



JAMES HOCKLEY

DISTANT SHADOW

A SHORT STORY OF GODSLOST

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Table of Contents

[Map | The Imperial Limit](#)

[1 | The End](#)

[2 | The Prison](#)

[3 | The Way.](#)

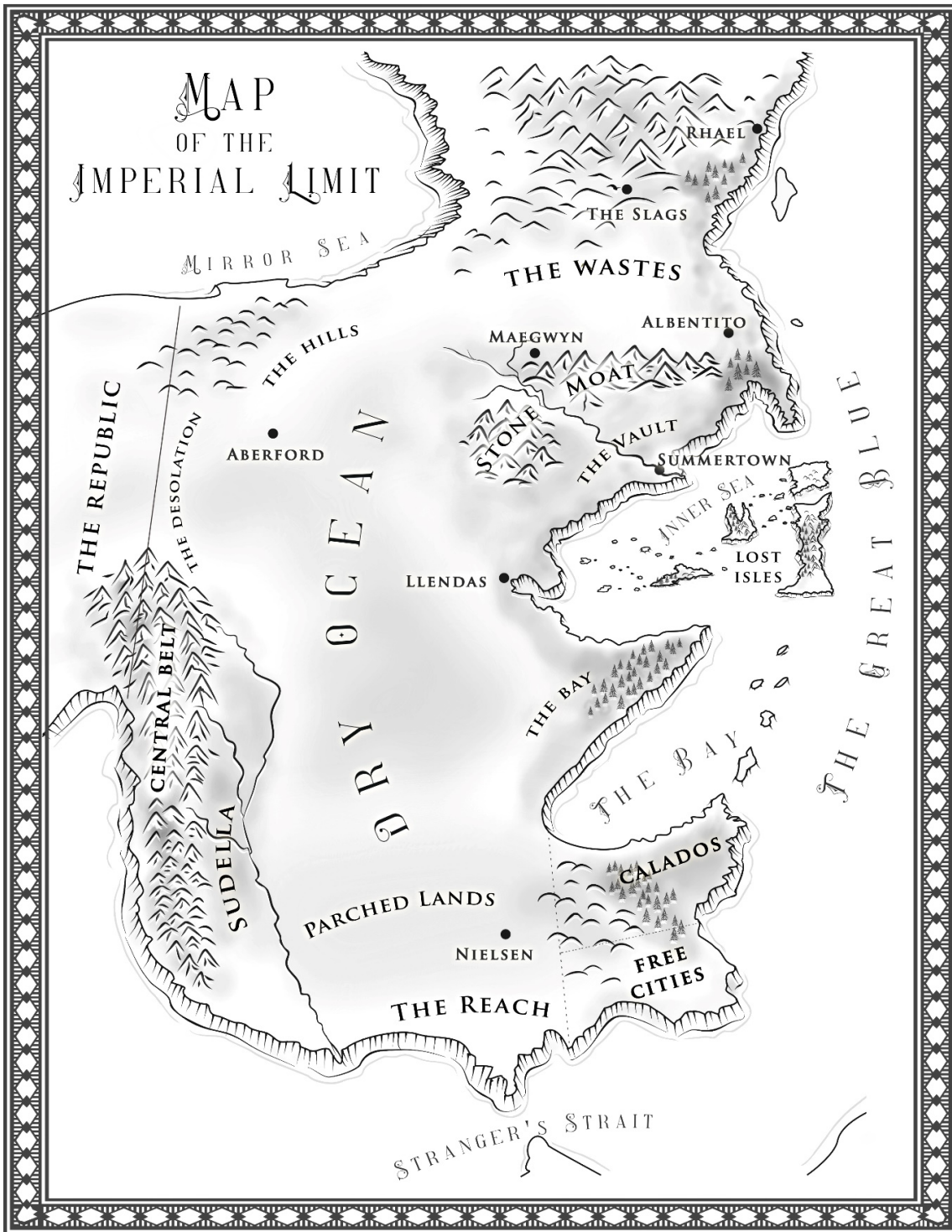
[4 | The Vengeance](#)

[Epilogue | The Beginning](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Assassin's Paradox](#)

MAP OF THE IMPERIAL LIMIT



The End

“It’ll be okay, Ali, I promise. It’ll be okay.”

Old Bet stroked his shoulder and smiled down at him, a wonkiness to that grin. But she couldn’t hide the truth from him, not really. He may only be twelve, but Old Bet’s eyes said it all. This wouldn’t be okay, and there was a very good reason for that. His ma was dead.

He sniffed back a tear and swallowed down the lump in his throat. Weakness would do him no favours here.

A house lay in front of him, right across the street. His house. A crowd of people were there, peering in with a curiosity that was more human than life itself. His ma had always said that of people – that they were nosy – and this confirmed her wisdom. Some of those in the crowd peered his way, but Old Bet drew him closer and pulled the hood of his cloak further over his face. She was hiding him, and for good reason, too: last night, he had almost been speared on the end of a weapon. It would be a shame if his luck was ruined on account of him being careless. He hunkered down, wrapping his arms around himself.

“Why have they come, Aunt Bet? Why?”

She squeezed him tighter, and leaned right down to him, mouth at his ear.

“Because they are the Empire, dear, and they do as they wish.” There was a gulp, and Old Bet whimpered. “They do as they wish, and they dislike their subjects having a voice.”

And wasn’t that just the truth of the matter? His ma had had a voice, and it had been a respected one at that. She had been the voice of the north, speaking up against the pain of imperial servitude that their country had suffered under for countless generations. That was what had got her killed – her voice – and it had almost gotten him killed, too. It was a wonder that the swords hadn’t punctured him where he lay.

The crowd parted and a man in the red livery of the Empire – a red-cloak – stepped out of the front door. The red-cloak was carrying something behind him,

and it quickly became apparent what it was. It was a stretcher, white sheet hanging over the sides, and a second red-cloak followed, carrying the back of the thing. A third red-cloak stepped out, too, this one all polished with gold trim and a red emblem at his breast. The third one also had a grim look on his face, like something wasn't right, and the man punched a northman on his way through the crowd, just for good measure.

“Get back into your filthy holes, you fire-skinned freaks!”

The crowd dispersed in the face of the third red-cloak's rage. Such hatred and vitriol. He peered up at Old Bet.

“Why do they hate us so much?”

She stroked his cheek. “Because we are greater than they will ever be.”

“But they own us. They rule us. How can we be greater than them?” He stomped a foot, but it seemed so small. “And how can they fear us so much that they leave children without their ma?”

“Because...” Old Bet tipped her head. “It is hard to explain to one so young.”

“Try.”

But she did not. She only chewed in that annoying way that old people did. What was she even chewing? He turned back to the stretcher and his ma lying beneath the white sheet. The two red-cloaks carried the body along the main road and to the central square at the foot of the Slags – great chimney-furnaces that were the industry of the town. The crowd followed at a distance, and they became a part of that crowd. Eyes flicked to him fleetingly, but none dared say a thing.

They arrived at the heart of the town, and a great throng of people had gathered. The group of onlookers were the northern local population, with fiery skin and icy blue eyes – a mirror of the cold, volcanic wastes of the north. The Empire affectionately called the region the Wastes on account of it being so inhospitable, but to the locals it was just the North. And despite its unappealing name, the emperors were obsessed with controlling the region. Their fists came down hard where rebellion in the north was concerned, and last night, the fist had come down very hard.

But that was not the end of it. No. The Empire had brought more punishment still.

At the heart of the throng of north-folk was the very core of the imperial force that had crushed his people so effectively the previous night. The red-cloaks. They stood there in their crimson finest, shiny north-made steel in hands. They guarded a great pile of logs surrounding a central post, and upon that jumble of dry wood, bodies were being deposited. Northern bodies. The stretcher with his

ma upon it reached the log-pile, and her body was unceremoniously dumped. An even more senior-looking red-cloak spoke to the grumpy officer, who shook his head. At that, Senior cracked a fist around Grumpy, which seemed fair. Served Grumpy right for punching random northmen.

“What is that?” He pointed off at the great haul of wood and the bodies laid on top. He had an inkling what the answer would be and swallowed down a lump.

Old Bet sniffed. “It is a funeral pyre.”

“And what’s that?”

“They are going to burn the bodies, dear.”

And there it was. The final punishment and the ultimate slight. In the north, a body wasn’t burned on dry southern wood. In the north, a northman was returned to the land from which they were made, buried on the lava flats where eventually they would be consumed and remade. This burning of bodies was a filthy southern tradition, exposing the remains to the wind and an unknown final resting place. This was not a good death for a northman, and he sniffed.

And then he spotted the smaller bodies – youngsters in the litter of the dead. Children his age and less. The whispering of blades in and out of the blankets from the night before came back to him vividly, but fortunately for him, not one blow had struck. These others had not been so fortunate.

“Why were they trying to kill me, too? It’s not like I have a voice.”

Old Bet squeezed him tighter again. “That, too, is hard to explain.”

“So, you’re not going to try?”

She simply shook her head. “Not now, no. When this thing is done, we will find your sister, and then we can decide what must be said and what must not be said. Until then...” There was a glistening in Aunt Bet’s eye, and she did the chewing thing. He would be getting nothing out of her now.

“And what if I say I don’t want to go to my sister?”

“Why would you say that?”

He stomped his foot. “Because she hates me. She’s always resented me.”

“No, she doesn’t.”

“Of course she does. She calls me ‘bastard’ and ‘freak’. Every chance she gets she puts me down. I don’t want to live with her.”

Old Bet shuffled closer. “Then maybe this is the time to heal those differences.” The old woman licked her lined lips. “After all, it’s not like there are many other options.”

“I could live with you.”

The old woman shook her head. “I fear I wouldn’t know what to do with you.”

“You are a nanny! You look after me better than my ma did.”

Old Bet stroked his cheek, tipping her head again. “It is too hard to explain, dear.”

“Oh, please stop with the—”

There was a boom, the sound of monstrous drums, and the crowd hushed to a deathly silence. At the centre of the square, a polished imperial commander stood straight, snapping to attention. All the other red-cloaks followed his lead.

“Servants of the Empire, be still. Your Emperor wishes a word.”

And there, from the shadows of the square, emerged a man of unrivalled power. Not only had the red-cloaks come to crush them, but the Emperor had come, too. This really was an honour, and also a curse. The fist was still pummelling, and it was not done yet.

* * *

The crowd hushed once more, but this was a different kind of silence. This wasn't only fear but wonder, too. The Emperor did that to a crowd.

The Guardian of All strolled from one side of the square to the other, around the funeral pyre, commanding the place. His red-cloaks stood at immaculate attention. It was an incredible sight, the subservience that this man instilled. Even Master Skvaerd couldn't quieten a class of children as well as this. This was real authority, and it had brought the town to a standstill.

“People of the Wastes! This didn't have to be.”

Damn it, but that was a booming voice. It travelled like the rumble of volcanoes, and he shivered involuntarily beneath his cloak. The Emperor stared over the crowd with dark southern eyes, and the man's skin had a dark toasted look to it, too. It was strange, and foreign, so he tugged on Old Bet's sleeve.

“Why is the Emperor that funny colour?”

She leaned in, her facial hair tickling his ear. “He is of the south, dear, and in the south, they allow Mother to toast them that colour.”

“But... what does Father think of this? Isn't he upset?”

Old Bet offered a crooked smile. “They believe the Old Man no longer sees. They are fools.”

He chuckled at that. “Father will punish them one day, won't he?”

“Aye.” Old Bet chewed in that old-person way once more. “That he will.”

“And will Father punish them for this?” He spread an arm towards the funeral pyre, but that did not get a response. Old Bet only carried on chewing.

The Emperor stamped a foot, and it rang out like a tolling bell. A shudder rippled through the crowd, and those dark eyes roved over the northern townsfolk.

“This didn’t have to be.” The Guardian of All shook his head, like it was their fault. Master Skvaerd did that very same thing when someone wasn’t listening, but in a classroom, the worst of the punishment was a rap on the knuckles. Here, the Emperor had devastated a town and left a pile of bodies at the heart of the community. A torch burned bright and threatening in the hand of a red-cloak at the back of the pyre, the flames licking at the wood. Hungry. In but a few terrible moments, those flames would devour the pyre and condemn a hundred northerners to be scattered across the continent as ash. This was a mighty slight indeed.

“We know that there are still ringleaders amongst your number. We know.” Those eyes roved the crowd. “We know that there are those of you who elicit fantasies of northern independence, and for those few of you, you can blame yourselves. The Empire has stood firm for six hundred years, has protected all of its thousands of citizens from the threat of the Centro and more besides. And what is the reward for such a fatherly act?”

The dark man thumped a fist into his other hand, and it seemed like it must shatter. But it didn’t. He had no doubt that a head would have caved at that blow, but not the dark hand of this dark emperor. This man was made of granite, so they said.

“And so. Here we are.” The Emperor spread his arms, bringing all the people of the town under his spell. He stared and he scowled and he shook his head, and with what can only be described as venom in his eyes, one arm dropped. The movement was tight and sharp and full, and with the signal, those licking flames were thrust into the kindling, taking to the fuel. The fire spread with alarming speed, and he yelped. Old Bet pulled him closer, but that could not fix him. His ma was being scattered before his very eyes.

The Emperor waved a hand over the burning pyre. “These men and women were traitors of the Empire, weak-minded fools who bent to the acidic lies of the movement that has come to be known as the Fatherlast. They die here, now, amongst you – their people. They are dying here as a symbol of their treachery, but they will be spread by the wind to rest amongst the friends of the Empire.” The Emperor smiled. “Their spirit will be crushed by those who deny them.”

With that, the Emperor turned on his heel and resumed the side-to-side marching across the square. There was whimpering and crying in the crowd, and

one poor mother threw herself at the flames – seeking out the body of her murdered son. No one stopped her.

“But!” The Guardian of All ceased once more, a finger in the air. “Fair as this punishment is, it is not the solution we need. You see, people of Crucible, this has been an inconvenience.” The man clenched his fists, as though that was really true. “And I do not have much in the way of time for inconveniences.” He resumed his stalking.

Ali turned up to Old Bet, sniffing. “Does he mean that?”

“Sadly, I think he does.” A tear dribbled down her cheek.

“And so, we must discourage such inconveniences. Bring them out.”

The Emperor gestured into the shadows, and four individuals in chains were unceremoniously ushered into the square. They were half-naked and beaten, and they looked worse off than—

“No.”

“What, dear?” Old Bet pulled the cloak back around him, but he was rising. He was stretching out and up. It couldn’t be, could it?

“That’s Lord Gorfin and his family.”

“Come, dear. People are looking.” She pulled him back to her, but he resisted.

“Please.”

Aunt Bet’s words barely registered. It was Lord Gorfin, and it was his family. Gorfin was the head of the town and as good a ruler as any town could hope for. But though that was relevant, it wasn’t the worst of it. Gorfin’s children were there, too – Zak and Chia – and they were good friends of his. Real good friends. They shared lessons with Master Skvaerd, and if there was one thing those two were not, it was revolutionaries. They were loyal to their father, and they were loyal to the Empire.

Old Bet grabbed at his collar, but he swatted the hand away. He must do something – they did not deserve this.

“So, as something of an incentive for you all, we will demonstrate the outcome that awaits anyone who dares preach the Fatherlast.”

The dark man nodded, and Zak was pulled from his family, the poor lad screaming. A huge brute of a man in the undeniable colours of the First Fist – the most loyal of all the Emperor’s cursed red-cloaks – picked up the poor boy and threw him into the now roaring fire. The screams that went up from Zak were horrific.

“No!”

“Ali, no! Come back.”

But it was too late. He was running, and he was running for Zak. Running for the Emperor. Running for anything. Just running. All around him was a maelstrom of chaos: red-cloaks charging towards him; Zak screaming; Old Bet crying out. And Chia, in chains still with her father Lord Gorfin, screaming too. She screamed at him. They were real close, he and Chia, and the look on her face snapped him to breaking. He clenched his teeth and charged. If he could just get to—

Something impacted the side of his head, a real thump. His head jarred and he crumpled, skidding over cobbles. Over him, just a shadow against the flames of the pyre, was a red-cloak. Another of the First Fist. The man crouched down and put a hand to his head.

“I’d be still if I were you. Real still and real quiet.”

But he didn’t listen. Chia screamed again, and he rolled, scrambling for her.

“Damn fool.” The red-cloak cracked a fist on his head once more, and his mouth hit the stones. He put a hand to his lip and it came back bloody. A wooziness came over him, and no amount of head-shaking would shift it. He was drifting off, and he could not do a damn thing about it.

The Emperor growled from his place, “Throw him on the fire.” Then the Emperor pointed to Chia. “And her: take her and the mother. They are servants of the Empire now.”

No! He stretched an arm out for Chia, hauling on a cobblestone, but his nail pulled back, a sharp pain. And the faintness was still coming in. It stretched in at the sides, a darkness before the eternal dark, and in those last fleeting moments, he witnessed the cruelty of the Empire. Chia was marched off and out of his life, and so he shifted into darkness. After all, what was left? At least it wouldn’t hurt this way.

* * *

He started, jerked where he lay, and sat up. It was light. Very light.

“Awake, is it?”

