find what they were searching for. Draven had imagined that the mines would be hot, but they were

instead filled with a deep, damp chill that penetrated right through their clothes and gnawed away at their bones. Water was constantly running down the walls and dripping from the low ceiling. The floor was often covered in water which could go as deep as knee height, and at once they once came to an area where the tunnel was completely flooded and they were forced to turn back they way they had come, 'May the gods help those who were in there' muttered Draven, Despite his lack of love for the gods, this place could change a man.

They then came to another end in the tunnel. It was deserted, but it had been mined recently, probably by the last shift, and glinting in the torches within the stone they saw veins of iron ore.

Mentillio grinned. 'Good fortune, we'll have this to mine and get Seregon his ore this day!'

Draven nodded, but his face was grim. So, this it then? His life would be spent in these mines now, scrambling for scraps of iron ore with no chance of escape. He would rather had Hookknife put a knife in his heart than this..

'Ere now, what do we have 'ere?' a voice behind them got their attention. They turned to see four men, slaves like themselves, approach down the tunnel. 'This be our dig curs, clear off if ya know what's good for ya,' growled the leader of the men.

'There is enough ore here to go around,' Draven told them evenly. 'There's no need for trouble.'

The men stopped walking, and laughed. 'Ya be new 'ere wouldn't ya?' The leader spoke up again. 'I'll clear things up for ya then shall I? Me name be Fen and these are me boys. We look after each other and anyone who gets in our way gets moved out of the way pretty sharpish, see? Now, you's in our way, so move.'

'If we all worked together, there'd be no need for anyone to miss their quota,' Draven said calmly, though Draven could sense a fight when one was going to happen, and now was definitely one of those times.

The leader of the men, who was bigger than his fellows, stepped forward: 'I'm getting tired of yer chattering. It's kill or be killed down 'ere. Survival a the fittest,

meanest an' baddest! Now git movin' or you'll be feeling the end of me axe 'ere see?'

The man and his gang raised their pick axes ready to fight. A pick axe was not Draven's preferred weapon of choice but he made ready to use it, as did Mentillio.

'Want a fight do ya? Alright then! At 'em boys!'

The four men made for them. Draven did not want to fight. He hated fighting. He could do it, but it was always when he'd been pressed into it. It was always at times like now, and he crouched ready to drive his weapon into the nearest man's skull.

Something large and heavy flew down the dark tunnel, catching the light of the torches, and impacted with the leader of the gang who flew backwards several feet and lay still; a pick axe protruding from the bloody ruin of his head. The other three men stopped running in their tracks.

'Hells!' one of them uttered.

'Fen's dead!' Complete disbelief filled another man.

'Uh, you.. you 'ave it, we'll find sommin' else!'

With that, the three remaining members of the gang scurried hurriedly away.

Mentillio went to retrieve his pick axe.

'I'll tell ye one thing,' Mentillio said to Draven, his voice raised and on his face an angry sneer, 'I'll not be taking crap from any of these lowlifes either!' He pulled the axe from the man's skull with a crack, and Draven realised it was in his best interests to stay on the halfling's good side from then on. He realised now what mattered the most to the slaves here - and all that mattered was the will to survive.

Chapter 6 – A Deal is Struck

Elina could see the sun sinking lower and lower towards the cliffs that effectively hid the mines from the rest of the world, already knowing that when darkness came Seregon would return. This day for her had passed longer than any other of her life, but at the same time seemed to have gone in the blink of an eye.

Elgeros had not come, and tomorrow would be too late for her. After tonight she would never be able to become a true priestess of Aurora, would never be able to realise her dreams. Her purity and innocence was about to be stripped from her, and there was nothing she could do about it.

But her dreams, her home and her family may as well be a thousand miles away from this terrible place. All day long she had heard the workings of the mines; the dull throb of machinery, the cracks of whips, the grinding of stone. All day she had sat there and been the loneliest and most frightened thing on the whole of Iliosia.

She thought about the days leading up to this point, trying to analyse why she was here; if she'd displeased the goddess in any way, trying to find reason why she wasn't to become a true priestess. But she'd followed her duties well; she'd studied the arts diligently and had remained true to her faith. No matter how hard she tried, no matter how hard she prayed, she couldn't find a reason why she was there except that the Fates had decided it.

It wasn't fair.

It was dark, she suddenly realised, as she shook herself from her self pity. The light of the day was just a thin line on the horizon now. It wouldn't be long before... oh no! She could hear his footsteps! He was early! She found that she pushed herself into the corner again as she crouched on the bed, and heard the latch open.

Seregon stepped inside and closed the door behind him. He stank of sweat as he'd just come from the mines. He didn't say anything until he sat on the bed. He was bigger than she remembered.

'I've been thinking about you all day,' he told her; his voice had a desperate edge which scared her even more.

She didn't reply. She had nothing to say to him, and doubted he'd listen.

'No others have been brought to me like you. None are softer or prettier.'

He glanced at her, and she physically flinched.

'Oh, you are a pretty thing!' Seregon suddenly grabbed her by the waist with one hand and pulled the terrified girl towards him. 'You are the prettiest girl in my harem. You will be my favourite, yes! And you're so soft!'

'NO!' she screamed at him, struggling for all she was worth but unable to do anything against his strength. She smashed her elbow against his chest and her elbow came off worse.

He laughed a deep and malicious laugh. 'I'll soon cool that fiery spirit of yours!'

'I can pay you! Let me go!'

He forced her to sit on his lap; his huge hands controlling her as if she were a life-sized doll.

'Even if you could,' the half-ogre chuckled, 'I have wealth of my own little one. And there's no way money could make up for this!'

He squeezed her breast and despite the thick fabric covering them she still cried out in pain. She could feel his arousal growing under her, and tried to take her mind somewhere, anywhere, other than here and the thought of what was happening to her.

Suddenly the door crashed open and in flew a shadow. A shadow which had two knives in place of its hands. And the shadow attacked with them.

Elina screamed again as Seregon threw her from him to face his unknown assailant. The knives struck, one embedded itself in his side, the other in his shoulder, and Seregon howled out and fell back. But he was a fighter – his ogre heritage gave him inhuman resilience – and it took him less than two seconds to recover from the surprise attack. He caught a glimpse of the shadow escaping the room and taking the girl with him. A mighty animalistic rage overtook him. He roared his fury, stumbling out of the room after them, ripping the door off its

hinges as he did so. There was no way he could keep up with them in his wounded state and they darted around a corner and vanished.

Seregon stood there, covered in his own blood, panting like a bull. It was only now that he noticed the dagger which had pierced his shoulder had remained there, caught in the thick muscle and tendons. He pulled out the dagger; a tiny thing in his giant hands, and stormed out of his manor.

'You!' he stormed at a group of guards on duty outside. 'My favourite has been stolen! I will not let them escape the mines! Find them!'

The guards all stood in mute shock for a few seconds trying to take in the sight of the Slave Master standing there covered in his own blood, and attempting to make sense of what he was saying.

'Now, you idiots!' Seregon wailed. 'There's a thief in the mine somewhere. Don't let him escape!'

This made more sense to them and they sprang into action immediately, more to get away from the towering half-man who was lumbering towards them than to follow his orders.

Within minutes the camp was being searched from top to bottom. Every hut, house and tower was searched. The guards stationed at the gate swore they had seen no one enter or leave the camp, and those around the manor had seen nothing either. In fact no one had seen nor heard anything that night, and this had only served to stoke Seregon's wrath, who had already snapped the necks of two poor slaves who happened to be working in the wrong place at the wrong time.

'I will have her back,' he was muttering to himself, examining the oddly designed dagger which had impaled itself in his shoulder.

'Sir,' a brave slaver ventured. 'We have found something.'

Seregon looked up from the grinding stone upon which he sat; a grinding stone which, at that moment, should have been playing its part in the process of extracting the pure ore from what was brought up at the mines. But none of the machines were running. All of the slaves not in the mines had been put back in the pens and all available guards had been searching for what they now knew as

a girl from the harem and maybe a kidnapper or rescuer of some kind. The fact that no ore was being produced made them anxious, because no ore meant no sale, and no sale meant no pay.