He jolted at the voice; a heavy voice of gravel and menace. There, beside him, was the largest man he’d ever met. A lot of the signs of office had gone, but there was no denying who this man was. This man was a red-cloak, and more than that, he was a First Fist. The one who had caught him.

He clambered as far from the man as he could, but that was not very far. The bed was in the corner of a very small room, and the big man was between him and the door. There was a window that might serve, though it looked like they

were quite high up: he wasn't about to volunteer his life. Negotiation was all he had.

"What do you want?"

The huge man grunted. "What do I want? A thanks would be nice."

"Thanks?"

"You're still alive, boy. If that don't seem surprising to you, I'll have to revise my view of whether you're worth saving."

He shook his head, shook the memory of things out of the darkness. He had charged, and he had been brushed aside by this man. Then the Emperor had demanded he be thrown on the flames. He checked himself over, but he was near as damn certain that he hadn't been cooked. This man had spared his life, or so it seemed. He shivered.

"You saved me from the flames." The man nodded. "But... How? Why?"

The man laughed, and the room actually shook with it. "So far as the Emperor's concerned, you were burned to a crisp. But he weren't watching – what is another north-boy to an emperor, after all?"

"So..." He sniffed back. "You smuggled me out."

The huge man nodded. "Aye, I did. Kept you out of sight, and once we was out of Crucible, I hid you in a cart. You've barely moved in a day."

"But..."

"Get over it, boy. It's done."

"And what about the why?"

The huge man scraped a mighty hand over his face, exhaling noisily. "That's not for now. For now, you're safe, and that's the end of it." It didn't seem safe, what with him being in a room with the Fist of the Empire. But what was a boy to do?

He gulped. "Ah, thank you."

The big man nodded, menace in that gaze.

"May I leave now?"

The member of the First Fist tipped his head. "Leave. Where to?"

"I..." He gulped. "I don't know. But I have to get out of here. Go north. Save Chia."

"Chia?"

He waved the question away. If this man wouldn't tell him why he had saved him, there was no way he was going to share his thoughts on Chia.

"Look, boy, you don't know what you want, and even if you did, there ain't no way the Empire's letting you roam around unchecked."

"Which means?"

“Which means I’m your best bet.”

“And who are you?”

The mighty man snorted. “That ain’t for now, neither.”

He slumped back on the bed. “My ma always told me not to talk to strangers.”

“I don’t think your ma’s rules apply to strangers who save you.”

“I’m sure she would’ve told me if that were the case.”

There was no response to that, so he shuffled forward on the bed and hung his legs over the side.

“Can I go, then?”

That exhibited a growl, and Red-Cloak climbed out of his rickety chair.

“No. You’re in my care.”

“Says who?”

“Says me and says the fate hanging over you if you step out that door.” The menace was still in those eyes, and something told him that he should obey. But he was a prisoner here, and obeying didn’t seem the northern way.

“I really need a better answer than that.”

The man growled and muttered under his breath – something about being harder work than he’d bargained for. The red-cloak picked up a tray and offered it to him.

“Here, eat this. I don’t want you starving on me.”

“Is it poisoned?”

The heavy man laughed. “You really think I’d wait and poison you when you’ve been lying there like a lamb all night?”

He shrugged. “Some people are sick.”

The laugh was cut short in the man. “There’s a truth I didn’t expect from one so young. Now, eat.”

The food was – to be fair – excellent. Not because it was good food, but because he hadn’t eaten in a long time. In fact, the last thing he may have eaten was a slice of his birthday banana cake a couple of days back. That cake, with the exotic fruit, had been incredible, but it was nothing compared to this cup of cool clean water and ever so slightly stale bread. He drank heavily and crunched through the crust like the ravenous beast he was.

He looked around the room, and then he gazed out of the window, which offered views of a nondescript town and wide plains.

“Where are we?” He managed the question from a mouth stuffed with bread.

The red-cloak grunted. “South o’ Crucible – a day o’ riding.”

He shuddered. “Am I a prisoner?”

“Not if you play your part.”

“Oh.” He put the plate of food on the table beside the bed and brushed the crumbs off his hands. There were footsteps coming, and voices. “What’s my part?”

The red-cloak moved in, grabbed his hand with mighty fists, and sliced a dazzling blade over the palm.

“Right now, Ali, this is your part. Goodnight.”

Big beads of blood welled up, and the fog came in at the sides. He fell through the darkness and into oblivion, but there was one question which still resonated. How did this man know his name?

* * *

It was dark when he came around: crashing up and down, slung over the rump of a horse. He could tell it was a horse straight off, too – because of the stench. He’d always hated the stink of horses.

“Where am I?” He shifted on the rump, but his hands were tied, his feet were tied, and he was strapped down tight. His head was heavy with ache where he’d been in an uncomfortable slumber, and his palm was sharp with pain where... Where the red-cloak had sliced him. That’s right – he was being saved. Except last time he’d been in a bed with food in his belly, and now he was strung up like game. If this was being saved, it certainly wasn’t as he’d imagined.

He wriggled about, bashing a hand on Red-Cloak’s back. “Where am I?”

Red-Cloak swatted his hand away. “This is my place. At least, one of my places.”

He peered up from where he lay, scanning his surroundings. But it was dark, so there wasn’t much to see.

“I thought you were saving me.”

“Aye.”

“Then why do you have me strung up like tonight’s dinner?” He waved his tied hands and legs, then wriggled within the binds that strapped him to the horse.

“Had to keep up the illusion.”

“What illusion?”

“Look, boy, you gonna be quiet or do I have to slice you again? The time for questions is when we reach our destination.”

“Oh.” He wriggled and looked about once more, but it really was dark. “And where is our destination?”

The man sighed and growled, shaking his head. “We’re south. Or south of north.”

“Maegwyn?”

“This look like Maegwyn to you?”

“I don’t know. I’ve never been.”

“Maegwyn is the most densely populated city in Godslost. This look like that?”

“Well...” It did not. “So where exactly are we?”

Red-Cloak whipped a knife out and it glinted in the weak light. It didn’t seem sensible to annoy the man any further, so he bit his lip and shivered on the rump of the horse. Everything the man had said suggested that he wasn’t in danger, but how could he be sure? Then again, what choice did he have? He tested the knots and they were tight – very tight – so he abandoned that idea, opting instead for obedience. He just hoped the man didn’t punish him for his sobbing.

Half a night later they reached the man’s place, and it turned out it wasn’t much of a place at all. A small cottage of loosely mortared brick, no more than two rooms, and a roof of thatch. It was draughty, it was poky, and it was rough. Quite nice really, a real northern homestead out of the north. The red-cloak dumped him on a mattress of straw, and pulled out that gleaming knife. This time, however, rather than slicing him, he sliced the ropes, freeing him, and then just walked off. The door was still open and he could run. He could run. Why wasn’t he running?

“Running ain’t wise. Gotta lot of running before you hit safety. Gotta lot of running before you hit anything, in fact. And for you...” the man turned “...I suspect you’d need to run further. What with the...” The big man ran a hand over his face and his eyes.

“You think I’m in danger for being northern?”

“I’d say so. You’re on the hunted list for being northern. The north ain’t top o’ the Emperor’s list these days.”

It would be nice to respond with some witty barb, but he was only twelve years old. Aunt Bet had explained what a witty barb was, but that didn’t mean he could use them. He trailed with silence, and the red-cloak simply grunted and turned away. His captor then efficiently struck a spark, and the hearth lit with minimal intervention. The warmth was delicious.

“This is a funny place for a red-cloak to live, isn’t it?”

The big man crashed onto a wooden chair, which held up remarkably well. “Why?”

“You’re a First Fist, too – Emperor’s personal guard. Don’t you have rooms in Maegwyn?”

The red-cloak grunted. “Aye. But a man gotta have his own place, too, and this is...” The red-cloak breathed in a melancholy fashion for a moment. “This is home. At least, this is the place I like being.”

“Why have you brought me here?”

“So I can keep an eye on you.”

“Oh.” He picked at some strands of straw sticking out of the mattress, his heart hammering. “And what did you save me for? What are you going to do with me?”

The man grunted. “You got nothing to fear.”

“But I do fear!” He was up, hands balled. “You snatched me away from my home and brought me to this place in the middle of nowhere. I don’t know who you are; I don’t know what you want with me; and...” He sniffed and gritted his teeth. “Please.”

Red-Cloak put his hands out. “Calm down, boy. Calm. I’m sorry, okay. You were in a lot of danger back in Crucible – that town was dead to you. I brought you here to be safe. This is a safe place. I do not want to hurt you.” His captor stared at him, and it was then that the familiarity flashed.

“You’re northern, aren’t you? Your eyes have a hint of blue.”

The man nodded. “Aye. Had ‘em scorched some years back, but the blue shows through for those familiar.”

“Scorched?”

“You don’t wanna know.” That was good advice. He didn’t want to know.

“So...” He shifted. “You saved me because you’re also northern.” The man nodded. “Then why me? There’s a lot of other northmen needed saving.” A sob climbed up his throat, but he swallowed it back down. Cold crept through him instead, mixing disruptively with the warmth of the fire. “You could’ve saved my ma.”

The man shook his head. “I couldn’t save your ma. I’m sorry. Believe me, I would have liked to save every one of those in Crucible who died, ‘specially your ma, but it was tough enough sneaking you out of there. In case you hadn’t noticed, I’m a red-cloak, and we aren’t usually in the business of saving northerners.” The soldier gave him a wonky smile.

“So you’re northern, but hiding out as a red-cloak.”

“Aye. But my true allegiance is to the Fatherlast.” The man winked, and that was almost enough. No one swore allegiance to the ‘last unless they meant it.

“But why save me?”

The soldier shrugged. “You got lucky, I guess.”

The whispering of steel through cloth came to him; the luck he’d ridden when his ma was laid out dead in his house. Maybe he was just lucky. He looked around at the ramshackle cottage, and then he stared at the huge man he was still wary of. This didn’t seem lucky.

The man kinked a smile. “Boy, I think you could do with some sleep.”

“I’ve spent an awful lot of time asleep already, thanks.”

The red-cloak shook his head. “A blood-coma ain’t sleep.”

“A what?”

“Blood-coma.” The man tipped his head. “You faint at the sight of blood – I noticed it back in Crucible. Can’t say it’ll make things easy, but we work with what we got.”

“I do not faint at the sight of...” But of course, it was true. Of course it was. “Since when?”

The man shrugged. “Trauma o’ some kind. I’ve heard of it before.”

“But...” The death of his ma. It had to be the death of his ma. That was the trauma. When he’d emerged from the pile of blankets, she had been lying in a pool of her own blood – that would be enough to screw with anyone. He shook the memory out of his head.

“Will it go away? This blood thing?”

Red-cloak shrugged again. “No idea, but we’ll assume not. Now, I’ll get you some bread and then you sleep, right?”

“Why?”

“Cos I need you sprightly tomorrow.”

“Why?”

Red-cloak tipped his head. “You’re part of the ‘last now, boy. Tomorrow, we start your training.”

* * *

The red-cloak was an idiot. Northern he may be – and a claimed member of the Fatherlast at that – but he had been too long in the soft service of the Emperor. A long walk was no obstacle for a northman. Not even a northboy. He had survived days in the wilds of the Wastes, and those volcanic stretches were far more daunting than these blank imperial surroundings. The biggest thing he had to fear was boredom.

Mother was just dusting the day in the east, and Red-Cloak was snoring away, oblivious to the mistake he’d made. The door wasn’t even closed, let alone locked.

He had scavenged a good pair of boots from a drawer, making them serviceable by padding out the ends and tying them so tight that his feet were slightly numb. He had a warm cloak wrapped around him – it was surprisingly chilly at this time of the morning – and a sack full of provisions. He didn't carry water with him, but that was no bother. Any good northman could find water. He took one last look at the snoring red-cloak and smiled. Fool. This had been too easy.

He stepped out of the door and breathed in the chill air. His breath misted, and he watched the moisture disperse, spreading out into the blank surroundings. Wherever it was that the red-cloak had brought him, there really wasn't much to it. The landscape was one of short wiry grass, vast flat plains, the occasional trough and undulation, and even fewer knots of wiry scrub. With a clear sight of what he faced, the biggest challenge would be remaining hidden. The blank landscape may not be daunting, but it didn't offer much in the way of cover either. The sparsity of options was actually something of a blessing, however. He located north using Mother as his guide, and then turned south. Red-Cloak would assume he'd gone north, so his first gambit would be south. That decided, he headed out and aimed for the nearest section of scrub.

As suspected, boredom was the worst of it. Back in the north, travel was broken up by the small markers that delineated the longer journey. The next mountain. The next boulder. A river of lava that snaked through one's path. There were always small steps on the long path, and he had grown adept at focusing on them.

Here, that didn't work. Here, in this unending grassland, every direction looked the same – flat and blank and lifeless. Even the scattered trees looked identical to each other. In fact, those trees looked more like wiry ghouls, and that didn't help one bit. He tried focusing on a patch of earth ahead of him, but a few steps later he couldn't tell where he had been looking. It all blended into one unending nothingness. The straightness of the horizon didn't help either. It suggested he was making little or no progress.

But his legs told a different story. They ached from the repetitive steps on the hard dusty ground. The sack was cutting into his shoulder, and the heavy cloak was now blisteringly hot. And yet he couldn't take the cloak off, or else where would he put it? He'd end up carrying that, too, and that wasn't a good outcome. He lived with it and turned back to the red-cloak's house – the only distinct feature in the entire landscape. But there was no good news there either. He had made good progress, but the landscape had fooled him and he was still terribly visible from the red-cloak's shack. He checked the time and feared that Red-Cloak

would be rising soon, rising and chasing. His only remaining hope was that his southern direction would fool his captor, and so he sought out the best depression he could, and laid himself down. Once Red-Cloak had gone off in the wrong direction, he could get moving again.

He lay as low as he could, not risking a peek and instead munching through bread that he'd borrowed from Red-Cloak. Butter would have been nice, but he couldn't find that in his early morning raid. Despite the lack of butter though, it was pleasant being laid out on the cloak, soaking up the warm sun with stale bread in his belly. He dropped into his hiding place, kept an ear out, and not long later, the noise of a horse snorting caught him. Red-Cloak was on the move.

It was something of a shame he hadn't been able to take the horse in his escape, but there were three very good reasons for that: it would have woken Red-Cloak; he didn't like horses; and he couldn't ride horses. He was left hoping that Red-Cloak would fall for his trick and move off in the wrong direction, preferably at pace on his horse. His heart hammered, filling his chest, his ears, and his head. This was the pivotal moment.

It took some time, but when the throbbing of his heart subsided, he caught the sound of horse and trappings on the move. Importantly though, the sound was more distant. He'd done it! Probably. He risked a quick look over the divot and confirmed. Ha! The red-cloak was going in completely the wrong direction. Empire's finest indeed. It was a wonder the Empire had maintained its iron grip on the north for so long.

Next up was water, but this was proving harder than expected.

In the north, rare moisture deposits could be found in cracks, under lichen, even gushing out of superheated geysers which exploded periodically into life. He could extract plentiful water from all these varied and difficult northern options, but the issue here was that none of these options were available. He dug fingers into the dry soil, but it got no wetter underneath. He tried chewing the grasses, getting at whatever moisture they must be living off, but that was fruitless. The grass was dry. He eyed the red-cloak's house, wondering about returning, but decided against it. Too dangerous, and surely another water option would come up somewhere. He packed up and pushed on.

Mother was rising fast towards her peak, and the heat was really kicking in. He tried carrying the heavy cloak, but with that and the sack it was simply too much. He sighed and grumbled. What was the best way of doing this? The lighter the better, so he dropped the cloak and pushed on at pace. The sooner he was off these blank plains, the better.

Except the blank plains went on forever. In every damned direction. There was barely even the hint of a mountain on the horizon. The place was frankly horrifying.

Screech!

The sound from the bird shook him to the core. He spun, swivelled, and then spotted it. The shadow. He peered up, and there was the largest bird he had ever seen. Five full grown men across, and he was only a boy. It was falling, diving right for him, and he turned and ran. He dropped the bag and sprinted.

Screech!

The force of the sound almost knocked him off his feet. Almost. He stumbled into one more step, two more steps, and then he rolled. The vast feathery bulk swept overhead, brushing him with its passing, swooping back up into the sky. He lay there a moment, still exposed, and then spied a copse that was perhaps not too far off – the one he'd been targeting in the first place. He breathed in once, twice, and then pelted for the scrub. There was another screech and the growing sound of wings beating, but he would get to safety. He would just about—

Something hit the back of him, knocking him forward and head-first into the copse. It was painful falling through those wiry bushes, but it was almost certainly better than the alternative. He lay there, the sound of his breath filling his head, and only the fleeting screech of the bird breaking through. The copse was dark and he closed his eyes. There wasn't much more to be done.

When the monstrous bird finally gave up and left, Mother was dipping toward the western horizon. It had gone from nearly midday and very warm to dusky and very cold, and it would only get colder, too. He scrambled from the scrub, re-opening the cuts from earlier, and ventured out onto the grasslands in search of his bag. It had to be there somewhere – he hadn't run too far – but it was nowhere. Had the bird taken it? Without the food he really was stuffed.

“Looking for this?”

He spun, and Red-Cloak was behind the scrub. The bastard had a hold of his bag.

“How did you find me?”

“Never lost you if truth be told. You left tracks enough.”

“But you went north.”

“Aye. Wanted to see what you would do. Here.” The man threw something at him – a leather skin, full of water. He un-stoppered it and drank greedily.

Red-Cloak glared. “Why d’you run off?”

He finished drinking and wiped his mouth. “No offense, but even if you are northern, I don’t know diddly about you. And you know diddly about me. What’s there to keep me around?”

The red-cloak sighed and shook his head. “I suppose it’s time for that chat already then, is it?”

“What chat?”

Red-Cloak shook his head. “Look, boy, truth is that I do know you. You are very special, and it wasn’t just luck that got you saved and brought out here. It was far more than that.”

Ali shuddered, and only in part because of the cold.

“But... But... But how did you know to save me rather than anyone else?”

“Because your ma asked it of me.”

And there it was. His ma. Even dead, she was shaping his life through this man – a man he didn’t know, but a man who knew him. And the man did know him. The red-cloak knew his name, and that wasn’t information he’d given up willingly.

“Come on, boy. We ain’t got time for this chatter. It gets cold in the Dry Ocean at night, and I prefer it warm. You want a ride, or you gonna walk back?”

A screech reached them from somewhere in the distance, and his mind was instantly made.

“Can I travel without being trussed up this time?”

“Aye. Hop on.”

It was more comfortable, but only just. A sense of dread was really creeping in on him.

2

The Prison

It really was chilly at night in the Dry Ocean, and he sat shivering on his makeshift straw bed, threadbare blanket wrapped tight around him. Red-Cloak was on the other side of the room, stoking a toasty fire and cooking. The flames looked so inviting – so warm – but seeking them out would be like accepting his fate. And he had not accepted his fate. This man had no right to keep him here, none at all.

His stomach growled, and he wrapped his hands around it. Red-Cloak turned to him.

“Grab yourself a mug and a plate.”

“I don’t need anything from you.”

The huge man shrugged and turned back to the fire, rotating a spit and toasting the bird upon it. The skin already looked crispy, and he couldn’t help but lick his lips. The fire spat at him, reaching for him, and his stomach growled again. The delicious stink of the food wafted up his nose.

He relented. “Fine. But don’t think this means I like it.” He got up from his bed and stalked to the second chair, slumping in it. The heat of the fire was impossibly delightful.

There was a lengthy stretch of silence, a real stand-off between the two of them. But he wasn’t enjoying the silence – quite the opposite, in fact. It itched him, really scratching him from inside, and what was more annoying was that the red-cloak seemed easy in the silence. The man just sat there, staring at the fire. Only that. The reflection of the flames flickered in those scorched eyes.

“How long have you been a red-cloak?”

The man tipped his head. “Decade.”

“Ten years by the side of the Emperor.”

“Aye.”

“Couldn’t you have killed him in that time?”

The man laughed – a genuine laugh, too. “I wish I could, boy, but there are two very big reasons why not.”

“Go on.”

The man shrugged. “First up – there’s plenty worse than the Emperor out there. You’ll learn that one day.”

He opened his mouth, his objection bursting forth, but the red-cloak cut him off with a wave of a hand.

“Second up, in case you hadn’t noticed, I don’t spend that much time around the Emperor. I’m here.”

He looked around and took the place in.

“So, what are you doing out here?”

Red-Cloak nodded – like that was the correct question.

“Out here, so far as the Emperor’s concerned, I’m protectorate of an important imperial mining town.”

“Oh.” He chewed on that a moment. “And what are you really doing?”

Those scorched eyes turned on him, and a chill went right through Ali.

“What I’m really doing is sniffing out those who are more dangerous.”

“But who—”

That hand again, and Red-Cloak pulled the birds from the flames, putting them on plates along with a spoonful of beans. The food was handed over and it smelled amazing, though he said nothing of the sort – that would imply that he was grateful. He wiped saliva from his chin – which he hoped Red-Cloak hadn’t seen – and then accepted a mug of something from his captor. He sniffed at it.

“This ale?”

“Aye.”

“I’m only twelve. Ma only lets me drink watered wine.”

The man chuckled. “She always was a bit uptight.” That caught him – it was too familiar.

“What were you to my ma?”

There was a pause, and the man peered at him, licking lips. “I was a fellow member of the Fatherlast. Now, eat. And drink. Your ma’s not here now, is she?”

“No. She’s dead.”

“Aye, she is. Scattered to the winds. In fact, she’s probably here right now, laughing at your suspicious questions.”

A wind rattled the rickety windows of the homestead, and he peered about. Could she really see out of death?

Red-Cloak laughed again. “Just eat, boy. Questions come later.”

With his options extinguished and his stomach growling, he devoured the food. The ale washed it down wonderfully, but he did get that wooziness that came with watered wine – and a whole lot quicker, too. He put the ale down and hung his head again.

“It was a god eagle.” Red-Cloak didn’t look at him.

“What was?”

“The bird. Attacked you.”

“Oh.” He sucked through his teeth. “I thought they’d died out before the Fallow Years.”

A shake of the head. “Alive and flying. Just like the stone wolf and the thunder stallion. It was hunted near to death in the Fallow Years, but it survives out here.”

He sniffed. “And where is ‘here?’”

“South o’ north.” Red-Cloak chuckled.

“That’s not funny.”

“No.” His captor climbed out of his seat – which creaked under the strain – and went over to a shelf. There were scrolls on the shelf, and he took one down, spreading it on the floor. It was a map of the whole of Eastern Godslost – the imperial limit. Red-Cloak slammed a finger right into the heart of the map – slap bang in the middle of the Dry Ocean, heart of the Empire.

“That’s where we are.” It was an immeasurable distance from... Well, from anywhere.

“And why do you live here, in this cottage, in the middle of nowhere?”

Red-Cloak shrugged. “The quiet.” The wind howled outside, sending the door to chattering.

“No, really?”

He went to the shelf and pulled down a second scroll, unrolling this one over the top of the first. It was a map with a smaller scale, focused in on their region of the Dry Ocean. Here at least, there was a little detailing on the map.

“This here,” the man pointed at a heavy cross in the hills labelled ‘Mine’, “is an important imperial location. It looks like any old iron mine, servicing a small town, but it’s actually the largest deposit of gold in the Empire. That’s my charge.”

“Oh.” He had travelled through the blank nothingness of the plains surrounding them. There had been no sign of a mine. “Where is this mine?”

“About a quarter-turn of riding east.”

“And shouldn’t you be, you know, there?”

The man chuckled. “Aye. I should. But so far as they know I’m ‘traveling’. This here is something of a secret.”

“Oh.” He peered at the map again. “And why are you really here?”

The man jammed a finger into the town right next to the mine – a town called Lowly.

“Here, there’s an orphanage. That’s what I’m interested in.”

“An orphanage?” The man nodded. “For orphans.” Another nod. “And what could interest you about an orphanage?”

“Well, boy, they fill it with kids just like you.”

“You mean orphans?”

“No.”

“Then what do you mean?”

Red-Cloak scraped that mighty hand over his face. “Look, boy, I told you – you’re special, right?” He didn’t believe it, but he nodded nonetheless. “Well, you are almost certainly more special than others, but you are not exclusively special. Understand?”

“Absolutely not.”

The man growled. “How’s this then? You’re northern, and you are therefore with the Father’s blessing.”

“So, it’s an orphanage for north-children?”

“I suppose so, yes.”

“Then why don’t you send me there?”

“Because...” Red-Cloak growled. “It is not a good place for north-children.”

“And here is?”

“Aye.”

“Why?”

“Because I’m going to train you.”

“Train me in what?”

“The ways of the ‘last.’” His captor pulled out a pocketful of coins and distributed them between the pair of them.

“What’s this?”

“We’re gonna play flip-coin. Every day. Least, every day I’m here.”

He scowled. “What are the rules?”

“I’ll teach you.”

Red-Cloak did, and so far as he could tell, it was a game of chance. Flip a coin and guess correctly – crush or flail. There were complications that turned it into an interesting gambling game, but it was ultimately a game of chance.

“Why is it crush or flail?” He turned the imperial coin over in his hand, inspecting the front half of a thunder stallion on one side, and the rear half on the

other.

Red-Cloak grinned. “One of the emperors – I forget which one – liked to use his thunder stallions to punish those he didn’t like. He’d either get the stallion to crush people under its feet or flail them with a sweep of the tail.” This time the big man laughed. “The bastard even had some coins made up with the image.”

Ali grimaced. “The emperors are bastards.”

“Aye. But as I said, there’s worse. Ready?”

He smiled. “Let’s play.”

They started lightly, and he lost. A second game, and he lost. They were gambling away their piles of coins, and where his was dwindling, Red-Cloak’s was growing fatter. The game only went one way.

At the end of an unsatisfying experience, he scowled.

“Do I have to win a whole round, or just a single game?”

Red-Cloak grunted. “Just a game.”

“Tomorrow then.”

Red-Cloak shook his head. “Not tomorrow. I’m off.” He pointed to his First Fist uniform. “I got me a gold mine to protect.”

“And you’re going to leave me here. On my own.”

“Aye. You can start your training.”

“What training?”

His captor pointed at a bow and a sheath of arrows next to the door. “That. We need to get those arms good and strong.”

* * *

If this was a prison, it was a damned strange one. The red-cloak had just upped and left him, nothing but a bow and arrows for company. He could loose a bow as well as the next north-boy, but Red-cloak had other ideas altogether. This crazy man expected him to strike a target that was out of sight, when the wind was up, and even in the dark. For nearly a half-season he’d been at it, on his own except for fleeting visits, and constantly looping through a routine of archery and flip-coin. Half a damned season! It was wearing.

And being outside in the open, with fresh air in his lungs, the idea of leaving hung heavy around his neck. Not that there was any great reason to leave – no-one was trying to kill him here – but the loneliness of the place was heavy, and the four ramshackle walls might as-well have been bars. Back home he’d had Ma and the friendship of Zak and Chia. Here, he just had silence, routine, and the odd grumpy exchange with Red-Cloak. Surely there was more out there, in that great

wide expanse? Surely he should just get up and go? But he'd tried that once, and there was only failure waiting for him. Failure and god eagles.

He pulled another arrow from the sheath at his waist, strung it, hauled on the bowstring, tipped the arrowhead, and loosed. One fluid movement and not a hint of hesitation. Not a hint of thinking, even. He'd gotten good with the bow, real good, and even with a breath of wind – there was always a breath on these vast plains – the target was no obstacle. He had adjusted for the wind with an acute sense of trajectory, a second nature hammered into him by a half-season of tedium. He could do it without a thought, and he smiled in anticipation.

Thud!

The arrow was quivering dead-centre in the target. Again. He was real good – he was sure of it – even if Red-Cloak wouldn't grant him that.

“There you are.” How did Red-Cloak always turn up with such frustratingly immaculate timing? His captor walked out from behind the cottage, hands on hips. Tutting.

“Yes. Here I am. It's not like I have other options.”

“And still failing, are you?”

He slung his bow over his shoulder and growled. “I can't not hit the target.”

Red-Cloak shook his head. “Aye, and very smart with it, too. But that's a static target in perfect conditions. Where's the ambition? Even a Mikaetan could stick it plumb on a day like this.” The man clucked and shook his head.

“Come on now. I can hardly be blamed for the weather, can I?”

There was a pause in the man, like there were other possible answers to that question, but it passed unsaid.

“Then stick somethin' in the way. Do it at night. Use your other arm. Make it ridiculous—”

“Why?”

“Because it's the only way to learn.”

“Learn what?”

The man growled, chewing on something or nothing. “Come on. I think it's time we had a chat.”

“Damn right it is.” He stalked off after the huge man, his heart leaping at the prospect of answers. It really had been a lonely half-season.

Red-Cloak handed him a steaming mug of tea and he gripped it between his hands, the warmth seeping through the ceramic. Then they sat opposite each other, the hearth prepped and cold beside them. At least that job was a distraction

from the tedium of his life here. He was good with a fire, and it was a chore Red-Cloak had willingly given up to him.

But now was not the time for that. Now was the time for answers.

“Why am I here?”

“I thought we’d been through this. You’re northern, and also very special. I saved you from a fate that I think we both understand. You are, after all, smart for a twelve-year-old.”

“And what am I doing with my time?”

“Training.”

“Training for what?”

The man pinched the bridge of his nose. “You are training to release the northern talent which is latent inside you. You are learning the skills and tricks that make you unique. The skills and tricks that make you dangerous to the Empire.”

He peered at the bow and arrow, then back again.

“Forgive me, but I’m pretty sure the Empire has archers.”

“It’s not about the archery.”

“Then why am I spending my entire time loosing quiver after quiver into a target?”

“Because...” Red-Cloak trailed off, sighed, and sipped his steaming tea. “Perhaps there was a reason your ma wanted you in your sister’s care.”

He jumped at that, hot tea slopping over the lip of the cup and scalding his hand.

“What do you know of my sister?”

“I knew your ma, Ali. Is it such a surprise that I know your sister, too?”

When he put it like that...

“But what does my sister have to do with anything?”

“It is a long story—”

“I have a lot of time on my hands, and I’m young. Try me.”

Red-Cloak shifted awkwardly on his seat. “Look, I’ve told you that you are precious, and that I was there looking out for you.” Ali nodded in response. “Well, I was supposed to make sure you were delivered into the care of your sister. That was at your ma’s request.”

He slumped into his chair, tea still steaming in hand.

“Then why didn’t you?”

The man grunted. “You pretty much buggered that up when you charged out into the open and brought yourself to the attention of the Emperor.”

It came back then, the conversation he had had with Old Bet. She had seemed intent on delivering him to his sister, too, which had seemed strange at the time. He hated his sister, and his sister hated him. He had no idea why she was such a bitch to him, but right through life she had been a thorn in his juvenile side. The thought of living with her was harrowing.

But the longer he was in the company of Red-Cloak, the more appealing his sister's sharp words became. At least that fiery arrangement wouldn't be tedious.

"So why don't you deliver me back there now?"

Red-Cloak raised a hand and extended three fingers. Then he dropped one.

"First, I ain't got an excuse for going north just now. You don't get to be First Fist by disobeying orders." The second finger dropped. "Second, I fear the north is too dangerous for you. The grip was closing, and it was real tight. You're safer here, and that is good for the north." The final finger dropped. "And finally..." The man tapped his lip, brow furrowed, but eventually wiped away the comment with a slice of the hand.

"No third point then?"

"Is two not enough?"

"Well, all the best things come in threes."

Red-Cloak growled. "Fine. Well, maybe you appear more advanced in your skills than we thought. Maybe I wasn't sure your sister had the learning to develop you further."

"And you do?"

"Aye."

"In the bow and arrow."

Red-Cloak scrunched up his face and growled. "It ain't about the bow and arrow. Did your ma never tell you about the wonders of the northern tribes of old?"

He nodded, but warily. Of course he'd heard the stories – of northmen capable of feats so outrageously powerful that it skirted belief. But they were stories. Just stories. People weren't capable of commanding fire and wind any more than they were capable of vanishing and then reappearing across the room. It was all a big old tale that north-folk told each other as some sort of consolation for being trampled by the Empire. Nothing more than that.

"And what do those stories have to do with this?" He extended an arm to the bow.

"They are the same. But only if you let go of the rational."

"And by that you mean..."

“Exactly that. Stick obstacles in the way, stick with it, and watch your talent bloom.”

He slumped back in his chair and sipped his tea. He had hoped for answers, but this was nothing like that. This was more of the same nonsense.

“I’m sorry, but I don’t get it.”

Red-Cloak shook his head. “And I’m sorry, too. I was never a good teacher, and I’m too old to learn. I can only show you what I know, and we’ll have to try and plug the gaps between us.”

“But how do you know you’re showing me anything? I mean, it’s just archery.”

The northman smiled. “I was trained the same way, in the north, by your ma.”

He was taken aback by that and sat up. He opened his mouth, questions bursting out of him—

But no. The big man swiped that option away and grinned.

“No more. I can’t let loose on no more, but hopefully you’ll believe I’m tryin’ to help, best I can. So, head down and keep at it. In all weather. In a gale. In the dark. On a windy night ideally. I promise, if you stick with it, one day it’ll all come tumbling into that there head of yours.”

Ali slumped again. “Well, what am I supposed to do on days that aren’t good for training? You know – when the weather is a bit clement?”

Red-Cloak nodded. “We got options. Now, grab a table.”

“What for?”

His captor grinned. “Flip-coin. It’s time you lost again.”

And just like that, the archery didn’t seem anywhere near as tedious.

* * *

The tedium persisted, day after day of it. It was getting real hard dragging himself out into the horror that was the weather of the Dry Ocean, but ultimately he gave in and headed into the wildness at its worst: the high winds, the midnight dark, and even the hail, which was more frequent than expected. Of course, his performance in these horrendous conditions was naturally awful. Why wouldn’t it be? Even the best archer would be terrible in a hurricane. So far as he was concerned, he had reached the pinnacle of the drawn projectile.

The wind howled and he picked an arrow from the sheath. He strung it, and just like that, a sheet of moisture stung his face along with the feathering of the arrow. He snorted.

“What?” It was Red-Cloak beside him – one of the infrequent sessions where his captor was with him.

“This arrow won’t fly true now.”

Red-Cloak grinned. “Then change the path.”