'What have you found? Have you found her?'

'N-no. We have found a rope ladder, hanging down the cliff behind the manor. The kidnapper must have come down it, and surely by now must have gone back up it again.'

'Escaped!?' Seregon shot to his feet and the slaver stumbled back a few paces, stumbling over a bucket. Seregon would probably have killed him, if he was not distracted by the sound of the bells calling the workers up from the mines, and Seregon stormed off in the direction of the cave.

* * *

Draven's surge of elation at being back on the surface again sent a strong shiver up his spine – he felt a breeze on his face and the air was not poisoned, but clean and cool. By the Gods he had to get out of here! It had been hellish, and Draven was not a man suited to hard labour. The fact that his sack was full of ore did nothing to improve his mood, as he'd have to do the same tomorrow, and the next day, and the only thing he'd have to look forward to was the feel of the fresh air as the day in the mines ended.

Mentillio was alongside him, and another man came up in the lift with them. He had been here a long time, Draven could tell. The man was filthy and dressed in rags, his body was skeletal, his hair and beard long and matted with filth. Draven felt sorry for him, and thus made way for him to let him out of the lift and into the fresh air first.

The move saved his life, but doomed the man.

'Those slaves, there!' a deep, animalistic voice echoed in the cavern, and they saw Seregon, who looked as if he had just fought through a war, bearing down upon them. In his hand he held a long, thin knife which looked very out of place

in the half ogre's hand. 'I want to gut them, now,' Seregon ordered his men. 'Drag them outside.'

Draven's heart almost leapt right out of his mouth right then. 'What? Wait! Stop!' he yelled. 'We haven't done anything!' He cursed his luck. First Elina, then Hookknife and now Seregon - everyone wanted him dead!

'I do not care, blood is what I want, and is what I will get!' Seregon boomed.

Their bags of ore spilling over the floor, each of them were seized by the slavers and dragged forcibly from the cavern and out into the plateau.

Any escape was impossible; there were a dozen or so armed men surrounding the three of them even if one of them did manage to break free. The hands of the men felt like vices on his arms. They were strong, rough hands, the hands of men who knew how to handle themselves and hadn't had much of a charmed life.

Draven watched as the man he did not know was yanked around, whimpering, crying a little. He struggled in the grip of the slaves who held him, but they were both bigger and stronger than he. Seregon stood before the man and, as he was held upright by the guards, Seregon slammed the small knife into his gut and cut him open.

The man screamed, gurgled, and shuddered. Draven gasped in horror and looked away as he caught a glimpse of his insides spilling. The man screamed for what seemed like a very long time until his cry subsided and he fell silent for the last time.

Draven opened his eyes but only to look at the ground. A trickle of blood ran between his feet. He had never been so terrified. His heart was beating so hard he could feel it trying to bash through his ribcage. He'd faced his own death before, but he'd always had some control over it, or there'd been some justification to it. There was neither here. This was butchery. This was murder for murder's sake.

Seregon approached, his eyes glancing over Draven before decided to go to Mentillio instead. He loomed over the halfling with a hand on his hip, the other

flashing the bloody dagger before his face 'Your turn, little man.' Seregon sneered

Mentillio, for his part, looked impassively up at the monster towering above him. Draven saw his eyes follow the knife, and the halfling said: 'That be an interesting looking blade there. I've only seen its like once before.'

There was a long, quiet moment.

'Where?' Seregon barked.

'When I was in the Thieves Guild. Only one man uses them.'

'Really?' Seregon mused. He turned to Draven, who felt a shudder run down his spine at the look. 'And you? You were part of the Thieves Guild also?'

Draven gulped, and then nodded hurriedly. He didn't care if it was half a lie.

'Take these two away. They could well be useful!' Seregon waved a dismissive hand, and they were taken from the scene of the murder and in the direction of Seregon's living quarters. Draven didn't struggle against this happening, although was filled with dread at what might await him at Seregon's abode.

* * *

They were locked together in what may have been used as a storage room. The walls were made of thick wooden planks, and the door was heavy and they heard it bolted from the other side. Once it was closed, there was little light to see by, and Draven could barely make out Mentillio's outline in the darkness. A guard had been stationed outside the door - they could hear him shuffle on his feet sometimes and cough occasionally, so when they spoke it was in hushed words:

'Mentillio, are you serious about what you said?'

'What be ye meaning by that?'

Draven gritted his teeth. 'I be meaning that do you know something that might us get out of here or were you bluffing?'

Mentillio scoffed, 'I never be bluffing, Draven. Aye, I know well enough who the dagger belongs to. Don't ye worry. Menty has a plan.'

But Draven was worried. Draven was very worried. He heard a slight shuffling, and realised that he had lain down and fallen asleep. He wondered just how Mentillio could do that, because he was far too anxious about their current

situation to fall asleep. But, as time passed on the darkness and the silence overcame Draven's senses, his need for rest consumed him and he slept. He didn't know how long he slept for. He dreamed vivid dreams of darkness and confined spaces and the hissing of snakes, and awoke with a start some time later with a sweat on his brow. He could hear the dull throb of the sound of the machines on the riverside that were used to smelt the ore down. Seregon had allowed the mines to continue working then, which meant he must have stopped slaughtering people.

A short while after this, there was the thump of many feet approaching, and he squinted as the door was opened and the room was flooded with the torchlight from beyond.

'C'mon, up ye get. Seregon wants a word.'

Mentillio awoke with a disgruntled grunt from his sleep and lazily got to his feet. Draven was up in an instant; his nerves on tenterhooks. They were escorted down the corridor and into a large room at the end of it. Inside, the Slave Master was sat at the head a large table in what looked to be a dining room. Around the table, two empty chairs were placed, at each place there had been set a plate covered in vegetables and a roast joint of something which smelled like beef, along with a goblet of what seemed to be (and they certainly hoped) was red wine, and in the centre of the table was a decanter. Steam rose from the plates, drifting up Draven's nostrils, and his stomach groaned.

Around the room furs of wild and exotic beasts were hung to cover the wooden walls. 'Kills from my adventuring days; from as far away as Kharanda,' Seregon told the pair as he noticed them looking at the skins. He had been bandaged up and looked to be in good health, and better humour. 'I will tell my guards to leave, but be assured if you try to escape they or I will kill you.'

They nodded, and the guards left, closing the door behind them. They sat at the table when Seregon motioned them to, and Draven's breath was shallow and hurried. He had not expected this. This was... civil.

Seregon asked them for their names, and once they had told him he said: 'My bloodlust has passed, for now. You deal with the more human side of my nature,

but do not cross me, or you will not live to regret it.' It was a simple statement, said with utter truth ringing within it.

What would be said next would have significant effects on their futures, and Draven hoped he wouldn't have to say much.

Seregon motioned to the wine, and the food. 'Eat,' he said.

Mentillio did so instantly, guzzling down the wine and then stuffing potatoes and the roast into his mouth greedily. Draven was more measured, but just as hungry. His mouth salivated as he tasted the food, and his stomach ached to be filled.

'So, whose dagger is this?' Seregon brought it out from under the table, a long, delicate thing, with a moon and star on the end of the hilt. Seregon left the dagger lying there, withdrawing his hand, as if daring either one of them to use it. Neither of them did. Even armed with the dagger, Draven knew he would stand no chance against Seregon, whose arms looked to be as thick as Draven's own thighs.

'It be belonging to a man named Mantis. An agent of the Guild.' Mentillio said.

'Was he a friend of yours?'

Mentillio laughed. He seemed completely at ease. 'Nay, nay. Mantis is no one's friend. He's not even really part of the Guild. He's just hired out for, well, specialist work.'

'The man who took her was like a shadow. He caught me by surprise, but still moved like a snake. He left with her without me even seeing him.'

Mentillio nodded. 'Aye, that'll be him.'

It occurred to Draven that he ought to say something, lest Seregon decide he was surplus to requirements.