He chuckled and lowered the bow. “You know, however many times you say that, it doesn’t make it possible.”

Red-Cloak clucked. “Not with an attitude like that, no. You gotta believe.”

“And how does that help?”

“When you’re northern, it helps. Trust me.”

He chuckled again. “I go back to what I said earlier. However many times you say that, it doesn’t make it true.”

“But it is true.”

“And how do you know that?”

“Because I practice it.” Red-Cloak stared at him, those deep scorched eyes burning through the sheeted rain.

“Then why don’t you show me?”

“Because that ain’t how you learn. I can’t teach you by showing. You must believe in yourself. Now, change the path.”

He wiped spray from his face. “But it’s not predictable.”

“You certain about that?”

“Well, no. I mean, it might as well be. With the wind and the rain and the randomness, the path is practically impossible to predict.”

“Practically impossible. Sounds like improbable to me.”

He snorted. “Improbable. Impossible. Same thing.”

Red-Cloak shook his head. “Not the same. With enough practice, a northman can turn the improbable into the probable.”

He rolled his eyes. However many times the man said it, the strange words didn’t make any more sense. None whatsoever. Improbable was improbable, and there was no way the gods were going to change that for anyone – least of all him. He supposed he’d better get the embarrassment out of the way, so he pulled back on the bow and angled it for the target. In fair weather this was a simple flight – even at a hundred paces. In this swirling maelstrom, it was ridiculous.

He loosed, and instantly it was clear what the result was. The tail of the arrow kicked out and the tip sheared off. And then the wind took it. A gust blew up, entirely unpredictable, and that was the end of it. The arrow ended up on the roof of Red-Cloak’s house.

He stomped where he stood, hand on hip. A finger on the cord told him all that was needed. Sodden.

“See. Even without the wind, this bow now needs drying out.” He plucked the soaked cord. “Useless.”

“You sure about that?”

“Yes. I am.” He stomped a foot again. “I’ve been training near a season now, in all the stupid conditions you can throw at me, and it’s still impossible.”

Red-Cloak rolled his eyes. “You don’t believe.”

“No, I don’t.”

His captor chewed his lip. “Then how do we get you believing?”

“Show me.”

“I told you – that’s not how you’ll learn. You have to believe yourself.” Those scorched eyes pierced him, but there had to be a way through this repetitive whirlwind. Had to be.

He dropped the bow. “Take me to my sister.” It was a measure of how bad it had gotten that this was now the best option.

“It’s too dangerous.”

“Then get someone else to take me to my sister.”

“It ain’t just about the journey. I fear the place itself...” Red-Cloak chewed on that statement. “It ain’t safe up north.”

Ali tapped his head. “It ain’t safe for my sanity down here.”

Red-Cloak growled and seemed bigger with it, threatening somehow. But not dangerous, not really. Just frustrated. Maybe he could annoy the man into taking him back north.

His captor leaned in, snatched the bow, and nicked an arrow from the sheath. The giant of a man then held the arrow in the spitting moisture of the air, getting it good and ruined, and nocked it. He angled it, stuck his tongue out, narrowed his eyes, and loosed. No chance.

The arrow kicked out, a whipping of the tail, and the wind swirled. Ali laughed. There was absolutely no way that... But wild as the conditions were, the arrow was going in broadly the right direction. Swinging from side to side, but frustratingly, heading for the target.

Thud!

He peered through the misted wind and... Damn if it wasn’t plumb. Red-Cloak was grumbling to himself.

“Damned luck.”

The man shook his head. “Maybe. But ain’t it funny how things got a habit o’ going my way?”

“It was a one-off.”

“And what about the coins?”

He ground his jaw. Damned Red-Cloak still had a perfect record in flip-coin, which was increasingly implausible. Improbable. The unlikely did have a habit of happening around this man.

“Then... why didn't you show me this before?”

The man tipped his head. “Cos it's not how I learned. I learned because I trusted and I believed, and in that, the skill just sort of... Well, it just sort of came to me.”

“But...” Ali peered back at the arrow, dead centre in the target. “And who taught you to believe?”

“Your ma. She was a great woman.”

He nodded. “She was.” And then he sniffed. “I wish she was here.”

“So do I. Then I wouldn't need to be tryin' to fill her boots.”

He turned on the man. “You can't fill her boots!”

“No.” Red-Cloak shook his head. “I can't. Ain't that just the problem? But if you're going anywhere, boy, you gotta trust me.”

“But I don't.”

The man shook his head. “No. You don't. So how we gonna change that?”

He shrugged. “You could start by showing me how you do that trick with the bow.”

Red-Cloak just shook his head. “If I could just show you, I would. But northern skill don't come with studying. It comes from in here.” The man put a fist to his breast. “You have to believe.”

“But I don't believe. It's ridiculous. However improbable your actions, it's still ridiculous.” He kicked at the sodden ground and wiped hair out of his eyes. “Just send me north and be done with it.”

Red-Cloak only smiled. “Half your problem, boy, is that you got no stamina. No push. You give up too easy.”

“You're probably right, but then I have nothing to push for.”

“You are the saviour of the north.”

“Ah, yes. My specialness. You do realise that they're only words, don't you? They don't mean anything.”

Red-Cloak tapped his lip. “So what we need is purpose, right?”

“What are you talking about?”

“If I give you a purpose for all this,” the man waved a hand at the target, the arrow still plumb, “then you'll start believing.”

He frowned and almost snorted. Almost. Red-Cloak offered a level stare, firm and man-to-man, like he was genuinely seeking out a way between them. A childish part of him wanted to snort, but his childhood had been ripped from him when his ma had been taken. The least he could do was play along.

“We can give it a go.”

His captor pinched the bridge of his nose and nodded precisely. “Fine. We go tomorrow. A target. If you had a vested interest in your target, maybe you’d focus a bit better.”

“Wait, what?”

“A target. We’re going to find you a target.”

He gestured at the board. “I have a target.”

“No. I mean a real target. All flesh and blood – you know the sort.”

“Wait, what?”

“Come on now. We need some rest. It’ll be a busy day tomorrow.”

His heart hammered and his hands were sweaty, even in the rain. If he’d understood correctly, then tomorrow he was going to kill someone. He doubted he’d be sleeping tonight, even a little bit.

* * *

It was crazy really. From back at the homestead, he hadn’t even seen in what direction the nearest town lay. On the back of a horse, at a mighty gallop, the journey was frightfully quick. Maybe a quarter-turn of Mother; still plenty left of the day. Escape was plausible if he could steal the horse, but he’d have to learn how to ride one first. And despite Red-Cloak always using a horse to get to the homestead, he still wasn’t easy around the beasts. Nothing as big as this should be treated with ease.

On the plus side, this horse – the small brown one with less of a temper – was about the friendliest of the four that Red-Cloak regularly used. He had no idea where Red-Cloak kept all these many horses, but suspected that it was the red-cloak barracks, wherever that was. The worst of the four was the huge black one with eyes like smoldering coals – even the thought of that beast brought about a shiver – but that huge horse was somewhat conspicuous, which was a bit of a godsend. He didn’t need his nerves shredded any further.

Red-Cloak himself had switched into brown-spun farm clothes; no sign of red anywhere. They carried bolts of cloth in saddlebags strung over the rump of the horse, and in those packages were the tools of his trade. His bow. He was an assassin with a bow.

Red-Cloak peered over his shoulder. “Do as I say.”

He nodded.

The town called Lowly was not really much of a town at all. There was a wide central street through which some trade passed, but other than that, the place consisted of a scattering of houses, a single tavern, a few places of basic trade, and an imperial office. Oh, and the local orphanage, too, which Red-Cloak took great pains in pointing out. That was the orphanage where he himself could have been holed up, and for the first time in a season, Red-Cloak’s cottage didn’t seem so bad after all. The home for unfortunate souls didn’t seem like much of a childhood memory.

“It seems like quite a large orphanage for such a small town.”

Red-Cloak grunted. “Well, that makes you smarter than most, as it goes. Most don’t think of that.”

He smiled. This man wasn’t generous with compliments.

“And you’ve been stationed here to protect this orphanage.”

“No – to watch it on behalf of the ‘last. If you ask the locals, it’s the mine I’m here for.” Red-Cloak pointed off to a set of shallow hills and the obvious scars of mining. He ignored the mine and peered back at the orphanage. If anything, it looked more like a prison.

“Doesn’t seem like these kids are much better off in this place than where they came from.”

Another grunt. “Turns out you’re doubly smart. Come on.”

Red-Cloak kicked on and they rounded a corner just off the main high street. There, they left the horse at a dubious stable, shouldering the bolts of cloth. Red-Cloak, in his brown-spun finery, led them in no particular direction.

“What sort of target are we expecting to find here?” It didn’t seem the sort of place where people needed to die.

His captor pointed off at a man sat outside the only tavern in town. The man was of no particular consequence, clothed simply, with no defining markings except a badge at the breast. The badge was red with some detail on it, but not particularly interesting. Apart from the man’s ease in the company of others, there was nothing about him at all. Well, almost nothing. There was something nagging just below the surface, but that seemed a bad reason for killing the man. He could say the same about Red-Cloak.

“Why him?”

Red-Cloak turned. “Cos I say so, and ‘cos I told you to do as I say.” His captor stopped and pulled him in, getting real close to his ear. “You think those hired to

kill get to choose their targets?”

Ali pulled back a touch. “You never told me I’d be a hired kill.”

“You want to eat, don’t you?”

He unhandled himself and stepped back. “Hang on. You told me I’d be some northern saviour. Not a hired kill.”

“One day, aye. Till then, you gotta eat.”

“But—”

“But nothing, boy. I’m sorry if you ain’t worked this out yet. I kinda thought it was obvious.”

He gulped. “Well, it wasn’t obvious. I didn’t know we’d be killing people.”

“And what did you expect to be doing with those skills you learned?” Red-Cloak peered left and right, like he was uneasy with the situation. They probably were making a bit of a scene, so he stepped alongside Red-Cloak. They could talk while walking.

“Killing someone who deserves it – I’m okay with that. Like a red-cloak. Killing cold for money is just...” He shuddered.

Red-Cloak put a hand over his shoulder. “Deserving is all down to perspective.”

“But surely there are better ways to earn—”

“Look, boy, why are you playing the fool now? I’ve been teaching you the bow. What else did you think that was for?”

“Hunting game.”

“Any old mug can hunt game. Ain’t wasting time on that. The north needs people dead – it’s really that simple.”

“Yes, but...” He trailed off. He supposed it was obvious, and he kicked at a stone, sending it skittering down an alley. The only saving in all this was that none of it was his choice. He hadn’t asked for any of it.

“No more questions now. Before or after is the time for questions, not now. Understand?” The man stared at him with those smouldering eyes. He nodded back meekly.

They set up on a low building two streets over from the tavern. There was just about a sight of the tavern, but it wasn’t easy. The buildings between them and the tavern were taller, and only the space between those buildings offered a vague view. Their target was visible, maybe only sixty paces, but it was a damned difficult flight. And what was worse was that the buildings created something of a weather-funnel. And the wind was up.

“Why don’t we set up on those buildings?” He pointed at some structures right in front of them.

“Any old mug could kill from there.”

“Which is why it’s a good spot.”

Red-Cloak shook his head. “Any old mug could also get caught up there. From here,” he pointed at the near-impossible flight, “only a northman sees the chance, so a northman is safe from those’d punish him. Right?”

“But the flight is impossible, so the kill won’t happen.”

Red-Cloak grinned. “Improbable. You’ll learn.”

He growled and took out his bow, stringing it and testing it, his heart hammering. Then he picked up an arrow, but Red-Cloak pushed the bow down.

“Wait.”

“What for?”

“Dusk.”

“Why?”

“Because it’s the perfect time for a kill. The between-time. For most, it’s a time of weakness. You will make it your strength.” It sounded like there was something profound in that, but he couldn’t work out what.

“Why?”

“Think, boy.” The depth of the growl was enough for obedience.

He didn’t think and stayed silent instead.

Dusk did finally come, and their target was – remarkably – still there. Still drinking. If anything, the man was swaying a touch, which might make the hit harder still. With permission granted, he whipped out his bow and nocked the perfect arrow – he’d been going through them all afternoon. It was a ridiculous flight that was being asked of him, which was of course absolutely the point. He had no doubt that when he missed, there would be a profound lesson in the failure. It would be nice if he showed up Red-Cloak just once, though. Just once.

He shifted into a squat, eyeing the man, judging the trajectory and the wind. Sweating. Struggling. It was getting dark quickly, and his mark was fading into the shadows – just a fuzz between two gloomy slabs of the buildings ahead of him. The man swayed and the wind swirled, and he just could not get it. The distance was nothing, but the perfection required in the path was... Improbable. The hiss in the ear from Red-Cloak didn’t help either.

A flash of red caught him, and there, trotting along the street to the left, was a red-cloak. A red-cloak on a horse, and behind the red-cloak was a parade of grubby children all tied together. They were downtrodden children, almost certainly on their way to the orphanage, destined for a fate he had somehow dodged. They looked weary and scared and beaten and—

He stared, squinted. It was gloomy, yes, but that was a face he would never forget. Her eyes were red and puffy, a bruise had flourished on her cheek, but it was her. It was undeniably her.

“Chia.”

In the gathering darkness, the red of the red-cloak shone like a beacon and his blood pumped faster, raw emotion churning his gut. Such an easy target and a red-cloak, a man who absolutely deserved it, and a man who had Chia, too. It was barely a decision at all.

He switched his aim left, hauled, and loosed with immaculate precision. Red-Cloak’s hand only knocked the bow out of the way when the arrow was sailing to its target.

“You fool.”

He just smiled back. “At least this one deserves it.”

There was a clunk, a grunt, the rattle of chainmail, and the red-cloak on the horse jolted. And then his target sat up, staring in their direction. Right in their direction. There was no way the man could see them up here, was there? It was practically night-time.

“There! Get them!” The bastard red-cloak pointed towards them, and the town erupted at the order. Red-Cloak spun him around.

“Fool.”

And then he was shoved from the roof, crashing to the ground. Voices were getting close, dangerously close, and he touched his head where it had hit the ground. He pulled his hand away, and there was blood there. Dark terrible wet blood.

Red-Cloak growled beside him. “Don’t you dare, fool.”

But it was too late. Night was coming in, but not as fast as his own personal fog.

* * *

Something stung, brutal hard. It laced through the darkness, digging deep. Right through him. Something grabbed him by the throat and yanked his head violently, throwing him from...

He pushed up and found that he was face-down in straw on a stone floor. Red-Cloak’s homestead. His cheek stung like a bellyflop.

He pushed onto his knees and rubbed at his cheek. It was sore, but he pulled his hand away and there was no blood. That was something. A part of his lip had

been caught, raised and bumpy. Painful. The back of his head was also sore, but that was an older ache. That was where...

“Ah.” He rubbed at the back of his head. “Have I been asleep all this time?”

Red-Cloak growled. “That weren’t no sleep. That was a blood-coma.”

“Well, it’s much the same thing, isn’t it?”

“Ain’t never had to wake someone from a nap with a slap like that.”

He swallowed and his throat was raw. Dry. He licked his lips, and they were terribly parched.

“Could I get a drink?”

Red-Cloak shook his head. “We need to talk.”

“About what?”

“About how you screwed that up so bad.” His captor leaned in, a stoniness in the scorched eyes, sure sign that this was a serious discussion. “What part of ‘do as I say’ did you mishear?”

“He was a red-cloak and...” The memory flashed. “Chia. The red-cloak was dragging Chia behind him, and I wanted to kill him because he deserved it. And I wanted to save Chia.” He stood. “Where is Chia now? We must save her.”

Red-Cloak crashed heavily in a chair and, remarkably, the rickety thing still held up. There was a fire going as usual, and Red-Cloak was in his reds – about to depart. For now though, the big man dragged hands over his face and sighed.

“Forget Chia.”

“But she’s in town. We can save her.”

“No!” Red-Cloak had never raised his voice like that before – a thunderous noise. It appeared that he’d really rubbed the man the wrong way.

“But—”

A shake of the head. “It’s not about Chia. She’s gone. Even if she’s here, she’s gone.”

“And if it’s not about saving Chia, then what exactly is it about?”

“You, Ali. You, and the man you failed to kill back in town. You almost screwed the whole damned thing with that little impulse of yours. When you have a target, stick to the target.”

“But who was the target? Far as I’m concerned, it’s the red-cloaks I should be killing.”

“Get a good look at the man’s badge, did you?”

He paused. “No.”

Red-Cloak grunted. “No. Course not. ‘Cos you’re a fool.”

“I am—” His captor cut him off with a swipe of the hand.

“If you’d been looking proper, you’d have seen that the man wears a badge of a red-faced demon. A red face with a white tear stitched in.”

He shrugged. “So?”

Red-Cloak ran his hand over his face. “And who d’you think the red face represents?”

It was obvious where Red-Cloak was going with this. “Northerners.”

“Aye.”

“So the man dislikes the north.” Red-Cloak nodded. “Is that really a reason to kill him?”

“Aye, it is.”

“Why?”

“Because he was there the night your ma died.”