He swallowed his mouthful of food and sat forwards. 'So,' he began, his voice was weak, and he forced himself to continue with a more levelled tone. 'We can find Mantis for you.' He put emphasis on the word *we*. Draven knew nothing of Mantis and relatively little of the Thieves Guild or Port Grimveil at all. Seregon didn't need him, he only needed Mentillio. Draven could only hope that Mentillio felt that he needed, or at least wanted, Draven's help in this at all.

Seregon was going to say something, hesitated, and then said: 'I must have her back,' he had a touch of urgency in his voice. 'She was... special. Softer than the others.'

Draven held back a scowl; he did not wish to hear this.

'How would you find this Mantis?' Seregon asked.

'Ye can find out anything if ye ask the right people the right way,' Mentillio smiled.

'I assure ye I know who to talk to. I was in the Guild for four years. And what's more I knows who not to talk to as well which is just as important, ye know?'

'I want you to go and get her back, and I will pay you all handsomely for your task. This feast here is but a taste of what you could expect if you bring her back to me.'

'Aye and I hope we can trust you not to throw us in chains when we return.'

Mentillio said.

Seregon shook his head. 'I just want her. Two slaves are nothing to me. This Mantis means nothing, kill him or not, I just want you to get her back.'

The halfling seemed satisfied. 'Very well then, the deal be made.'

Seregon was obsessed, Draven could see it in his eyes. He'd do anything to get her back now, including letting them go with a vague promise of finding her and nothing to keep them from leaving for good.

Chapter 7 – Yallinia's Plot

A cold wet mist drifted across from the sea and over the still town of Port Grimveil. Its icy fingers crept into the docks and between the sailing ships anchored there, and past the many rowdy taverns and closed shops and silent houses, and flowed along the streets and up the alley ways, and around the palace and over the walls. The mist was thick, and Yallinia was glad of it. She waited, hidden in the dark gloom between two houses, and looked out upon Three Point Square, so-called because three roads met at this place. Twice a week a market gathered here and a vast rabble of people would barter and sell, but now the square was empty, and she waited for Mantis to return with the patience of a spider sitting in her web. Yallinia glanced upwards out of habit to tell the hour from the moon, but there was no moon. There was only a whiteness which seemed to envelop the world. She was getting nervous. The city had been put under lockdown and she'd seen that day how strict the guards were being at the gates. Elgeros was not happy that his niece had disappeared and she wondered if even Mantis would be able to get Elina back into the city. She could have no better man working for her though; that at least was certain. Mantis had never failed a job yet, and he'd better not start now, because she needed Elina. With her, everything would fall into place.

Things had not gone well since Hookknife had disappeared. Though she'd not seen anything of Hookknife, the halflings had somehow got word of what had happened and sought to rebel against her. There had been some men within the Guild who had been loyal to her because they felt her a better, more suitable leader, because she'd made empty promises to them, or because she'd bewitched them, and these men and their had stood up against the halfling rebels. The divisions within the Guild had been there for months and this was the climax where they boiled over and the violence began. There was infighting throughout the Guild now - under the city in the tunnels. She was sure that the halflings would win it, and so had fled away as soon as she could. She cared nothing for the Guild or who ran it. It had just been a way to get what she

wanted. Now Elina had been thrown into the mix, the last piece of the puzzle was in place, and she was sure that the Fates had been with her from the start. 'Soon we'll be together my love... very soon', she breathed.

She was brought from her thoughts suddenly because a man approached. He was a fat man, who ambled vaguely in her direction. He wheezed and coughed under his own weight, and stopped a while to lean against one of the buildings she was lurking between. She remained there, confident the old fool had not seen her.

'Tis a cold night tonight,' the man wheezed.

Yallinia froze, she stopped breathing. Who was he talking to? Himself?

'Hardly a time for ladies to be hiding in alleyways.'

She recognised the voice now, and came out into the otherwise empty square.

'Mantis. I didn't recognise you. Have you succeeded?'

From within the shadows of his hood Mantis nodded and patted his belly to show her where the girl he'd been sent to kidnap was. 'Aye'

'Follow me,' Yallinia told him.

She took him from the square down the road which led towards the docks and away from the usual Thief Guild meeting points.

They walked through the mist-enveloped streets until they reached the docks.

The sounds of drunken singing and fighting drifted over the air from the taverns, as did the creaking of the ship timbers and the waves calmly lapping against their hulls, and elsewhere two housecats' cries sounded as they fought for territory.

But there was little movement save the flickering of streetlamps.

Along the docks they walked, and then down some steps to the mudflats where several fishing boats lay moored, ready to go out with the tide in the morning.

Mantis was becoming increasingly nervous and tired. Elina was not heavy but he had been carrying her for the past four hours or so now and the thick mud they were walking on did nothing to aid him. He hoped that they'd get to Yallinia's hideout shortly.

She continued to lead him onwards across the mudflats to the main discharge pipe of the sewers. Then she said: 'In there. It is the safest place. They are vast

and many tunnels lie unused and abandoned, and would take Elgeros weeks to search through.'

Mantis made a face - he did not relish the prospect of going in there, though could see her reasoning. 'I see your logic, but doesn't the Guild use them?' She smiled at him through the darkness. 'Not all of them.' Then, without another word, she was walking again, and Mantis found himself following her.

Into the sewers they went. The smell was almost enough to knock Mantis out there and then, and he could only just manage to breathe by holding part of his robe to his mouth. Yallinia seemed more accustomed to the smell, and led him onwards into the filthy gloom until they could see only by the wane light drifting down from the grates in the street.

'Yallinia, this is stupid, we cannot see!' he almost fell off the narrow walkway and into the waste.

'I will create some light for us.'

He heard her speak some words he could not understand and suddenly the sewer was filled with light. Not torchlight, but sunlight. Above Yallinia's head hovered a small ball of pure light, no bigger than a child's fist.

'Magic!' he spat.

'Yes, a basic spell.'

'Basic or no, I knew not that you were a wizard.'

She almost seemed flattered, for she looked away. 'There is much about me you don't know Mantis, and I'm sure the same could be said for you. We all have our secrets, and mine is that I dabble in the Arcs.'

Mantis had a great distaste for magic, but said nothing more on the subject. He was becoming increasingly aware that he wanted as little to do with Yallinia as possible now, and just wanted her to pay him for his work. 'Lead on,' he told her. She did so, leading him through the maze of sewers which, though he tried to keep track, he soon found himself hopelessly lost.

The tunnels they were walking through got older, until they did not hold any sewage at all, but were bone dry and cobwebs filled them. Mantis also had the feeling that for quite some time they had gradually been going downwards, and

soon was certain that they were no longer in the sewers at all but in some other network of tunnels – tunnels which were so lost and forgotten that even the Thieves Guild did not use them; that perhaps even Elgeros did not know they existed. There was an arcane feel to them; a heaviness to the air. The walls became curved and red coloured. It got warmer.

And finally, just as he thought he was going to collapse, the tunnel ended and they came to a chamber. It was a large, high chamber, which reminded him of the inside of a church tower. The roof stretched away maybe a hundred feet above them, coming to a point at the very top, the six walls were made of the same red warm rock as the tunnel they'd been walking through, but carved within the walls were the faded images of what looked like some kind of angel, and some of demons. Mantis thought they may be fighting in some, but in others the angels and demons looked to be making love to one another. The carvings covered the walls, all the way to the top. In the centre of this chamber was a six-sided dais, made again of the red rock, and again with elaborate designs of flowers, vines, shapes, images, and words, but the language was unfamiliar to him. The floor too was covered with markings. Upon the dais was a coffin, which showed no signs of rot or age, and, from the amount of wet soil on the thing, it had recently been buried and dug up again. Upon the coffin was the dagger he'd seen her slash Hookknife with. He could see no place to store gold, nothing which could be adequate payment for the work he'd done. The dagger would be worth a fortune, but he could never sell it, and after seeing what it did to Hookknife and the other halflings the thing made him uneasy.

'What is this place? Where have you taken me?'

'We're directly under the fort, or palace as Elgeros likes to call it. Hush Mantis, rest. Put down your burden.'

He wouldn't say no to that. Removing the robe he'd acquired he unfastened the straps which held the still unconscious Elina from around his body, laid her upon the ground and sat next to her. Yallinia frowned when she saw the nasty bruise upon Elina's head.

'Couldn't you have found a less brutal method of subduing her?' she asked him.

'I got her here didn't I? She's unspoilt, as you wanted. You were lucky though. I got there just before Seregon could have her. She told me when I questioned her that the night before Seregon had been too tired to have his way with her. She became his favourite.'

She looked back into the chamber, at the carvings, dais, coffin and knife. 'I suppose you're wondering what all this is about? Why I want this virgin girl?' But Mantis shook his head. 'No Yallinia, I am not. I am only here to collect what I am owed, after which I want nothing to do with you again.'

She looked disappointed in him. 'That is a shame. Understand that in order for me to reward you, I must explain all of this to you.'

Mantis grew angry. 'I tire of your meanderings!' he snapped, getting to his feet. 'You have brought me to this place, and had me kidnap her, and now you tell me there is to be no reward for me?'

She held up her hands, and he felt oddly calmed by that action.

'There is a reward my friend. A reward beyond your wildest dreams. A reward which can be anything you wish!'

She had calmed him. He was not angry any longer, he was curious, and motioned for her to start talking, which she did.

'My tale is quite a long and, as you put it, a meandering one, so please be patient and listen to what I have to say. If, by then end of it, you wish to leave and never see me again, you can.'

'Very well Yallinia,' Mantis sat down again, and Yallinia did the same.

'You know me as, until recently, the joint leader of the Thieves Guild. Before that I was a petty thief, working for the Guild, collecting blood money. That is who I was, until I met Rhenis.' Her face changed when she said that name – her features lightened, her eyes brightened slightly. 'He was an elf; a priest at the temple of Hyra. I met him through the Guild. He was beautiful, and found me so too. We fell totally in love. We share a true love – a pure love. I have known nothing like it. During the times we shared together he told me great things, things which many people do not know; about the world and how it was before humans existed. About magical things, and about spell casting, which is how I

know the spells I do. He taught me. He taught me so much.' She stopped, looked up at him, and he saw tears in her eyes. 'He is dead.'

She took a deep, shuddering breath, and then continued.

'How he died isn't really important. Have you ever lost someone you loved? It is terrible. It is pain beyond words, like losing a part of yourself.'

'Is that his coffin?' Mantis suddenly asked, something between disbelief and disgust in his voice.

She looked back again towards it. 'Yes, my beloved lies in there, dead,' she turned back to Mantis. 'I had members of the Guild dig him up, just as I had them do many things in my quest for me to be in this place with you. I worked my way up the Guild ranks after his death. It was surprisingly easy. I did it because I want him back. Yes, Mantis, I know how I can bring him back from the dead, as if he never died!'

'Necromancy!' Mantis hissed. 'The Taint!'

'No, no. That creates undead; they aren't really alive. I'm talking about bringing him back, like he was.'

'It's not possible.' Mantis waved the notion away with his hand. 'There is no known way.'

'No *known* way!' she gasped, coming a bit closer to him. 'There is a way, though. A forgotten way - you have to summon a Harbinger!'

Mantis blinked.

'It's... it's a kind of demon, from an age before humans really knew anything, thousands of years ago. It's written that they had the power to raise the dead.'

'Written by who? Who would know such things?'

'Elves! And dwarves! They live longer, so remember things better. They're the Ancient Races. I have read the writings in the temple that Rhenis gave me access to. Secret, guarded writings that no thief, not even you, could manage to steal! Look at these carvings around us. They show a great war, eons ago, before mankind had crawled from the dirt. This temple was built by those who came after who worshipped demons - the denizens of Inferis. And it still survives

untouched, even to this day. I found it only with the lore I read. If I can do that, I can do anything!

'What you're proposing is to summon a demon from an age gone past to raise your dead lover?'

'Yes.' A simple statement, simply put, and one that Yallinia felt was right with her very soul.

'You are mad. I want nothing to do with this!' Mantis made a move to rise.

'No! Don't go!' Yallinia pounced at him, pinning his shoulders against the wall and looking at him with eyes that burned with fire. 'I need you. I've come this far. I needed a noble virgin and I got one! I needed a magical weapon and I got one! I need a place like this and it is here and I needed the knowledge in the first place and I have it! It's all falling into place - this was meant to be! We need Elina as a sacrifice; a virgin of noble blood, slain by a weapon of magic! That's why I sent Draven to retrieve the Serpent Fang from the palace! He brought back the virgin of noble blood too! And Mantis, you can ask the Harbinger for anything! Don't you see? Kill her with the magical knife, here in this ancient temple, and it will grant our wishes! Gold, power, anything, and it will grant it!' He looked into those eyes and his willpower crumbled away like sand in his open palm. 'I will help you,' he said.

'Thank you,' she said, and turned away. And she smiled. She had charmed Mantis more easily than she'd charmed Hookknife. Oh what a wonderful spell that was.

'We must rest,' she said. 'It is too late to start now. We will have to wait until tomorrow night before we can carry out the summoning and get what we both want.'

Far down the corridor where they had entered the ancient temple, but still within earshot, a small misshapen creature mumbled something inaudible to itself and crawled away.

Chapter 8 – The Search

Almost reluctantly morning came, and with it the sun that drove away the mist and the damp, but not the cold which lingered as it always did this time of year. As the mist fled, the people emerged from their houses to conduct the day's usual business. Carts rolled down the streets delivering goods, the first ships set sail for near or distant shores, and the slave caravan rolled in from the north, ready to take away the degenerates and deviants and other such undesirables. The slavers had two more among their number than usual - a halfling, and a thief.

'Elgeros must want Elina back badly if he's upped security to this level,' Draven said as he considered the main gate ahead. A dozen guards were stationed there, checking every cart and carriage going out of the city. 'It's a wonder the people stand for it.'

The two of them had been re-equipped and armed with well balanced short swords each. Draven was glad to be finally out of his filthy clothes and into something better. Their current garb was inconspicuous enough - cloth shirts and leggings with a leather jerkin each. They all donned the red headscarf of the slavers and Draven felt dirty just for wearing it.

Seregon had not been totally trusting of them, though. He had them escorted back to the city by the very guards who had taken them away from it to at least ensure they start in the right place. He had even wanted several of his guards to join them, or at least shadow them, but Mentillio had been adamant that such a move would jeopardise the entire operation - the two of them were known to the Guild and a stranger would not be permitted entrance: *'The lure of the reward you offer is more than enough to lure these fishies back, don't ye worry'* Mentillio had told Seregon, and they had laughed. Seregon believed him. Draven believed him too, and knew the halfling was doing this for the reward - a reward that didn't tempt Draven in the slightest, but they had to find Elina first so for now he kept his agenda to himself.

Draven glanced over at Mentillio. The little man did look rather odd on the horse he rode. He seemed to look smaller, or was it the horse looked bigger? He couldn't decide. As dislikeable as he was, Mentillio had grown on Draven over the time he had known him to the degree that he had a healthy respect for the horrible little halfling if nothing else. He feared that at some point they may well come to blows over their conflicted interests over Elina (indeed, what exactly were his own interests in Elina? Were they to save her and hand her over to Elgeros, accepting, in return, a pardon for his actions and a passage away from the city, never to return? They should have been, but they weren't).

'Now what ye be gawping at?' demanded the halfling.

Draven had been looking through Mentillio the whole time he'd been pondering this. He stuttered a little, before collecting himself. 'You're sure it's a good idea to go to the Thieves' Guild?' he thought up, though the matter had been on his mind. 'Won't someone recognise us who won't want us there?'

'We're going to see a top informer of mine who owes me a favour. I already told ye, ye've no need to worry.'

'I always worry, which is why I'm still alive.'

'Aye and why yer brain's so small' Mentillio grinned, and turned away.

Draven didn't even crack a smile. He wasn't entirely sure if it'd been a joke or an insult, and thought that maybe Mentillio was also aware that they had different goals in this venture and if that was the case, why had he allowed him to accompany him back to the city?