“I very much doubt...” The words dried up in his throat and he slumped back onto the straw. Red-Cloak was right – that man had been there the night his ma died. It was the same man who’d been there the following morning, searching his house in vain. The red-cloak officer, the one who lashed out and who got beat up himself. Grumpy. With the benefit of hindsight, the red-mark on the red-cloak uniform shone bright in his memory, too.

“But he was a red-cloak back there.”

“Aye.” Red-Cloak pointed at his uniform. “So am I.”

“But who is he?”

“He’s a Lost Monk, and in Crucible, he was looking specifically for you.” Red-Cloak levelled him with a stare. “You.”

“Why?”

“Because you are more northern than any other northman I know. That man is the enemy of the ‘last, Ali, and they were closing in on you – on the cusp of throttling you in your home. It was a blessing we got wind ahead of time and alerted your ma. Alerted Aunt Bet. It’s a blessing that, despite the chaos, you survived, and you were hidden. If anything, it only showed us just how northern you are.”

“So...” Ali licked his lips. “Are the Lost Monks those that are more dangerous than the red-cloaks?”

“Aye. They are.”

“Oh.” He had spotted the Lost Monks up north on the odd occasion, but never had they attacked. Never had they burned northmen and women and children in a fire. But they had infiltrated the red-cloaks – just as the Fatherlast had – which said a lot in itself. And Chia, who was captured by the red-cloaks, had

been brought to this town and its disturbing orphanage. If that was the trade that the Lost Monks peddled, then perhaps they were the ones to be wary of.

He peered up at Red-Cloak. “How did you get wind of the red-cloak invasion? How did you get the jump on them?”

“Let’s just say that your ma would have done anything to make sure that you fulfilled your potential, and that includes pre-empting even the Emperor himself. The ‘last hasn’t survived in ignorance, Ali – hundreds of people have put their lives on the line so that you can flourish. Your ma included.”

“But...” His question trailed off, the weight of the words pressing down on him. Why was he never told any of this?

Red-Cloak stood, adjusted his belt, and growled. “I need out of here, back to town. You very nearly screwed everything the north has paid such a high price for, and I need to show my face – keep up the illusion. I’ll leave you thinking on what I said there.” With that, the soldier turned and departed.

Which left him with a very real weight on his conscience. He screwed himself into a ball, pulled the threadbare blanket over himself, and wept.

3

The Way

It was ridiculous really, but he couldn't actually recall any of the details of that fateful night when his ma had been killed. The *clump, clump* of booted feet in his house was clear enough, as were the soothing words of his mother: '*Stay hidden, my sweet. The Father be with you.*' Then there was hiding in the blankets, the whisper of steel which miraculously missed him, and waking up the following morning, Aunt Bet over him. Apparently he had been out cold, and apparently it had been a blood-coma. That's what he now understood.

But details? No. He hadn't noted the look of the men who had entered his house and murdered his ma, but that was because he'd been hiding. Peering out from his hiding place may have been a quick route to death, so he hadn't peered out – just stayed hidden, weeping as quietly as he could. But after Red-Cloak's outburst, the Lost Monk's face was vivid; outside his house, screwed up with frustration. Angry at not finding something – and that something was him. Him. A town had been devastated; people had been burned and scattered to the winds, and all of that happened for him. The least he could do was honour them with a little effort, and so that's exactly what he gave. Effort. As it turned out, that was all that was necessary.

He was outside as usual, braving the worst of the elements – and it really was the worst today because it was storm season in the Dry Ocean. Red-Cloak loomed over him, big as ever, inspecting his progress. The man hadn't been generous with praise recently, probably because he was still brooding over the bungled attempt a season ago. But he had improved – he was sure of it – and he wanted to make it up to Red-Cloak. His ma clearly trusted the man, which meant that he should, too. And besides – there was still lots unsaid, and he got the impression that further details wouldn't come out until he'd earned the man's trust back. That meant that all there was to be done was try, try, and try again. Eventually Red-Cloak's closed-book approach would surely end.

"I'm ready for this."

“I’ll be the judge of that.” Red-Cloak flexed his grip on that heavy, heavy sword of his.

“Well, are you going to give me a fair viewing?” He gritted his teeth.

“Show me something fair and I’ll let you know.”

“Alright. I’ll show you something fair.” He pulled another arrow, strung it, and loosed – not even looking at the target. Not even targeting the target. The wind was up as usual, but that was no longer a variable. In fact, with a bit of wind it was easier, just like Red-Cloak said. He struck the water-butt plumb, a hissing sound where air leaked in and water leaked out.

“Stop stickin’ holes in that damned butt!” Red-Cloak rushed over to the butt and performed more emergency maintenance. The precious water-butt was holier than a sponge.

He sauntered after the man, bow casually in hand. His captor turned to him.

“You do realise this water is our lifeline?”

“I do. I have to drink the piss.”

“Good clean rainwater, that is.”

“Stinking southern water. Nothing down here is clean.”

“Aye, there is that.” Red-Cloak grunted a laugh. It wasn’t often that Red-Cloak was light with him these days, so that must be progress.

Red-Cloak finished plugging the hole with clay putty and handed him the arrow. He peered at the man.

“It was a fine shot, no?”

“You’ve improved, I’ll give you that.” Red-Cloak rose back to his feet. “Still ain’t got my eye though, have you?”

“You don’t use your eyes so far as I can tell. You got some strangeness in you.” That brought about another smile in the man.

“Now we’re getting somewhere.”

“And it’s the same strangeness in me, right?”

“Aye.”

“So...” He ground a foot into the wiry grass and fiddled with the cord of his bow. If he was going to do his ma proud – perhaps even avenge her – then he should probably know what it was that she died saving. He stared into Red-Cloak’s terrible scorched eyes but said nothing.

“So what?”

He gulped, sucked in a deep breath, and let loose.

“What exactly is it inside us? I mean... in what way am I special?”

“Well, boy, what was it that your ma preached?”

“She preached of the sacred north – home of the Fatherlast.”

“Aye. And therein lies your answer.”

He threw his hands up, blustering. “But the ‘last is just a set of stories – myths of great northmen wielding magics of fire and wind and invisibility. Much as I enjoyed the stories, even I know that they were just tales.”

“Your ma didn’t seem to think so.”

He swiped a hand before him. “No, you’ve got it all wrong. Ma used the stories to breathe life into the north – to encourage those to her side with stories of impossible deeds. But they’re still stories. They were never real.”

“Then what is it that’s inside you that she died for, eh?”

He shrugged. “Mothers will do crazy things for their children.”

“Then what is it that the Lost Monks saw in you that drove your ma to her actions?”

“I...” There wasn’t an obvious answer for that one.

“Look, boy, believe it or not, but you have the ‘last flowing through you. Your ma knew this, and I...” he gulped “...I also know this. It is there, and we just need to train it out of you.”

He held up the bow. “With this?”

“Aye. With that. Look, boy, there ain’t been no flame-wielding northman for best part o’ two thousand years, I’ll grant you that. But that skill – that gift – is not just chanced upon. The bigger magic is made up of smaller parts; learned, assembled as a greater skill by those with the smaller skills. The knowledge has been lost so that even those with the line don’t know how to wield it, but the flame can be kindled. I promise you.”

He hoisted the bow again. “With this?”

“Aye. I don’t know how, but the skills that make you good with the bow will lead you to the greater feats. The way is lost just now, but you’ll find it, I’m sure.”

He shook his head and snorted. “I’m sorry, but this is nonsense. I don’t believe it. Much as I loved Ma and want to do good by her, if this is truly what she preached, then I want nothing to do with it. It’s ridiculous.” It stung even saying those words, but his frustration was deep. It was nonsense, that was the simple truth of the matter. It must surely be.

“Why is it ridiculous?”

“It’s just a bow and arrow.” He held the weapon up. “Plenty learn the bow and arrow, so what makes me special?”

“Oh, do they, now?”

“Yes.”

“And you’ve seen plenty of people hit a target plumb in a storm, have you?”

“I...”

“Didn’t think so.”

“But you can do that. It means I’m no better than you.”

“Oh, really?”

“No.”

“Well, think on this. I can do that, aye, but it took me two decades to get there.”

At that, Red-Cloak turned and walked through the door of his homestead, leaving those words hanging.

He picked an arrow from the sheath, nocked it, pulled on the bow, swung, and loosed all in one fluid motion. A ridiculous effort all told, and not remotely likely to hit the target. But of course, it did hit the target. Dead centre. And it had only taken two seasons to master the skill, which made him forty times the man that Red-Cloak was. He gulped, and he followed. There was still so much to learn.

* * *

A cracking noise woke him, cracking and swearing. He rolled over on the straw-padded mattress, and on the far side of the room, fiddling with the hearth, was Red-Cloak. The man was back in his reds, ready for another day in the service of the Empire, but he was struggling with something. It appeared that the fire was giving him a fight.

“Problem?”

The man twitched. “You’re awake.”

“Hard to sleep with all that noise you’re making.”

“Aye.” The man threw the poker into the carefully piled skeleton of wood, sending it tumbling. “Wanted to get a fire going, keep you toastie, but the damned wet’s got in there. It’ll need drying out.”

He rolled out from under the blanket and slipped to his feet, wrapping his arms around himself. Damn it, but it was cold.

“Where’s this cold weather come from?”

Red-Cloak grunt-laughed. “The north.”

“It doesn’t feel this cold up north.”

“Aye. That’ll be the volcanoes.”

He grabbed a shirt and wool-spun jumper from a chair and slipped them on. Once warm, he moved quickly to the hearth and took a look.

“Seems dry enough.”

“Aye, the hearth’s alright. But this wood,” the man touched some of the larger logs, “has moisture in the core. It’s seasoned, but somethin’s seeped in.” Red-Cloak slapped the brickwork of the hearth, the noise surprisingly loud.

“Give it here.”

“You doubting me?”

“Of course not. It’s just that I’ve always been good with fires.”

“Have you now?” The scorched eyes almost glowed at that statement, something behind them.

“Just give me the damned kindling.” He laughed off the intensity of the moment.

With the structure remade, he took the flints and struck them once, twice, three times. The sparks showered the kindling and there was an instant take. A little blow into the fireplace and the burn spread along the shavings, flames leaping up.

“Easy, no?” He smiled up at the man.

“That ain’t the hard bit.”

“Oh, I know that. But we’re almost there.”

He fiddled with the wooden structure, lowering it slightly, and then shifted a particular length over the liveliest of the flames. Then he got right down low and blew up and into the fire with a steady flow. The flames licked and wrapped around the small length of wood, and the wood was relenting. Eventually though, the flames subsided, and the kindling burned down to a glowing crisp. What was left was a seemingly inert fire.

Red-Cloak grunted. “So much for that.”

“Hang on.” He peered at his favoured length of wood, got right up close, and tickled it with air from his lips. There was an orange glow, slow but definitely there. He smiled. The glow crept up the length of wood.

“It’s good.”

“Ain’t seen no evidence of that, yet.”

“You will.” He walked off and pulled some trousers on, pouring himself a cup of water from the bucket that had been sluiced from the rain butt. It was hardly fresh, but the cold winds had chilled it to bearable. Once he was seated in his chair, the fire was really kicking in.

“Well, I’ll be damned.” Red-Cloak scratched his head.

“Told you I’m alright with a fire.”

“Aye. Ain’t never seen that before.”

He leaned forward. “What? You’ve never seen someone good with fire before.”

“Have you?”

He opened his mouth, finger raised, poised. There were others with a talent for fires, weren't there? Of course there were. Plenty were handy with a flame, but then again, he'd never seen Red-Cloak struggle before. He, however, was just that little bit better. He always got it going when others seemed to struggle.

"How did you do it?" Red-Cloak stared firm, those eyes smouldering.

He shrugged. "No skill to it really. Just get a feel for the best option given the situation, and then sort of... Well, just sort of hope that it works. Will it to work, I guess."

Red-Cloak grinned. "Just like the bow, eh?"

"What are you saying?"

The huge man came and sat across from him, leaning in, seriousness all over his face. "Look, Ali, hear this. The northern, ah, talent is barely a flicker these days – just wisps of the past drifting through generations. But it's still in us," he beat his chest, over the heart. "Still here. And it still shows, too, on occasion. But when it does show, it almost always shows as a talent of the air."

He tipped his head. "What's talent of the air?"

"Like bow work. The arrow flies and shifts in the air can alter the path."

He threw his hands up. "Whoa, that is not what's going on."

Red-Cloak raised an eyebrow. "Whatever you like – but that's where it shows. It's a lot of years since someone showed talent with the flame."

He reclined and laughed. "And here I am, some sort of chosen one, manipulating fire."

"Aye." It was terribly matter of fact – mundane even. Did the man actually believe this nonsense?

"What are the other skills, then?" He threw his hands up. "Actually, don't tell me. Earth and water, right?"

Red-Cloak scoffed. "Don't be a fool. Ain't seen no one shaping rock before, and even water..." He drifted a moment, but waved it away. "No. The talent don't need splitting really – it's all the same skill – but many like it separate and the main faculties are air, flame, motion, illusion, and mind."

He jolted at the blunt unwavering answer.

"You are joking, right?"

"Ain't nowt to joke on here. Look, I gotta go – duties. I'll be back tonight, and we'll talk proper, right?"

He nodded.

"And..." Red-Cloak stood and rubbed at his jawline. "Damn it, but your ma may have been right. Maybe she didn't die for nothing after all."

“Wait, what?”

“Later. We’ll speak later.” And then the man was gone, fled into the cold, leaving him and a hearty fire, a fire that he’d made. He put his hands in front of him and stared into them, like they were powerful. But that was ridiculous, and he thrust them into his lap. They were just hands, and he was just a simple northboy. And a hungry one at that. He set about salvaging some scraps from the kitchen.

* * *

It was much later when Red-Cloak got back, and he’d fallen asleep, a rattling storm outside. Again. But the sleep was troubled with images of magic, and when the door to the homestead slapped open, he sat up, wide awake. Like he hadn’t been asleep at all.

“Don’t lemme disturb you.”

He grunted. “You disturbed me this morning good enough.”

The huge man laughed, a great rattle of a thing. “I’ll get changed, and then I’ll pour us a drink.”

The storm raged harder, and the two of them stared at the flickering fire, a draft agitating the flames. It was the same fire he’d breathed into life that morning, and it still fascinated Red-Cloak.

“You really believe all that stuff. About the northern faculties – that’s what you called them, right?”

Red-Cloak grunted. “Your ma did.”

He nodded over and over, huddled inside a blanket. His ma had been obsessed with the Fatherlast – the old god’s last gift to man. Or actually, five gifts bestowed upon five northern sons. He’d never heard them called faculties, but it was surely too much of a coincidence.

“Isn’t it supposed to be one gift per northman?”

Red-Cloak reclined. “That’s a modern take on it from the Fallow Years.”

“Modern. From the Fallow Years. You do know that was two thousand years back, right?”

“Aye. And the magic of the north is older.” He didn’t like it being called magic. That was just fairy tales.

“So, it’s not one gift per northman?”

Red-Cloak shook his head. “It’s all the same, really. When the talent was lost, the five were created by those that remembered – and each faction wanted their own corner of the whole. And so the five faculties were born, such as your ma said it. What she also said was that with the right line, the boundaries blended.”

“Oh.” The next bit was awkward. “And I’m the right line?”

“Aye.”

“Right.” He pulled the blanket taut around himself, recalling the mundane acts he’d seemingly mastered in just two seasons: lighting a fire and loosing a bow. If that was the standard for greatness, it really puzzled him that the world wasn’t full of great men and women. It was all a nonsense, sure as the sky was blue.

Except at night, the sky was black; and someone had been seeking him out in Crucible. Him. Little old him. It made no sense unless he believed what Red-Cloak claimed.

“So, back in Crucible, you’re saying that they – the Lost Monks – were after me.”

Another nod from Red-Cloak.

“Okay. So who are the Lost Monks? Who was that man you would have had me kill?”

Red-Cloak only stared into the flames, and the silence stretched. He had a measure of the man now, and so he left it. Red-Cloak would be considering his answer. Finally, his captor reclined.

“You know the story of Dusk, right?”

It was a hell of a tangent, but he went with it and chuckled. “Another fairy tale.”

“Aye. Well, in that tale, you’ll recall that the old children of the Father beat seven shades out of one of their own.”

He nodded. “Yep, the Stranger.” He peered over his shoulder, as was the only decent thing to do when speaking the Stranger’s name. He was, after all, still plenty young enough for the Stranger’s tastes.

“Aye, the Stranger. Well, the thing about the Father is that he was always smarter than the other gods, and even now, departed as he is, his hand is there. In the gifts.”

“You mean the Fatherlast?”

“Aye. The ‘last.’”

This explanation was jumping all over the place, so he went to the only logical place.

“So, what is the ‘last for, then?’”

“Protection.”

“Against what?”

This time Red-Cloak grunted. “The Stranger.”

And there it was. The stupidity of this whole thing. Dusk was a tale told to keep children in bed, nothing more – even if he did keep an eye over his shoulder. He

hung his head in his hands and groaned. Did this man really believe this nonsense?

He reclined again and took a sip of drink, eyeing Red-Cloak. There were still gaps to fill, however ludicrous the answers would be.

“And what does this have to do with the man you would have me puncture with an arrow?”

Red-Cloak grinned. “Two sides of a coin there, boy. We fight for the Father, and that there man is in the Stranger’s grasp.”