They approached the main gate, where a group of guards approached to inspect the wagons.

'Ye see that one there?' Mentillio said, indicating the leader of the guards who wore a grander uniform. 'That's Baranorn; Captain of the Guard. Elgeros's right hand man no less, and 'ere he be, searching slave wagons. I dread to think what'll happen to him if Elina isn't found eh?' The halfling laughed, and once again Draven did not share in his humour.

'Have you seen this woman?' a city guard asked them. He held out a portrait of a woman that had Elina's exact resemblance to Draven. 'You haven't taken anyone who looks like this?'

'No, sorry,' Draven said, then fell into character and grinned. 'Mores the pity, the only women I get to take look like dog arses!'

The guard scowled at the remark and passed on to ask someone else. 'Slaver scum,' they heard him mutter.

The wagon and the slavers were allowed to pass through the gate, and they headed the usual way towards the prison to pick up any new slaves.

On their way, the two then detached themselves from the caravan and discarded their red headbands. Mentillio stuffed his into this pocket, but Draven let his fall from his fingers and onto the muddy lane and trod on it.

Mentillio lead the way to the Thieves Guild entrance where only a few nights earlier Draven had delivered the Serpent Fang and the unconscious Elina to Hookknife.

As they neared the entrance they could immediately see that something was very wrong. The door, which was a strong, thick, wooden door and one which was always closed, was swung ajar, and when they got closer and peered into the gloom they saw the body of The Doorman lying prone on the floor with a sword through his chest. Draven, though surprised, wasn't sorry to see it. He drew his new sword, expecting trouble.

Mentillio grunted and headed inside. 'This one had been asking for something like this to happen for a while now,' he intoned as he gave the corpse a none-too-gentle boot.

Draven stepped inside along side him and peered down one of the tunnels. He could see another body lying on the ground with an arrow in it's back. 'The Guild looks like its being attacked. It could be the city guard, looking for Elina.'

'This is a little much, even for that lot!' Mentillio spat. 'And look 'ere!'" he said, pulling the sword from the Doorman. He held it aloft in the light with the dried

blood sticking to it like thick paint. 'Nicks and blemishes in the blade - this ain't the weapon of a guard.' He let the blade fall back onto the Doorman's body. Draven noticed something too. 'Yes, look here...' he went to the corpse further down the passage. It was of a human male who was sprawled out toward him. 'This man had been running this way, up towards you,' he pointed back toward Mentillio. 'He was shot in the back, by someone up that way, further in the tunnels. If the guard had broken in here, he should be facing the other way.' Mentillio had found the Doorman's pipe and had relieved his body of his tobacco. The halfling was completely unfazed by all the death around him. He lit the pipe with a match and pondered. 'So, not the guard. The Doorman would never have opened the door for anyone anyway, and it don't look like it's been forced.'

'It was the Guild'

The voice was close and came suddenly. It surprised them both; Draven whirling toward it, as Mentillio at last readied himself, discarding the pipe, and drawing his weapon. Had the owner of the voice been hostile, Mentillio would have been killed for certain. But it wasn't hostile. It was Jynx.

He emerged from the shadows of one of the other tunnels. Jynx was smaller than Mentillio, who was stocky even for a halfling. He had his arm in a sling and a bloodstain down his left hand side from a wound he'd suffered in the shoulder.

'Jynx!' Mentillio exclaimed. 'I came here looking for ye! How fortunate!'

'Shh!' Jynx hushed hurriedly, and spoke in a quiet and urgent tone 'Keep your voices down. It is not safe here. If anyone other than me had come across you they'd have likely attacked. The Guild has imploded. If we must speak - and I think we must - then we must do it away from here.'

'Where? A tavern?' Mentillio asked. Jynx nodded. 'Aye, as safe a place as any in the city right now...'

He couldn't finish his sentence. Draven grabbed him and roughly lifted him, pushing him against the wall with his forearm wedged in his neck. Jynx gasped, struggling as he was choked.

'What in the hells name do ye think yer doing?!' Mentillio yelled, despite what Jynx had just told him.

Draven ignored him, his eyes fixed angrily on Jynx. 'You let me walk right in there, didn't you? You knew Hookknife was going to send me to the mines.'

Jynx shook his head, and croaked: 'I didn't.. know anything.. about that!'

Draven couldn't contain his anger. He liked Jynx, he remembered the smile he flashed him as he'd opened the door for him to that ambush. He'd trusted him.

'Draven please... please..' Jynx gasped.

Draven had never intended to go all the way and choke him to death, but Mentillio wasn't willing to give him the benefit of the doubt and struck his ribs with the hilt of his sword, causing him to gasp and let him go.

When Draven thought back on this moment it would scare him. He would tell himself that he had always intended to let Jynx go, but just before Mentillio had struck him. Yet his own anger, his adrenaline, and perhaps most of all his ability to be in control of something (which felt he had not been since he had arrived at the port) may have made him push it just a little bit further than he'd meant to.

Draven collapsed with Jynx, both of them sliding to the floor and coughing.

'Pull yerself together, ye great idiot!' Mentillio barked. 'Jynx is as honest as they come, and if ye kill him we'll have no chance of finding yer girlfriend!'

'I didn't know... I didn't.' Jynx panted at Draven.

A wash of regret surged over Draven, whose anger had overtaken him and made him a mindless aggressor. He shuddered, remembering what Seregon had said:

'You deal with the more human side of my nature...' Seregon's ogre instincts could overcome him and make him an animal. Draven was no half ogre, but he had snapped just the same.

'I'm sorry.' he told Jynx.

Mentillio pulled them both to their feet. 'All very touching. Now, let's get to an inn and get to business.'

* * *

The tavern they went to was as regular as they came - crowded, smoky, loud. Mead and beer being quaffed and spilt and laughter and shouting ringing out over each other, with card games and dice games and sailors challenging one another to arm wrestling with threats and boasts flying this way and that.

They had little coin on them, but enough to get some thin stew and a mug of ale each (Draven had bought Jynx's out of guilt for what he had done). The three of them huddled around a table near the back of the inn, away from the main ruckus but still close enough that they had to raise their voices to one another to be heard. It did not matter - no one was listening.

'The Thieves Guild is no more,' Jynx began, and then told them everything. It started for him when he had been around Hookknife's quarters when he had heard the scream. Like the other two who had been around, he had come to his aid and seen Yallinia and Mantis there. He had seen what had become of Hookknife. When he had attacked Yallinia and missed, she thought she had struck him with the dagger of hers. He had been fortunate in that the blade had slid not into him but instead into the leather pouch he kept around his neck which contained his smoking weed. He'd made the most of his luck and played dead after that because he knew full well he didn't stand a chance against both Yallinia and Mantis.

So he lay there and listened to what Yallinia had told Mantis next:

'Mantis. I have a job for you, if you would have it. Find Elina, and bring her to me...'

'Why?'

'She is no good to us at the mines. If we have her then we have a bargaining chip.'

'You said bring her to me, wench. Don't lie to me.'

She sighed. 'Very well, you are sharp in your observations. I need her, it's true. And I need you to get her for me. I will pay you, Mantis. You're short on coin, I know, and I have plenty.'

'This is better...'

'Also, I assure you that when I have her, neither the city watch nor the Thieves Guild will suspect you in her disappearance.'

'Well, that's good. Since I didn't have anything to do with her disappearance.'

'Indeed. Go and get her for me, Mantis. And get her quickly - I've heard of what Seregon does with women up there.'

'I can imagine'

'Bring her back to me. Meet me at Three Point Square, at midnight tonight, and I'll take you to my hideout in the dock's sewers where I'll pay you. You'll never find it otherwise.'

There had then been a noise which had disturbed them, and they both had fled. Once he had been found, Jynx had told the other halflings of what had occurred between the two of them and Hookknife, and the Guild began to break apart. The halflings had been itching at a chance to claw something back from Yallinia, and this was it. It hadn't taken much - a push and a harsh word, and then there was fighting and bloodshed, and no one to stop it. Hookknife and Yallinia had both disappeared and both sides blamed the other. In the end, the warrens beneath the city had turned into a battleground.