He shook his head, utterly baffled by the claims. “I don’t believe it.”

The big man only shrugged. “I got that impression. No worries. Took me a while, too. Well, aside from being in the service of the Stranger, that man is also proprietor and chief of that there orphanage where your gal got took.”

“You mean Chia?”

“Aye. She’s in his care now, and if you believe anything I say, believe this: you do not want to be in that man’s care.” The stare from Red-Cloak was levelled and firm, not for questioning. But then the big man simply broke into a grin and reclined. “Now, talking of two sides of a coin...”

“Oh no, not again.”

“Aye.” The big man grinned and took coins out of his pocket.

He growled and shook his head, sipping more of his weak beer – the fuzziness coming in at the edges. “And which faculty does flipping a coin belong to?”

Red-Cloak grinned at that – really grinned. “Good question, boy, and ain’t that a question that’s raged for centuries.”

“Has it?”

“Aye. Faculties of air and motion – they both claim it.”

“And who owns it?”

A chuckle. “As your ma said it, they are both blends of the same thing.”

“So you can blend?”

“I can flip a coin and loose an arrow. Can’t light me a fire, though, ‘least not as good as you.” Red-Cloak grinned. “Right, let’s get to it. What length?”

He shrugged. “Let’s go four, shall we?” That raised an eyebrow.

“Alright.” His opponent leaned over, handing him four coins.

“No. I’ll follow the link.”

The eyebrow levitated further. “Come now. You ain’t even chased a length once.”

He grinned. “Let’s just say I’m feeling lucky.”

Red-Cloak kinked a smile at this. “Well, let’s go then.”

The coins were flipped one after the other, and then lined up on a table between them. Crush, flail, flail, crush. It wasn't the most challenging combination, but he'd never won a game, so confidence would've been out of place.

Red-Cloak smirked. "Fancy your chances?"

"I do." He picked up the coins and started.

Coin on end of finger, he peered right into it, like he had power over it, which was clearly ridiculous. Then he flipped, followed it through the air, and it crashed onto the table, bouncing and landing...

"Crush." He smiled.

Red-Cloak grunted. "We've been here before."

"Only about once."

His opponent chuckled. "Aye, there is that."

A second coin, and he peered at it again. It somersaulted through the air, crashing on the table and settling quickly. Flail. He smiled, and Red-Cloak nodded back.

A third flip, and this time he caught the coin glinting in the air. The flail side of the coin may have actually flashed at him in the wan candlelight. He didn't even bother looking once it landed.

Red-Cloak furrowed his brow. "Now this is long odds."

He picked up his fourth coin and flipped it without concentrating. It turned over and over, and hit the table with a thud, settling instantly. Red-Cloak had a sheen to his forehead. A sweat. Maybe nerves.

"Crushed. Impressed?"

Red-Cloak snorted. "It was luck."

"Yeah, but still. It was luck I ain't had before." He sipped his beer. "Maybe it comes from this."

Red-Cloak shook his head. "Don't think so. It's the practice paying off, and that means it's time. The lost monk must die." The man grinned, and he mirrored it. He was going to kill again, and this time it would be a success; this time, he would avenge his ma. Maybe he could be the saviour of the north, after all?

* * *

Two cycles later, they were back in the town of his failure. They stabled their horse, and he took the bolts of cloth under his arm, breathing the place in. A season on from his failure, and he appraised the town with a wealth more experience.

Their strike point for the kill was perfect; a moderately tall building with a flat roof and a lip on the near side, making them almost undetectable from the inn. And that was without the row of buildings between them and the tavern. Further across, where the red-cloak on the horse had been with Chia lined up behind him, they were easily detectable, but not from the inn. From the inn they would be invisible. It was an excellent choice for that very particular job: implausible for most, but not for him. With a bit of help from the wind and lots of precision, it was a flight he could make with his eyes shut. He shook his head, whistling.

“What you whistling about?”

“Just thinking about your choice of seat for the job.”

Red-Cloak clucked. “Seeing it now, are you?”

“I am. Let’s get to it, shall we?”

They waited all day, but that was nothing. After so much time spent training and waiting – most of it on his own – an afternoon was a mere flutter of the eyelids. In fact, he may well have drifted off for an eighth-turn or so. Red-Cloak hadn’t even called out their mark, but there was no doubt the man would be at the inn. Red-Cloak knew the mark’s schedule better than the mark himself did, so all that was left was waiting. This was the perfect spot for the job.

“There.”

He was jarred out of a restful state, and he shrank around, peering over the lip. A bawdy man had just arrived at the inn.

“Is that the same man?”

“Aye.”

“Huh. He’s put weight on.”

“Aye.”

He chewed a moment. “You sure we want this man dead? I mean, would it not be useful to catch him and interrogate him or something?” He touched the bow.

Red-Cloak turned on him. “Much as I’d love to squeeze the bastard, it ain’t usual for the town’s commander to lock up and beat the most powerful man in town. I done my watching, but this one’s lost his value now anyway.”

“Oh. Why?”

“Well, he was supposed to have you locked up in that there orphanage. Or dead. But you’re not there – you’re here. I call that a failure.” The big man grinned.

No more words were required. Mother was drawing down, slipping to the horizon, and the precious between-time was here. The mark was nowhere near as drunk as last time, but the man was just as loud. Arrogant. That dusky dimness

crept over the small town, torches flaring up along the main road, but this did not matter. Not this time. With just the right level of dark and the unmistakable noise of their mark having finished a boast, he swung over the ledge and gauged the trajectory. The mark was not ideally placed, half out of sight, but with a little lean over the edge and a favourable puff from the wind – which was whipping up in the gathering dusk – it would be simple. Simple. He pulled back on the bow and loosed.

The lost monk put a tankard to his lips, tipped his head back, and the arrow struck his neck perfectly. The man fell out of view, and he missed the look in his victim's eyes. It would have been nice to see the eyes of the man at the point of the kill, but then again, was that really important? The job was done, and he had some sort of vengeance for the death of his ma. It didn't feel like parity just yet, but there was a dim satisfaction there. Something had improved.

The screams went up.

The town turned to a chaos of activity, but he ignored all that, instead delicately placing the bow and his other instruments back into the folds of the cloth. Bells clanged, men ran, and women screamed, but he and Red-Cloak slipped from the roof and strode toward the stables and their horses. The stable-hand was rather distracted when they arrived.

“We would like our horse back.”

“But sirs, there has been...” the stable-hand wiped his brow. “There has been a murder.”

“We know. We would like our horse back.”

“But... But...” Stable-hand's mouth opened. “Damn it, but it was—”

Quick as lightning, something flashed in Red-Cloak's hand, plunging into the belly of the stable-hand. Red-Cloak turned to him.

“Don't look at the blood. Just cut our horse free and chuck a few coppers down. We always pay our way.”

He was struck dumb by Red-Cloak's actions but pulled himself out of it and did as asked. Leading the horse away, he turned to Red-Cloak.

“I'm sure you told me once that we shouldn't be doing any killing off-plan.”

Red-Cloak grinned. “Who said that was off-plan?”

* * *

The town was left in a maelstrom, and their discreet exit was, unfortunately, not entirely discreet. But of course, Red-Cloak had it all planned out.

They galloped for some low hills – where the mines were based – with the dust of their pursuers thick in the gathering gloom behind them. Once at the hills, they pulled up and leaped from their horse. Red-Cloak then gave the poor beast the mightiest whack on its rump, and the mare ran off into the hills at pace. They hunkered down in a ditch, and the drumbeat of the approaching hooves rolled towards them. The chasing horsemen arrived, and he scrunched up his face, guarding against the dust. The chasing horses charged right past.

With their pursuers fading into the embrace of the hills, there was a noise. Laughing. It was Red-Cloak.

“I wouldn’t call that a laughing matter.”

“It was fun, no?”

“Well.” His heart was beating so fast that it melted into a continuous stream. “It was nerve-racking, I’ll give you that.” He looked about at the pitch-black surroundings. “What do we do now?”

“Ride back home.”

It was his turn, and he laughed. “Did you not notice when you set our ride off as a decoy?”

Red-Cloak tutted. “Plan every detail, boy. Come on.”

There was a second mare saddled and waiting round the back of a wiry scrub at a water hole. More alarming though was a rustling noise from the trees on the left, where a raggedy man climbed out. He tensed and dropped to a knee, but he had no weapon.

Red-Cloak stepped forward to the man and extended an arm. “Thank you, friend.” The raggedy man took something and nodded – probably coin.

“The trick worked then?”

“Aye, perfectly. If you could retrieve Magma quick, I’ll pay double. She’s a good horse that one.”

The man nodded and then drifted back off through the trees. Red-Cloak said not a thing.

“Who was he?”

“You think I work alone? The Fatherlast has a long reach, Alidinia – it is worth remembering that.”

They climbed up quick, and were drifting off into the dark at a leisurely pace, shadowing their way back home. It would be slow going for sure – the hills were in the exact opposite direction from home – but they both had thick cloaks and food for the journey. Some sleep would be nice, too, but he wasn’t sure about

snuggling into Red-Cloak. They weren't that close just yet. Then again, a little shut-eye might just do him the world...

"Damn it, but you might've been right 'bout him."

He jolted from a semi-sleep, and Red-Cloak jolted, too. His companion had been looking up at the heavens: at the ghostly presence of the Father.

"Who were you speaking to?"

"Uh..." The rest of Red-Cloak's words faded into some sort of grumble.

"I didn't really catch that."

"Weren't meant for you."

He didn't doubt that, but sleep had been ripped from him and he had an unexpected opportunity. Here, he had a captive audience.

"Who are you?"

"You know who I am. I'm a northman masquerading as a red-cloak who has just assisted in the murder of the man he is charged with securing." Red-Cloak chuckled, a deep grumbling thing. "Speaking of which, I must be back in town early tomorrow – for the clean-up. We need good pace tonight."

"Doesn't mean we can't talk."

"Suppose not."

"Then who are you?"

"We just been through that—"

"No, I mean really: who are you? I don't even know your name."

There was silence, and a clenching of the shoulders. "Not really your business."

"It sort of is, though, isn't it? You've trained me, which must be a mighty risk for someone deep in the imperial colours. But why are you taking that risk? Why are you training me?"

"So you can fulfil your potential."

"Yeah – a potential which I know nothing about, and you seem to know everything about. Why is that?"

Red-Cloak hunkered forward. "We need some speed here."

"No. Not now. Please answer some of my questions. I've spent too long in the dark."

"Look, boy, you asked a lot o' questions there. Where d'you want me to start?"

"Wherever you're comfortable."

"Fine. I'll crack on then." This was followed with silence, and it stretched on and on, into the gathering gloom. Silence. A deep part of him wanted to break it and to push the issue, but something innate stopped him. The big man did not respond well to bombardment, so the best he could do was wait it out and hope

the man cracked. The distance between them seemed vast, even though they were huddled on the back of a horse, but he rode out the discomfort, hoping that it was eating at Red-Cloak faster. He didn't have much else in the way of tactics.

"Alidinia."

"What?"

The man huffed. "Alidinia. Ali."

"Yes?"

"No, boy. Not you. Me."

What in Godslost was the man talking about? Had the Stranger scrambled him? Getting a response at all was perhaps more than he expected, but this made little to no sense. He didn't even know what to say to—

"Wait. Is that your name, too?"

The man flicked his head. "Quick, ain't you?"

"Ha! After all this time we share a name. That's a bit of a coincidence, isn't it?"

"Ain't no coincidence to me."

He went cold with that statement – with that thread. This man knew him, and he knew his ma, and they shared a name. And... And... Red-Cloak wasn't just a northern libertarian. He was also... It didn't bear thinking about.

"What was my ma to you?"

"She was a special woman, your ma. You know that. I know that. Your sister knows that."

"Wait. Why would you mention my sister?"

"Does that really seem so strange?"

He supposed not, but he was always on edge where his sister was concerned. The questions were bubbling inside, but that was not the way that Red-Cloak liked to be played. He had to ask pointed questions, so he breathed in deep, out, then in again. It was a bit like some strange verbal duel, and he was the novice.

"You said once that I was supposed to be delivered to my sister after the attack on Crucible."

"Aye."

"Were you there to do that delivering?"

The man tightened up but loosened quick enough. "I was there making sure it happened, aye. But I weren't doing the delivering. That was Aunt Bet's job."

"Brother's Balls, you know Aunt Bet, too?"

Red-Cloak peered over his shoulder. "Your ma teach you that language, did she?"

"I heard it off the other kids. Did Aunt Bet know you were there?"

“I believe so, yes.”

“And she didn’t say a thing. She didn’t tell me that…” The words died in his throat – he didn’t want to say it. Not yet. He’d never had a father to the extent that he didn’t even question this fact anymore. And yet – yet – others in his life not only knew of this man, but had potentially had contact with him. Why was he cut adrift like that?

“You alright back there?”

“Yes.” He squeezed the man tighter, putting his cheek against Red-Cloak’s back. “Just thinking.”

“More questions?”

“Maybe one more.” Silence reigned, but he took that as a good thing. “You’ve told me plenty of times now that I was supposed to be delivered to my sister. That’s what my ma wanted, and that’s what Old Bet was planning on doing. And yet here I am – not with my sister. With you instead. What changed?”

There was stiffness in the man again, and silence. Little point in holding back now, so he pushed on.

“Please – it’s important that I understand. My sister hates me. Resents me. Living with my sister is the last thing I would want, and yet that was the plan that all those people that loved me had for me. Except for you. I need to know why.”

Red-Cloak’s head dropped. “I already told you why.”

“No. You gave me two excuses, and a third to make up the numbers. But I don’t believe it. If it is so dangerous for me to be in the care of my sister, in the north, then why would my ma plan on that basis? She was smarter than that.”

“Aye, she was.”

“So why? Why have you taken matters into your own hands? You’ve already told me that you’re a terrible teacher, which I can agree with.”

“Look, Ali, there are forces at play here that even I don’t understand. I’m just taking precautions – that’s all. Maybe one day we can get back on plan.”

“But why take these precautions? It must be important if you changed the play like you’ve done.”

“Aye, it is.”

“Then what’s the reason? Why am I here? I deserve that much now.”

Red-Cloak nodded, slumping slightly. “I will tell you, Ali. I promise. But not here. Not now. We must get back, and I must show my face in town – keep up the illusion. When I return, we lay it all out on the table. Agreed?”

He sniffed and nodded, arms tight around the man’s middle once more. Questions would bombard him in the meantime, denying him proper rest, but at

least there was an endpoint in sight. That was progress from where he'd come. That was an improvement.

Red-Cloak put a hand over his, stroking it with a thumb. It was surprisingly soft, and it broke him. He sniffed, and then he wept. The last person to do that had been his ma, and the memories came flooding in. He barely registered the rest of the ride home.

* * *

As it turned out, it was really quite easy sleeping on the back of a horse, especially when hugging the rider in front. It was surprisingly pleasant, too – a real deep sleep of contentment. He couldn't recall the last time he'd slept so well.

He stretched, wiped dribble from his mouth, and breathed in this wonderful day – the first day of the rest of his life. A life with a father. The day smelled of horse so far, and he still disliked the stink of horses, but answers were coming, and with that he could put up with anything. Today was a good day compared with where he'd come, and the whiff of a horse would not undermine his mood. He smiled and breathed in the fresh air.

“Awake, is it?”

“Aye.” His stomach growled, but they were riding the long grass of the Dry Ocean in what was still the semi-night – that grey time before dawn came proper. They would be home soon, and that would mean breakfast. Hopefully it would be a big meal.

They continued their steady progress, Mother hauling herself towards Friendly, the palette of her brightness seeping over the horizon. It was a red sky, and that usually foretold heavy winds, which in turn usually foretold practice. He could probably do without practice today, but he would save the bickering for later. With answers coming, he could put up with any amount of tedium.

“When do you need to be back in town?”

“Soon as. Chances are, my superiors will be there by lunch – I need to be on top of things by then.”

He nodded. It sounded like he would be making his own breakfast then.

“Shit. Down,” Red-Cloak hissed at him.

“Down where?”

“I said, down!” A meaty arm came round and crashed into his shoulder, tipping him off the mare. He landed awkwardly, grunting, and then a package of cloth and weapons landed on his head. Red-Cloak kicked at the flanks of the horse and galloped off toward their home.

“Hey!” He pulled up onto his elbows within the wiry grass, but didn’t shout again. He poked his head higher, where the grass was thinner, and followed the horse. There was their homestead, closer than expected. Red-Cloak was back there already, but he was not alone. A bunch of other red-cloaks were also there, and that was odd. He didn’t think Red-Cloak shared this strange, homely location with his fellow red-cloaks. What could these soldiers want in this out-of-the-way lonely place?

There was a crunch, and a man who rode a six-legged monstrosity of a horse – the much-vaunted thunder stallion – cracked a fist around Red-Cloak’s mouth, felling the giant easily. The same man gave orders, and then stared off in his direction. He hunkered right down, relying on his ears instead. He very much doubted that this new red-cloak would be good company for breakfast.

The red-cloak invaders did not hang about long at the homestead. They trussed up Red-Cloak and slung him over the rump of his own horse. They then secured the reins of the horse and pushed back in the direction of the town, the sound of their considerable hooves drifting off into the looming dawn. One red-cloak hung behind, hiding himself round the back of the homestead, but waiting was a game he had considerable practice with. After the best part of the day, the lone red-cloak kicked off, and he was left with the empty homestead for company. That, and memories; and frustrations.

He shivered in the gathering evening of the Dry Ocean, the harsh reality burrowing deep inside. Just as the answers had started coming, so he was back on his arse again. He was alone, and actually, it was worse this time. This time he missed the life he had rather than the life he’d lost.

4

The Vengeance

He had no other options. Not really. He needed a friend – some sort of guidance – and the only people he knew by name were thousands of kilo-skips to the north. Except one. There really wasn't another option.

Breaking into the orphanage was likely to be challenging, and he'd set himself up appropriately. He'd holed up in Lowly, fully expecting a long wait while he worked out the best way in. Food could be stolen, and he had time – he hoped. Fortunately, it was much easier than that.

He'd slunk into the shadows across the street from a side entrance, watching the doorman's schedule. He'd only waited a quarter day when, ludicrously, the doorman slipped inside and left the door ajar. He took the opportunity, stepped inside, explored the atrium within, and found it empty. It seemed rude not to accept the gift, so he'd pushed on deeper, infiltrating the unnecessarily vast orphanage. Now he was deep in the bowels of the place, a ghost in the shadows.

Inside, he hadn't known what to expect. The truth was, though, that he would never have expected what he found. It was more like a prison than a place for unfortunate children, all bars and moans and a horrible, horrible stench. There were precious few adults in the place, but he still kept to the shadows. The last thing he needed was an excited crowd alerting the Monks to his location.

But finding Chia was proving tough. There were just so many cells, and so he changed strategy and waited in the shadows at the edge of what seemed a mess hall. Periodically, groups of victims were brought in chained together, dispensed meagre food, and then marched back out again. He waited, and eventually it paid off. Chia was delivered as a member of the latest group.

It had been a season since last he'd seen her – and it had been harder on Chia than it had on him. She was all out of proportion: painfully thin legs and arms, but with a torso that had become bloated somehow. Her hair was dank and limp, cut away roughly in places, and there was another bruise on the opposite cheek. But despite all this, it was undeniably Chia. It was her. With her foul meal

finished, she trudged off through the orphanage, and he followed. The line of orphans was possibly the saddest sight he'd ever encountered.

It was at this point that his talent for waiting really came into its own. The cells were horribly open, with bars on all sides. In fact, they were more like cages for animals – poor orphan animals. He waited until darkness, watching the 'jailers' rapping clubs on bars and even beating a couple of poor souls. What could he do? When the place was deathly silent, he waited a touch longer – always longer, that's what Red-Cloak had taught him – and then he moved. Chia's cell was right ahead of him.

"Psst." She did not respond. "Psst." Nothing. He picked a stone out of his pocket and threw it at her through the bars. She jumped at the impact, betraying a life in her that hadn't been obvious earlier when she trudged through the halls. She wasn't dead yet.

"Psst."

She spun like a caged cat, pushing back against the bars, as far from him as possible.

"It's me. Ali."

Her eyes were wide – he could see that much – and they widened further.

"Ali?"

"Yes. It's really me."

"But..." She clambered forward on her delicate knees, clawing at the bars. "It is you. How?"

"I... It's a long story."

She put a hand through the bars and stroked his face. "It really is you." He nodded. "What are you doing here?"

"I've, ah, come to save you." He smiled, but the response was not what he'd expected. Chia slunk back into the cell, receding once more.

"You can't save me."

"Why not?"

She gestured at the cell. The bars. "What are you going to do about all of this?"

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a knife, steel glinting in the weak light. "I thought I might try picking the lock."

She rushed forward on her knees again, but rather than smiling, cajoling him on, she just stared at the knife almost longingly. She may have even licked her lips.

"You can't break me out, Ali. There's nothing to break out. I mean," she sniffed. "I don't even know what I'd do on the other side of those bars. Even if you could get me out and away from this prison, what would we do?"

“We could go back north.”

“Do you know how far north is? It’s thousands of kilo-skips.”

“I’m aware of that.”

“So how will we make that – the two of us? Got a thunder stallion, have you?”

And there it was. The reality. Maybe one day he could make it north again, but he would need to scratch out a life in the meantime, building the skills he’d need for that journey. That would be hard enough with one northern face to hide. Having a weakened Chia by his side, her skin still fiery red... They would surely die within the cycle. He gulped and shivered all in one. It had been a disappointing start to his rescue.

“How did you get here, Ali?”

He sniffed. “I was brought by a northman disguised as a red-cloak.”

“To what end? It’s been over half a year since Crucible was broken.”

“He’s been training me.”

There was silence then, and it was telling. He stared at her, and she was breathing steadily.

She smiled. “The ‘last.’”

“You know about that?”

She nodded. “Of course I do. All north-folk know about the Fatherlast.”

“Well, sure. But they’re just stories. What has any of this craziness,” he gestured at the cell and the orphanage, “got to do with the ‘last?’”

She sniffed. “This place has everything to do with the Fatherlast. You see, the Monks. They are searching for northern secrets, and they think they’ll find them here.”

“Where?”

“I don’t know, Ali. They punish us, and they toy with us, and they...” She sniffed. “They do things, and all the time they are watching us. Looking for something. What else could it be but the ‘last?’”

He looked closer at her, and of course, they were there. Cuts and scars – thin and precise. Red-Cloak’s training had been tedious, but this was something else. This was something deeply troubling.

“They’ve been cutting you.”

“I don’t want to talk about it. Point is that this place is dangerous for north-folk. You should be out of here.”

“Not without you.”

Chia bared her teeth. “Oh, don’t be absurd, Ali. I was lost to the world a half-year ago. All of us were. But you...” She sniffed. “You always were special.”

“Who told you that?”

“My mother.” She sniffed again, and it hung there.

“You mean the Lady Ellia of Crucible?”

Chia rolled her eyes. “That is my mother, yes.”

“But...” He couldn’t believe it. Lady Ellia was wife of Lord Gorfin, and though he’d admired the pair from afar as fine northern rulers, he’d never imagined that they would even know who he was.

“What did she say was special about me?”

Chia wrapped her ragged rags tighter about her, bones protruding in unnatural places. “I heard her arguing with my father one night. She was saying that you were special – strong with the ‘last – and that my father was a fool for not securing you. For letting you live at risk in the hands of rebels. My father disagreed.”

Was anything of his life as it seemed? If Chia had it right, one of the most powerful families in the north had considered him an asset that needed securing. He stared at his hands again. They looked normal and uninteresting, just as they always did.

“Ali?”

“Yes. Sorry.”

“This must be a lot to take in.” She put a frail hand through the bars, and he took it. “Did your red-cloak tell you anything more?”

He shook his head. “No one’s told me a thing. Even Red-Cloak has been training me blind.”

“Then you must find answers.”

“From where?”

“The Red-Cloak. The one who’s been training you.”

He shook his head and stroked a thumb over her hand. “Red-Cloak has been taken away, probably to Maegwyn. I think he was found out somehow.”

“Oh.” She was silent a moment. “Well, I suppose you should go north then – find your answers there.”

“But as you said, that is thousands of kilo-skips.”

“Yes. It is.” She hung her head. “But it might be the only way.”

He shook his head. “Or it might be a trap. Red-Cloak brought me here for a reason – he wanted me away from the north. He was about to explain what was going on just before he was snatched away.”

Chia smiled and tipped her head. “I think you have your answer then.”

“Do I?”

“Yes. You have unfinished business with this red-cloak, so you should seek him out first.”

“But he’s been taken to Maegwyn.”

“Yes, and I was brought here – yet you found me easily enough. You are special, Ali, and you should trust in that.”

He gulped, and sniffed again. “What about you, though? I should try to get you out.”

“I would slow you down.”

“But...” He stared at the cuts and scars. “I can’t leave you here for those monsters.”

“No. You’re right.” She stared down at the knife, then back up, locking him with her gaze. “If you give me the knife, then you will have done your part.”

“But what will you do with—” She put a finger to his lips, quietening him.

“Don’t think about it, Ali, but know that it is for the best.” She offered her other hand through the bars, and he stared at the frail thing – all skin wrapped tight around bones: welts, marks and a horrible gash. He sniffed, put the handle of the knife in her hand, and those fragile fingers wrapped around, securing the item. Chia pushed up against the bars and offered her lips. He touched his to hers, a horribly fleeting moment of intimacy, and then she pulled back.

“You are special, Ali. You can do anything. Now, get out of here. Before they find you.” She shuffled to the back of the cage and lay down, hugging the knife. Staying any longer would tear him to shreds, so he stood, took one last look at her, then stalked off into the shadows. What use was being special if you couldn’t save the ones you loved?

* * *

Maegwyn was even more disgusting than his ma had told him. She would never confess exactly how she’d ended up in the imperial stink pit, but she had shuddered at the memory. It was now clear why. This many people in one place could not be healthy. It smelled worse than a horse.

The city was looking worse than it normally did, too. It was still only a few years since Elai had marched right over the Central Belt, out of the Republic, and had bent the Empire to its very knees. This city had been the final stand in that deadly exchange, and somehow – anyhow – the Emperor had turned the tide. As the town storyteller told it, the Emperor turned Maegwyn into a charnel pit in that final resistance. Maegwyn still stood, even despite the damage caused in that

defence, and it was still a property of the Empire. It always would be. Maegwyn was impregnable.

Walking into the city was, however, easy enough. Even with a bow-shaped package slung over his shoulder, the guards barely wasted a glance on him. There was a lot of traffic in and out, and there were far richer pickings than a grubby boy with an odd-shaped package. After all, what damage could he do? The answer was a lot, but the guards weren't to know that.

Lodgings were found easily enough. The main avenues and wealthier parts of town had been restored to something of their former glory, but the rat-hole quarters were still burned-out husks. He climbed into one house, third floor up, scaling the wall. It was almost empty – almost – except for a young couple rutting in the corner. The young lady startled, and her gentleman jumped up, everything on display.

“What d’ya want?”

“Mind if I kip round the corner?”

The gentleman shrugged, turned, and got back to business. His lady didn't seem flustered either.

Locating Red-Cloak was invariably harder. Not being a clueman or a finder, the tools of that particular trade were not in his skillset. But one tool he had earned was the tool of waiting. Of being patient. Red-Cloak had taught him that at least, and so he played that coin in the best way he could: regularly, and with one eye on off-duty red-cloaks. It had been two cycles since his own red-cloak had been carted off, but rumour had a way of lingering on the lips, and if anyone would know the whereabouts of his mentor, it would be the red-cloaks. All he had to do was listen, and hope that Red-Cloak wasn't dead already. It was just a shame that red-cloaks tended to spend their off-duty periods in the densest and rankest parts of town.

As he should probably have guessed, inns were the best places for listening – ale had a habit of loosening tongues. The problem with inns, though, was that he was twelve. Sure, he could walk in well enough, but he'd be chased away by the landlord and that didn't make for good listening. What he needed was an excuse for being in the inn, and hadn't he just had the perfect idea?

“Get out, boy.”

“Wait!” He threw his hands up.

“I said, get out!”

“Please. I have a proposition.”

The innkeeper stared at him, menace in the eyes, and the patrons weren't much friendlier. The whole inn was focused on him.

"Spit it out, before I spit you out." The innkeeper sneered with that.

"I want to earn some coin—"

"Don't we all, boy?"

"Yes, but I want to earn some coin on your premises. I want to offer boot shining services to your patrons while they enjoy your fine produce." There. It was out. Now all he had was waiting.

The innkeeper's sneer stretched. "Get out of it—"

"Wait." A red-cloak stepped forward. "I could do with my boots being shinier." The red-cloak slipped a couple of coppers out of his pocket and handed them over. Innkeeper nodded warily and went back to his bar, leaving him with his new business venture.

"Thank you, sir." It didn't seem right thanking a red-cloak, but it was all part of the act.

"Just get on with it, boy."

And he did. Night after night for a whole cycle. And as well as being good for listening, there was the added bonus that he was earning coin, too. Not enough to get rich, no, but enough to pay his way.

The real goal was information, and a cycle of listening later, he finally got what he was listening for. A red-cloak who was drunk enough to answer his questions while he polished the man's boots.

"Aye, that's how I 'eard it. They got a rogue o' the First Fist locked right up in that there keep. A northman, they say, blue eyes as cold as the Wastes." The drunkard tipped his head. "Bit like you, actually."

He hung his head, rubbing a particularly stubborn scuff over and over. "He's my uncle. I want to be there when they punish him."

"Oh, aye. Why?"

"He used to abuse me."

"Oh, aye. There, there, lad. Jus' part o' growing up that is, but I see ya. He'll be spread in the Square o' the First soon enough." The drunkard clapped a hand on his back. "You go take it out on him, eh?"

He sighed, and actually cried with that information. It meant that Red-Cloak was alive – still – and that he was here, in the city. For how long he didn't yet know, but at least he had some time. A big part of him wanted to know exactly what spread meant, but a smaller part overruled. He could probably do without that information.

But if the information was a godsend, the implications were harrowing. Red-Cloak was locked away in the Imperial Keep at the heart of Maegwyn and sneaking into the cells within the keep was frankly insane. Or suicidal. Or actually, both. The guardians of the keep were legendary.

The Immortal, they called them – on account of them having defended the city for six hundred years without an obvious changing of the guard. And there were always two of these Immortal on the locked front gates of the keep.

Immortals. He stared at them and shuddered. They were at least a man and a half tall, wearing long maroon cloaks with cowls so deep that nothing of their face was visible. They did not flinch at anything – standing still day after day – and the weapons they carried looked more than deadly: long reach like a spear, but with a curved end, the other side serrated. That thing would do all sorts of damage to a wall, let alone a man.

But try he must. He'd already cheated death a few times, so perhaps he had a knack for it, and perhaps that was what made him special. If Red-Cloak's strange words meant anything, then he might actually be starting to believe that. Still, it wasn't wise pushing himself to his limits. Caution was still the order of the day.

He searched the keep over and over, looking for the chink in the armour. All armour had chinks, didn't it? The vast conical keep loomed over him, a monstrous tower standing head and shoulders over the world. There were some open windows high up – way up – and a platform sticking out about halfway to the sky, but there was nothing in that. He'd need wings. He kicked a stone down the street and almost gave up. Almost. He persevered because that's what Red-Cloak would expect of him. Half a year of waiting in the Dry Ocean instilled a certain stubbornness, and he clung to it. There had to be a way.

Any building this size needed servants, those who tended to the rich bastards within. But through the front gates, with the Immortal standing deadly, no such people entered. In the north, the lower workers usually entered through the rear of the building, but here that was impossible. There was no rear – just a mountain. That meant there had to be another way into the keep, so he went stalking.

And wasn't it just a sneaky one? He found that, though the Imperial Keep was referred to separately, it was actually very connected to the two sweeping fortress arms that wrapped the city of Maegwyn, forming impregnable defensive walls. Further around the city, a long way from the glory of the keep, it jumped out at him. Or rather, was thrown out at him. A ratty looking boy in the rich red of the

Empire was booted from a door, landing on his arse. He rushed over to the snivelling kid and knelt down.

“Hey there. You okay?”

The boy looked up at him, tears in the corners of his eyes. “I bin booted.”

He looked at the door, which was now shut. “What for?”

The boy sniffed. “Stealin’ an apple.”

“Bit disproportionate.” The boy looked at him funny. “Unfair.” At this, the boy nodded.

“My ma’s gonna kill me.”

“For stealing the apple?”

The boy shook his head. “No. For losin’ the work.” He sniffed. “Poor as it is, it’s still work.”

Ali fingered a coin in his pocket, but then had a better idea.

“How would you like to get a bit of your own back?”

The sniffing stopped and the boy stared up. “How?”

“By stealing lots of apples. Come.”

* * *

His heart was pounding. The open space surrounding the servants’ gate was silent except for the young boy in his red uniform. His assistant. The boy was stepping tentatively toward the door, looking back frequently, and that did nothing for his own nerves. Light was fading rapidly, and it had gone beyond the between place of dusk. This was pure night now, and there was not a flutter of wind. That should be comforting, but somehow it wasn’t. He had the arrow nocked already.

The boy moved forward the last few steps, almost shuffling over the flagstones. The whole space was cast in a dark eerie red, not helped by the early prevalence of the Stranger – the blood-red star that pulsed in a clear sky. He was sweating, which was ridiculous given the chill, and his hands were moist on the grip. Come on! If this boy didn’t hurry up, they’d have to abandon the attempt.

Finally, the youngster reached the door and tentatively lifted the knocker. It crashed back down with a boom, louder than expected. He jumped and readjusted his sweaty grip. This should not be so hard! He licked his lips, and the taste was salty. His pits were sodden but adjustments did nothing. Just get it over. Get it over.

But there was no response at the door, and the boy started dancing on the spot, peering back.

A click, and the mighty door opened. It was a hell of a door, too. Thick. Unfortunately, it also opened the exact wrong way: toward him. Blocking his sight. Damn it! How had he not considered that? The words of Red-Cloak washed over him, and he shivered. Maybe the man was right and he wasn't ready after all. And with his mentor lost, he would never be ready. His life was slipping away from him.

"You, boy!" the guard behind the door roared and the boy dropped to his knees, pleading. If he didn't do something quick, the poor lad would be killed.