'There are few left now,' Jynx told them. 'The halflings won - drove the humans away. I had no part in it. I had done enough by starting it in the first place. I don't regret it, but it doesn't stop me being sad. A lot of people died, and the Guild is no more.'

'Well, thank ye, Jynx' said Mentillio. 'I came here looking for ye, but ye found us first. I knew ye'd know something about this. Eyes and ears everywhere, this one,' Mentillio poked a thumb at Jynx while looking at Draven, who simply smiled.

'You're going after Mantis and the girl?' Jynx asked

'Aye. More the girl - there's a fine price on her head. Seregon will have to at least match the one offered by Elgeros. That's quite a pretty penny. Will you come?'

Draven, who had not expected the question, welcomed the invitation. He hoped that his outburst toward Jynx would not sour their relationship if he chose to accept (and then thought, if it did, he'd have two of them to deal with rather than just the one, and it seemed likely Mentillio was aware of this also).

Jynx considered a while, turning the mug of ale he had in his small hands. 'If I did, it would not be to go after any woman other than Yallinia. The Guild was my home, and she destroyed it. I'd be coming after her.'

'I can't blame you for that,' Draven said.

'Then come,' Mentillio said. 'Whatever reason she has for taking the girl, it's likely we'll have to deal with Yallinia anyways.'

Jynx nodded assertively, his lips drawn in a line of determination. 'Yes, I'll come with you.'

Three people with three agendas. Draven had been on a lot of misadventures in his life and he had a strong feeling this one wasn't going to end any better than any of them had.

They went out of the inn and headed to the docks, which were the lifeblood of the city. It was midday by now, and the business of the day was in full swing. A myriad of peoples mingled around; young and old, big and small, all races and creeds and colours. Sailing folk, most of them, but businessmen and passengers too, coming and going this way and that all with their own reasons for being there. The whole place smelt of fish, which was unsurprising considering the trawlers making land with nets full of their latest catches. Boxes and crates and barrels were being loaded and unloaded from the various vessels moored at the docks, and overhead a swirling mess of seabirds flew, calling out over the dark ocean as it rolled and moved.

Draven found himself looking out towards it as he and Mentillio waited while Jynx had gone into a shop to buy some lanterns so that they could see in the tunnels beneath the city. He found himself longing to hop on a boat and be gone from this place forever. It was quite a possibility, but he realised even as he thought it he wouldn't do it. There was no Thieves Guild here now, no one keeping him under house arrest, and yet something kept him here and he didn't know what it was.

They reached the edge of the sea wall where there was a set of ill used and unsafe looking steps which lead down to the mudflats and to the sewer pipe which Yallinia would surely have meant when she spoke to Mantis. It was quieter at this end of the docks. Thankfully, people did not want to do their trading near the sewer outlet pipe, and so it was with little worry of being seen (at

least by anyone who would be at all interested) that they headed down the steps and went to the pipe.

As they neared it, Draven wished he had some of those nose filters left and he had to cover his mouth with his sleeve. The others did the same.

'It be a safe place for them to hide in, that's for sure. The Watch would never come down here. They don't get paid enough!" Jynx said to them. It was loud down here too - the waves echoed along the sea wall. 'We should hurry - the tide will be coming in soon and will clean the sewers out - and us along with it!

'Draven.'

The rasping voice Draven suddenly heard call his name made him jump.

'Draven!'

It was coming from within the pipe.

It was a voice which he hadn't heard before and yet he knew it. They peered into the black hole, but could make little out within it. Something in there moved but it was too dark to see detail.

'Who are you?' called Draven. 'What do you want?'

'Hooknife I am, or wass.'

'So the illusive leader of the Thieves Guild,' mused Mentillio.

'Come insside, it is where you were going anyway, wassn't it?,' Hooknife called to them, in a voice that was still his but different to how any of them remembered it. 'I have newss for you.'

'It's a trap, it must be,' Mentillio said to them, quietly.

'Aye, it seems that way,' Draven agreed. 'But it seems too obvious to be a trap – too crude for the work of thieves...'

'I have newss about Mantis and Elina,' Hooknife called to them again. 'I heard you talking, I know you sseek her. I know where she is'

'So do we.'

There was a low hiss. 'The ssewerss yess? Clever, yess, clever you are, but you know not exactly where, and you would be losst for an eternity before you find what you sseek.'

'How do you know where they are?!'

'I will not answer any more questions until you come in here!' spat Hooknife. Draven thought for a moment. 'I'll go in there and speak to him,' he said. 'You two stay here and help if anything happens.'

'I should go to him,' Jynx said. 'He knows me the best.'

'Maybe, but he's asking for me,' Draven told him, getting one of the lanterns Jynx had bought ready.

'Yer going to talk to him?' Mentillio was shocked. 'Tis bound to be a trap man!'

'How? Who is he working with that could make it a trap? He has no one.'

Draven told him firmly, and they all knew that he was right.

Nevertheless, Draven took a firm grip on the handle of his newly-acquired short blade and stepped into the pipe. It was just large enough for him to stand upright in at just over six feet in diameter, but it did not take long for the light to fade out and leave him standing in damp, stinking gloom.

He saw no sign of life at all.

'Where are you Hooknife?' he called to the darkness. 'What do you want?'

'I want to kill Yallinia,' came the voice, so much clearer now away from the sounds outside. It was a rasping grating voice, not the one he used to have.

'Yallinia? There are rumours that she killed you.' Draven looked for him, but saw nothing but blackness.

'Are there?' then came a laugh that sounded more like a fit of coughing echoed from down the pipe. 'Well they are true. She did kill me. She killed what I was, and turned me into what I am now'

'And what are you?'

'Ssee for yourself!'

Draven took the invitation and held his torch alight, striking a match and bringing it to the lantern. Light illuminated the inside of the tunnel, and Hooknife squatted against the side of the pipe ten feet further up. But it was not Hooknife. Half of his face and most of the right side of his body had turned into a mass of brown quivering flesh. What remained of his right arm was now just a useless stump, and his right leg seemed to be twitching like some dying animal.

'Gods!' Draven hissed, almost turning away from the hideous creature.

'Draven? Are you alright?' Jynx called to him.

Somehow he found his voice. 'Yes, it is safe. Come down.'

'Yallinia introduced me to that little blade you brought back for uss' Hooknife said.

Jynx and Mentillio joined them and could not hide their disgust for the thing that called itself Hooknife.

'Hooknife? Is that you?!' Jynx said in a mix of amazement and horror.

'Yess, as you can ssee I cannot lead the Guild any longer. And thiss poisson spreadss fasst. I will die ssoon, and I am glad. But before I die, I wissh to have revenge!' Hooknife coughed hard

'Do you know if Mantis is down there with her?' Draven asked the remains of Hooknife.

'Yess. Sshe hass bewitched him like sshe did me. He iss her sslave. Sshe hass bad intentionss for the girl. I had intended to come and find the Guild to help. But I am dying. Now there iss no time. Come, follow me and I sshall explain on the way.'

They began to follow Hooknife, who slithered along the floor using his working arm and leg to propel him across the floor. He moved slowly - it would take a long time to get where they were going.

'I came down here to hide, and to eat the fissh they dropped off the boatss, and I ssaw Yallinia and Mantis walking along here. They entered the ssewerss, and I followed. They had Elina with them. I could follow last night, but now I am weaker, much weaker. I will die soon I think. Come, I will sshow you.'

Hooknife dragged himself along, and they followed warily.

Chapter 9 - Ritual

Those who were attuned to such things knew that there was magic in the air that evening. Not the pure, clean aura of Light magic, nor the earthy heavy aura of Nature magic or the sophisticated polished sense of the magic of the Mind. No, it was the dirty and corrupt feel of Dark magic which filled them - The Taint - and the wizards and priests of Port Grimveil stayed in their dwellings that night and hoped that the aura would come to naught. Such an aura would happen when followers of Hoth gathered to pay homage of the Dark God, but no gathering was known of, and that fact worried the practitioners of magic greatly that night.

Below the city, in a forgotten temple built to gods unknown in ages long since passed, was the source of the Taint of darkness that filled the air. There was no large gathering; only three people occupied the temple around a six-sided dais which had upon it a coffin of one not so long dead. Six torches had been set up around the six sides of the temple to light the room as the summoning took place.

Mantis watched Yallinia in shocked silence as she began the spell to bring the Harbinger forth from its plane. She had been in a kind of trance for some time now, perhaps an hour or more. She was seated cross legged on the opposite side of the dais, a small, ancient book of arcane and dark magics on the floor before her. It concerned him that she was attempting to do something so ambitious as she was no real sorceress, but the charm she had put on him had worked well and he did not even consider trying to stop her. She was mumbling something incoherent to herself and he wondered if she was doing that consciously or not. It didn't seem to be any language he had heard before.

A whimpering to his right reminded him that there was a third in the chamber. Elina had been bound and gagged and she was now looking up at him with crying, pleading eyes. Nearby the Serpent Fang lay, and at Yallinia's signal he was to take that blade and cut her throat as an offering to the Harbinger. Not a thought of pity entered his head for Elina; no signs of remorse entered any part of his soul. Nor had they ever.

Yallinia's eyes snapped open.

'It's coming!' she said. 'It's coming!'

And then there was nothing. And they waited.

Then it came.

There was a distant rumbling like the sound of an earthquake. The sound grew louder and closer, and the temple began to shake a little, then more so and Mantis started to have trouble standing. The dreadful tremors wrenched the ground beneath them erratically and there was no doubt that they were being felt above ground too.

Elina was hysterical, tears streaming unchecked down her face, as she began crawling as best she could to get away. Mantis stopped her. He pulled her back towards the dais and dragged her to her knees while trying to reach for the dagger as he realised that the time to kill her was close. Her muffled screams were drowned out by the noise.

This was too much. Too much. Yallinia screamed. Something had gone wrong! Suddenly steams of blinding blue lightning materialised from the walls several feet above their heads and struck inwards towards the chamber. Their blistering heat made them all crouch down away from it. They all tried to shield their eyes from the light; Elina buried her face into Mantis's tunic because she had no other way of protecting her eyes from the awe-inspiring glow that was emitting from above them.

Where the six beams met they crackled and wildly spat out parts of its wild energy; where it hit the walls and floor it blackened and scorched; where it hit the coffin smoke rose from the damp wood. However, none hit the three people gathered there.

The light intensified, burning like the brightest star, and came primarily from the centre where the beams met, and a ball of sparkling white Dark magic hung there. The six beams ceasing and flowing into it, leaving it suspended there for several seconds. The noise subsided. Something began to form within the ball. Through the swirling sparkling spinning energy there was a more deliberate movement, and the ball began to change shape, becoming elongated, it lost some of its light, it formed human shaped arms and legs and a head, and also

massive wings and a long, thin tail. It solidified and the light faded. The demon drifted slowly downwards to lay upon its side on the coffin.

Even those who knew nothing of magic would have known, sensed, that this thing was no Harbinger - no lesser demon. The very air seemed heavier with its mere presence.

Those in the room sensed it. This was something more. Something far, far worse.

The demon was a beautiful creature; more beautiful than any other thing they had ever seen or would have ever seen in this world. Its body had the basic form of a lithe and slim woman. Her unblemished skin was such a pure untarnished white that it pained his eyes to look upon it. Her face was long and perfect and peaceful; her thin white lips and her eyes were closed and unmoving. Her white hair was straight and fine and went down her back to the base of her wings, which were smooth and bat-like, but white. They were folded and it was impossible to tell how large they were, the tail too was curled up on the floor and it was impossible to tell how long it was. It was not smooth like the wings – instead of skin it was covered in small pale grey scales – scales which ran not only along her tail, but throughout her body as well. They covered her abdomen and ran down the sides of her legs to cover the base of her feet and her clawed toes. They ran up the middle of her torso, between her bare white breasts, over the sides of her arms to her hands, and down over her shoulders and followed her backbone to the tail again. Her hands were covered in the scales, taking on the appearance of claws like her toes.

They stared in awe at the creature that had come from a world that existed before theirs. Even Elina had stopped struggling and crying and just looked. Finally, it moved. She sat up on the coffin, her body seemingly immune to the dirt that covered it, and lifted her eyelids to show eyes that had no other colour save a deep red. The demon did not look at any of them.

'I come from this place, called from seven-thousand years of torment in Inferis, called by a being lost in its ignorance and arrogance that it now calls itself ruler of this world,' the voice shot through each of them like an arrow through the heart.

Her voice was so deep and feminine, so perfect, that it almost hurt their ears to hear it. 'I am a Chkarth, and I am its ruler now.'

The Chkarth turned its unnaturally beautiful head to look upon Yallinia, who was obviously worn from the summoning and in sheer wonder of the being that now addressed her. 'Called for a task which you wished one of my underlings to perform. You offered me escape, foolish one, and I took it. Now hear my words. What task would you have me perform before I leave to obliterate your world?'

The statement was lost on Yallinia, who only glanced at Mantis. He took this as a sign to make ready to kill the sacrifice.

'I summoned you to perform a deed for me,' Yallinia spoke in a voice that belied the fear she felt. 'Raise the one who lies dead beneath you. I want him brought back to life. He was my lover,' she added, perhaps needlessly.

'I will do this deed for you,' the demon said. 'It is in my power, but I require tribute. One of tar'tchii or noble virgin blood.'

Yallinia had no idea what a tar'tchii was, and the fact that she didn't know it reminded her of her total ignorance of what she was doing. Of what she had *done*. Regardless, she said: 'I offer you this noble virgin, to be slain by enchanted weapon. I hope this sacrifice will satisfy.'

'I accept the tribute.' The demon said, and with it Elina wished she could just stop her heart beating and spare herself the touch of the blade.

Yallinia nodded to Mantis, who made ready the knife. Elina just knelt there, her body quivering, her eyes staring. He tilted back her head and she did not fight him. She was to die now.

Then a sliver of steel span across the temple towards Mantis; but the assassin was somehow aware of it and managed to dodge even though thrown from behind him.

He turned to see a group of four enter the temple.

'Yallinia!' he called.

Yallinia had seen them, but they weren't her primary concern. 'Kill her!' she screamed, pointing towards Elina.

The action happening around her brought Elina out of her trance-like state and she started to desperately shuffle away from Mantis, kicking at him as best she could in her bonds when he tried to grab at her, and managing to keep him at bay long enough for one of the newcomers to get to them.

Mentillio had his short blade ready, and tried to stab Mantis in the back while he was distracted with Elina, but the assassin turned to meet the halfling and blocked his stroke with the Serpent Fang.

'I'll gut ye good Mantis!' threatened Mentillio as Jynx came along side him to help. Separately, neither of them would have much of a chance against Mantis, but together they put him on the back foot.

Draven rushed over to Elina and began to cut at the ropes holding her arms and legs. In her struggling her gag had loosened and she was able to work it out of her mouth. 'You!' she exclaimed, recognising him. 'What in the hells are you doing here?'

Draven glanced up at her and tried to smile reassuringly, but said nothing - he was afraid his fear at being in the presence of the demon would show through his voice.

Elsewhere, the thing that used to be Hookknife was making his way around the outskirts of the chamber with the thought of murdering Yallinia burning in his mind.

'No, you fools!' Yallinia was on her feet now, watching these unforeseen developments with bewilderment and hopelessness. The Chkarth caught her eye.

'You have not fulfilled your sacrifice,' the demon said in an even tone.

'I'm sorry!' Yallinia pleaded; her voice breaking. 'I will do! Wait!'

The Chkarth shook her head. 'No. However I will grant your wish regardless.'

Yallinia startled, not expecting this generosity. 'Th- thank you,' she said.

The Chkarth rose from the coffin and simply waved a clawed hand over it. 'It is done.'

Yallinia watched the coffin, and for a few seconds nothing happened. Mantis was battling two halflings, one of whom she thought she had killed and one she had ordered sent to the mines, and she saw Draven, who had somehow not only escaped the mines but had found where she was, who was freeing Elina.

But the coffin remained still.

Then the lid was thrown aside and landed clattering loudly upon the stone floor, and the body inside the coffin rose and got out.

It took Yallinia a few moments to realise that it was actually what it was: a body. It used to be a handsome elf, but his skin was pale, almost blue in places, his cheeks and eyes were sunken and his movements stiff. The smell of death started to fill the air. Her lover had indeed been brought back from the dead, but not in the way she'd intended.

'I... NO! Rhenis? I did not wish this!' she stammered to the demon.

The Chkarth chuckled to herself: 'It is what you asked for, is it not? Why don't you embrace him?'

To Yallinia's horror the dead body of her lover began to amble towards her, his arms outstretched to capture her in a ghastly embrace. Terrified, she backed herself against the wall and then saw to her left something else approaching her.

'Oh gods!' she gasped.

'Yess! It is I; Hooknife! Come here bitch, and I will make your death a slow one!'

Yallinia was horrified at the two abominations which now made their way towards her. All of her plans made these past weeks lay in tatters, her dreams in ruins; everything she cared about was gone. And now she'd released a Chkarth into the world for nothing. The realisation of her selfishness swept over her like a tidal wave; she was filled with an emptiness and unbelievable grief that overwhelmed her senses, and she blacked out and collapsed.

'I'll kill you bitch! I'll strangle you!' Hooknife was frantically scrambling over to where the helpless Yallinia lay. The poison was coursing through his body and had driven him to the point of insanity; now all he could think about was killing the one who had done this to him.

But a pair of long feminine legs suddenly barred his way. 'What is this thing?' The Chkarth reached down and picked Hooknife up by the throat with one of her hands, raising him fully from the ground. The Chkarth frowned with curiosity. 'I have not seen one of you before. What are you?'

Hooknife could hardly breathe: 'Musst... ku... kill... he... her....'

'Hmm,' the Chkarth's face was impassive. 'Stupid as well as ugly.' And with her curiosity satisfied she snapped his neck and dropped his lifeless body onto the red floor, then looked around the chamber at those who still remained.

Draven launched himself at the shambling corpse with a loud cry and drove his sword into its shoulder. The blade ripped through rotting skin, muscle, and bone, and penetrated well into its ribcage, but seemed to have no effect at all. The corpse slowly turned towards him with the blade still buried within it and attempted to strike at him with its heavy dead arms. Its blows were slow and clumsy but Draven recognised that their impact would be serious, and he had no way of retrieving his blade. Draven stumbled back away from the creature and felt a hand on his leg. It was Elina.

'No, you cannot kill it,' she told him. 'Help me.'

He helped her to rise; her bonds had cut off some of the circulation to her legs and she had difficulty standing but managed to do so with most of her weight against him.

Then she began to chant. She chanted in a language which he recognised as the language of magic and was surprised that she knew any of the magical arts. She moved her hands around in front of her, and within the pattern she was tracing a large red ring formed and seemed to solidify. Then with a word she sent it flying off towards the corpse. It struck it with unerring accuracy, wrapping itself around its neck and disappearing. Instantly the corpse keeled over and landed on the stone with a dull thud.

'You are tiring, little men,' Mantis smiled. He had not yet struck with the Serpent Fang, but the blood that covered his other dagger was the result of many minor wounds he'd inflicted upon both of his foes.

'Not done yet,' Mentillio panted, but neither he nor Jynx had been able to touch Mantis at all in their duel. Mantis was the better fighter, there was no doubt about that, and Mentillio now knew he had to rely on his brain to win this fight. They could run of course. He had seen that they'd got Elina and there was no real need for him to fight this man. But he was the enemy, and Mentillio was a proud man who wouldn't back down often. 'Ye cause is lost, ye see?' he indicated the rest of the chamber as they circled each other.

Mantis recognised this but the charm put upon him by Yallinia was powerful, and he would stay to fight whatever the odds. He was confident he could beat these opponents in any case. Charm or no, Mantis would always be a confident man. 'Yes, it's something I'll rectify once I deal with you!'

Mantis struck at Mentillio again. The halfling blocked the blow from the Serpent Fang but the other blade struck again, this time slashing Mentillio just under the arm. It was a bad place to be cut and the blood loss would be serious. Jynx saved him then, lunging in from the side in a hope of catching Mantis off balance. Mantis was never off balance. Indeed, Mantis had planned for Jynx to do such a thing, and, twisting away from the direction of Jynx's attack, managed to nick him with the Serpent Fang.

Jynx screamed. There was no bag of smoking weed to save him this time. He felt as if his skin was on fire around the cut as the poison spread through it. His face was contorted with rage as he tried to strike at Mantis again but found that his arm was dead and wouldn't move at all. Mantis capitalised, as he always did, and drove his own dagger into Jynx's chest.

He gasped his last breath as he felt the point enter his heart; his last thought before he died was that at least he was saved the fate Hookknife suffered at the hands of the dagger.

Draven saw this. He saw the halfling whom he had liked the most among those of the Guild, the halfling that had helped them and the halfling he had wrongly accused of being a liar die at the hands of the cold killer.

His rage flared up again. It was not so much for the loss of the halfling but more for the loss of life and the manner at which it was taken. Mantis would take a life as easily as Draven would cut a purse. It reminded him of the way Seregon executed slaves. It was the same. It wasn't right. It had to be stopped.

Mentillio got to Mantis first, though, and he too was enraged at the death of poor Jynx. Mentillio's blade smashed against Mantis's defence over and over, the ring of steel clashing throughout the chamber again and again. 'Die ye bastard die!' Mantis fell back under the assault, backing up further into the centre of the chamber...

Too late, Mantis realised there was something behind him and couldn't avoid the long tentacle that grabbed him by the ankle. It pulled him off balance, lifting him feet-first into the air. Mentillio retreated well out of the way. Mantis tried to slash at the tail with his weapons but was unable to make contact, and then lost his grip on the Serpent Fang and heard it clang on the stone floor and skid away. He tried desperately to see where it had fallen, but then found himself looking into the red eyes of the Chkarth. Never had he known such terror. Mantis had lived a life facing death every other day. His profession steeled him against the fear of pain and of dying. He'd seen life end many times, often by his own hand, and yet when looking into those eyes, those depthless red eyes, he was frozen, unable to move, unable to speak.

Draven saw it happen. He saw the cold heartless killer who had no respect for life, not even his own, freeze with the fear when he was in the clutches of the demon. He saw too how he didn't struggle even when the Chkarth lifted Mantis towards her and ripped his throat open with her pointed teeth.

'Uh... gods!' Elina gasped, turning away as the demon began to feast. 'Draven! Help her!' She pointed to Yallinia, lying unconscious on the floor.

'She's the reason you're here!' Draven protested.

'So you would leave her here to die, would you? You would be no better than these people'

Elina was right. Leaving Yallinia would mean a death sentence for her. 'Alright. Go, get out, I'll get her!'

Draven ran to Yallinia and scooped her up into his arms. She murmured as she was moved, coming to. 'Book... the book...' she said weakly, stretching for it with her hand, her fingers finding the spine of it. Draven pressed it into her grasp, and then yanked her up off the floor and made a bolt for the door. He saw Mentillio running out of the chamber too, the body of Jynx slung over his shoulder.

'Human!'

He froze. She'd seen him.

'Turn!'

He did so. He looked upon her, repulsive with her body covered in human blood and Mantis's lifeless body still hanging above her, held by her snakelike tail, and yet the same time eerily beautiful. She held the Serpent Fang in her right hand. He cursed himself for a fool that he should risk rescuing Yallinia - he had just ensured that he would die along with her.

'I am Scythliea the Reaper, one of the six Chkarth. I have been exiled from this world for seven thousand years, and now your stupidity has brought me back. You will rue this day human. You and all of your kind. Go! I let you leave so you can realise the mistake you have made today.'

Without a second thought Draven turned and fled from the chamber, Yallinia half conscious in his arms, with the Chkarth's words ringing in his head:-

'You will rue this day human. You and all of your kind.'