"What you doin' here, boy? You wanna hang?"

He shuffled, but there was simply no way of getting a good sight. Or any sight. The heavy door was in the way, and there was no way around without exposing himself.

The guard roared again, and he had to do something. Had to. He looked about the square, and there was not a soul. No lights in windows, nothing. Perfect, except for the flight. The angle. What could he do? What could he...?

There was a crash on the door, a final warning from the guard. "Move it, boy, or else."

There was simply no choice, and he peered into the eyes of the young man. A boy he'd almost condemned. He nodded, wiped his hand, and then ran. He ran for the open centre of the square and the elusive sight that he needed.

The guard's fist was falling, and it would crush the boy. Crush him. He skidded over cobbles, pain in his knees, but only dull and distant. Not for now. The arrow was nocked, and he hauled back in a fluid movement, stepping up. The fist was falling, and the guard's eyes turned up, widening. Right at him. This was either the end or the beginning, and he shifted the angle ever so – instinctive. And then he loosed. There was nothing else for it. If this missed, then he was done for. He simply stood.

The arrow thumped into the guard's face, right between the eyes. The man flew back, thudding onto the ground. The poor boy slumped and wept, which was exactly what he would like to do. He rushed forward and comforted the poor kid instead.

"It's okay. It's over." He rubbed the boy's back, every sob running through his fingers.

"I thought you'd left me."

He shook his head. "No. Just didn't think the door would open like that." He hit his own head, still furious at the oversight.

The boy looked up at him. "Where d'you learn that?"

“Just something you pick up in time.”

The boy tipped his head. “Well, that ain’t true. You’re barely older than I am.” And wasn’t that just the truth of it? He was still only twelve, and this youngster may be only a year or so younger.

“Come on. Let’s get you your food.”

* * *

It turned out that this part of the fortress housed a huge food storage area, as well as facilities for baking bread and brewing beer. The boy had acted as a runner, shipping food along a sequence of corridors to the ‘finishing kitchens’ in the main keep.

“Do you know where the cells are?” They’d pulled the dead body of the guard into the storerooms, but before he released the boy to his food frenzy, he needed what information he could gather. His assistant could barely take his eyes off the free pickings, so he forcibly turned the boy’s face his way.

“The cells.”

The boy nodded. “Follow that corridor. Inside you’ll enter tunnels within walls. Follow it round till you get to winding stairs. All the way down. Ye’ll end up in the cells’ kitchens.”

He slapped the boy on the back and then moved off at a skulk.

Darkness was really coming in, so he went mostly by touch. Touch by hand or touch by foot. And touch by face. It was the sensation of wind on his lips that alerted him to the stairs. Without that, he might have missed it.

And he did indeed end up in the cells’ kitchens – frankly, the worst kitchens he may ever come across. A couple of guards were there, playing flip-coin by the looks of things, ale in tankards. They had a pitch torch burning, but otherwise the kitchens were shadowy, and it was a simple thing sneaking past them. He left his bow in the servant tunnel. It was too cumbersome for the break-out job.

Out into the cells proper, the place was astonishing. A tall circular chamber, there were tiers rising up the sides, and it appeared that the quality of cell increased with height. Down below at the base of the cells was a pit, and that appeared worst of all. There were no bars down there, and instead the prisoners were guarded by two wild creatures. The monsters – one furry and one scaly – stalked around the centre of the prison pit, and the prisoners huddled against the wall of their partitioned space, clamps around their wrists and ankles preventing any thought of escape. There were leashes on the beasts, but they looked only just short enough. The prisoners were not left much in the way of slack.

And of course, right there, was Red-Cloak. It was never going to be easy.

He slipped out of the shadows and over to the rail that edged the pit. There was an overhang shadowing the prisoners, and he got himself to the place where Red-Cloak would be below. But in doing so, he had exposed himself. There was an increase in chattering from prisoners up high, and the hairy beast below growled. His saving grace was that the whole complex was underground-dark, only illuminated by flickering torches, and he had chosen dark clothes for the job – hopefully he looked like little more than a shadow. There was movement from the guards, so there really was no option. He slipped over the rail and into the pit.

The beast leaped for him, and he shuffled back rapidly. Red-Cloak's eyes widened, but his mentor stayed silent. The beast was snapping and snarling, just an arm's length from them. The slathering jaws sprayed him.

“What's going on down there?” The guard came slowly down the stepped side of the pit. The beast nearest him snapped and snarled, joined by the other, and he shuffled down against Red-Cloak, hiding in plain sight. It brought echoes of the fateful night his ma had died – hidden in the clutches of the blankets, escaping the purge of the red-cloaks right under their noses. If he'd done it before, then perhaps. Perhaps...

But he would be seen. He must be seen. He was staring into the eyes of the prison guard, and the guard was staring right back. He would be seen for certain.

Red-Cloak stood, stepping up in front of him. “Seems they don't like me pissing.”

There was silence, and the guard took two more steps. Had the man seen him? It was a stand-off: prisoner and prison guard. That would only go one way.

But the moment was broken, and it was broken with laughter. The other prisoners of the pit burst into hysterics, and the guardian-beasts quieted and backed off at the noise. The prison guard, too, shook his head, cursing under his breath.

“I'd hold your tongue if I were you,” the prison guard tutted, and then stalked off, back to his game of coins. The moment was over, and he was alive.

Red-Cloak turned on him, eyes wide.

“What sort of stupidity brings you here?”

And wasn't that just right? He'd thrown himself into the most secure place in all of the festering Empire. There was no getting out of this one.

* * *

“What are you doing here?” Red-Cloak hissed, teeth bared. The guard-beast still growled in the background but didn’t come closer.

“I’ve come to save you.”

“And how’s that going for you?” Red-Cloak threw his manacled hands up, shut fast and ominous. “Got something for this, have you?”

“I do actually.” He rummaged in a pocket and pulled out a pair of metal picks. It was an improvement over the knife he’d taken to Chia.

“And you know how to use them, do you?”

He tipped his head. “I assumed you’d know.”

Red-Cloak rolled his eyes and slumped to the floor, back against the wall. There was a hiss from behind the right-hand partition.

“Oo you talkin’ to?”

“Myself. Bugger off.” The other prisoner did bugger off.

They sat there in silence, the beasts eyeing them from lounged positions. Even when one of those guard-monsters closed its eyes, the other was wide awake, staring at them. The slobber at the corner of their mouths was horrible, and the red stains on the floor were more horrible still. It was an evil that only the Empire could spawn.

“Why are you really here?” Red-Cloak had broken the silence.

“Because last time we were together, you promised me answers. I still need those answers. If I’m going to be who you think I am, I need those answers.”

Red-Cloak smiled then. “Forgive me, but in the pain of the last days, I appear to have forgotten where our chat got to.”

“Well...” He gulped. “You told me your name is Ali, too. Does that mean...”

Red-Cloak shook his head. “I’m not your father, Ali.”

“But I am named after you, aren’t I?”

He snorted. “Yes.”

“So... What were you to my ma then?”

“A long time ago. She and me were,” Red-Cloak bobbed his head. “You know.”

“I do know. But it sounds like it was before me, right?”

Red-Cloak nodded. “Before. And after.”

“You’re going to have to explain that one.”

“Aye. I probably am.” The silence stretched a while, but he left it. Red-Cloak was gathering his thoughts. He’d speak eventually.

“Me and your ma – we were good.” Red-Cloak wrung his hands together. “Tight. But I lacked something your ma wanted. Something important.”

“What?”

“Lineage.”

“Lineage?”

“Aye. Northern lines; I mean, real good northern lines are valuable. Or so your ma believed – and she should know, having been one of the faculties at some time in her past. She was always bleating on about greater purity in northern lines. Not that it stopped her being kindly and all, but she was obsessed with a rich northern vein. I could never give her that.”

“What happened?”

“She went off, plain as a southern day, and got you. Got you from some pure-bred northern noble – finest line there was, apparently. And then she came back, with you in her belly.” Red-Cloak stroked his cheek at that. “That’s how we know you’re special – you have about the finest northern blood it’s possible to get in these dark days. You’re special by design.”

He gulped. “And you took her back?”

“Aye. She was still your ma, and we were both of the ‘last. I knew what she did it for.” Red-Cloak smiled, and his face softened impossibly. “And besides, I was doing a crap job o’ looking after your sister. I needed your ma.”

He shifted where he sat. “So, are you my sister’s pa?”

“Aye.” Red-Cloak nodded and hung his head, eyes hooded.

“Well, that explains why she hates me so damned much.”

“She don’t hate you. At least...”

“Ah, yes. And that was the other unanswered question.” Red-Cloak slunk back at that. “You were going to tell me why you didn’t leave me with my sister. It appeared that everyone else thought that was the best idea, though I have no idea why.”

Red-Cloak gulped and twiddled his thumbs, peering hard at the manacles about his wrists. This was a silence that the big man would not volunteer away.

“Please. I need this.”

“Alright, boy. Alright.” Red-Cloak shook his head. “Let’s just say I had reason to doubt.”

“What reason?”

“Well, we got fair warning of the attack on Crucible, and there was a good reason for that. Someone snitched to the red-cloaks.”

“Oh. Who?” But the big man needn’t have answered. It was obvious. His sister. She hated him – he was sure of that – and she had condemned the town to dust. She had brought in the red-cloaks, and she had murdered their ma. He didn’t break down until the words came from Red-Cloak.

“As I heard it, it was your sister.”

He cracked at that, wept, and Red-Cloak put big meaty arms over him, offering the best hug possible with the manacles in place. No amount of consoling could smooth that one over – his sister had destroyed his life.

“Look, Ali,” there was desperation in Red-Cloak’s voice. “It ain’t necessarily true. I don’t know if it’s true, and I ain’t been able to talk to her. I sent a letter but ain’t got a reply yet.”

He shook his head. “She hated me. It makes sense.”

“No, but...” The big man trailed off. He was clearly struggling with this, too. “She’s my girl. I don’t believe she could do it.”

He swallowed down, the ache of the sadness plunging down his throat. “She could.”

The big man grabbed his face between his manacled hands, staring at him with smouldering eyes. “Go back east – home. Wait for the response. The letter. Once you have a reply, then act. Don’t assume until then. Please.”

Half a year ago he would have spat in the man’s face, but not now. Now he missed the guiding hand of Red-Cloak. Now he missed his mentor.

“Okay.”

The big man nodded and then pulled away, slumping against the wall. The guard-creatures were still eyeing them deviously.

“What about you?”

Red-Cloak shook his head. “Ain’t no gettin’ me outta here. All I can hope for is a quick’n.” The man reached out and stroked his cheek again. “But you, Ali, are the future of the north as your ma said it. You must get out.”

“Yeah, right. How?” He gestured at the beasts and the ridiculous hole he had gotten himself into.

“Well, you’re not exactly chained up like I am, and my guess is that you’ll do the rest through sheer force of will. Remember, Ali – you are beloved by Father Fortune.” Red-Cloak put a hand on his arm and shushed. Then his step-pa pulled a set of ragged blankets from behind his back and threw them over. Ragged they may be, but they were no worse than the threadbare blanket back in the homestead, so he snuggled down on the cold hard floor. With the warmth of his step-pa beside him, the tiredness soon drew in.

“First though, get some sleep. Now’s not a good time for escaping.”

He yawned and snorted. “No, it’s not. Best wait for the between-time, right?”

Red-Cloak cuffed his ear. “Finally learning, is it? Maybe I ain’t such a shit teacher after all.”

* * *

He jolted, and it was instantly clear. Red-Cloak wasn't with him, and the manacles that had constrained the man lay open on the floor. Either his step-pa had been moved to a more secure cell – which seemed unlikely – or he had been marched off for his ending. The guard monsters lay before him, snoozing, but that would not stop him now. Could not. He needed Red-Cloak more than ever, and Red-Cloak was not here. He couldn't be here either.

Without the luxury of thought, he leapt up and ran at the beasts. His feet slapped the ground in his haste, waking the nearest beast – the furry cat with long sabre-like teeth. The beast was groggy, just now stirring, but it was still lightning, and the second monster stirred, too. He pelted, legs pumping, arms swinging, and with little more than blind luck, he threw himself into the air – into an arc. The beast swiped at him, but he was moving over the razor claw and fell back to the floor. He would like to have rolled into a smooth step, but crashed instead, and leapt up at an odd angle, and wasn't that just the luckiest coincidence. Right beside him – where he would have been without his crash – a reptilian beast struck, spearing and snatching. His awkward angle confused the thing, and in that he ran. Behind him Furry leapt, too, and there was a heavy clash of monstrosities. Guards came out of their corners, but that was irrelevant. He ran, expecting a sharp claw in his back, and yet... Yet... He leapt up the steps of the pit two at a time, and then he was sure. He was out. Out. It was a wonder none of the other prisoners had ever escaped from the place, but then he had not been chained hand and foot to the wall. That, and he had the purest northern blood flowing through his veins – whatever that meant.

“Hey, boy. Where d'you come from?” The guard loomed, pike in hand, but he had the benefit of being short. He bent at the waist and threw his head into the soldier's vegetables with a satisfying outcome. Then he leapt into the now bustling kitchen, pushed past an unsuspecting cook – spilling boiling water in the process – and slipped into the servants' tunnel. The bow and sheath were still there, and he picked them up slickly.

Weapon in hand and free of the guards, he was ready. But ready for what? Where was he going? Moving fast was essential, if he wasn't already too late, but where? They would be executing Red-Cloak soon, he was sure of it, and no doubt they would be doing it in the full glare of the masses. The Square of the First, just like the drunkard had said.

He climbed the slippery steps two at a time, and the roar of a crowd grew out of his climbing. Up and up he went, legs burning, but he must go up. Each door he passed showed an Imperial Keep full of red-cloaks, so he continued his climb – up, up, up.

Eventually, the sound of the crowd faded again, and he peered from behind a curtained door and found an empty landing, wide and round and vast. There was a central circular staircase in the room, locked fast, but at the edge there were other doors. He crept out of the servants' tunnel and tested his bow, repositioning the sheath around his waist. He trod carefully.

To his right, crowded at a balcony and overlooking what was – presumably – the Square of the First, were a knot of red-cloaks. Some had cocked crossbows, but most were spectating along with the noisy crowd below. He steered clear of the red-cloaks and stepped to the nearest door instead. That door opened onto the top of the vast fortress arm, and ludicrously it was empty. He slipped out and around, searching for a view of the Square of the First. From out this side he was a long way off, but it was there: the Square of the First. The crowd was immeasurable.

And there also was Red-Cloak, awaiting his execution. There were four oxen in the square, each with a driver, and Red-Cloak's limbs were tied to the beasts. He had a good idea now what spreading involved.

A man in black raised his arms, and the crowd stilled with the gesture. The Emperor. Even from afar the man exuded power, and with the Immortal surrounding him, he may as well have been a god. The black was that same matt armour the man had worn in Crucible – his arrows would barely scratch the stuff – so it looked like vengeance was off the table. For now. But if Red-Cloak had taught him anything, it was that all was not as it seemed. He was the saviour of the north, and in order to fulfil that role, he needed to survive this chapter of his life. And to survive this chapter of life, he probably shouldn't kill the Emperor. Much as the prospect was tantalising, he bit his lip. Not for now.

And besides, Red-Cloak needed his help. The man needed a quick'n, and he could provide that. He sniffed back, wondering if he'd ever save someone he loved rather than providing them with quick ways to death, but here, now, there wasn't another option. This was what Red-Cloak would want. This was the better option.

He did a quick scout of the wide battlements, planning his escape, and though the options were slim, they were not impossible. Just implausible. He picked an arrow from the quiver and locked Red-Cloak in his sight. It was a distance, but

perhaps... Perhaps. No, not perhaps. For him, with his talent, this was not improbable. For him, this was probable.

“There! Get him.”

The red-cloaks on the balcony had spotted him, and two charged out at him. Several crossbows discharged, the darts flickering, but none were on target. The two red-cloaks with swords came fast, teeth bared, and he was only a boy. But he had a bow and he had arrows, and with a quick swivel of his body, it was done. He loosed a second arrow, and only then did the first arrow thump into a face. He was looking back at the Square of the First, a final arrow in position.

He and Red-Cloak shared a look – a curt nod of the head – and then Red-Cloak closed his eyes, his face a rictus of pain. The oxen were pulling, disturbed by the ruckus now flowing through the crowds. He caught the eye of the Emperor, those dark eyes in the toasted face, and he smiled. He might not kill the man today, but he would put the wind up him – and against the Emperor, that was unheard of. He loosed, and the arrow sailed perfectly. He had dispatched the quick’n his step-pa had wanted, and though there was an ache in his chest, he shook it out and saved it for later. For now, there was only the future. For now, he had to escape.

More red-cloaks were swarming from the keep, and he threw his bow over the edge of the fortress-arm. That done, he turned and ran, away from the keep. The sound of heavy feet clumped, but he focused on the patch he’d spotted earlier. Maegwyn was built in the embrace of mountains, and that meant there was a perfect spot. A few darts whipped past him, but no bother. He reached the edge of the wide battlements and did the only thing that was insane. The only proper northern thing. He jumped. The space opened up beneath him, and he fell down, down, down. The only certainty left was that, at some point, he would hit the ground.

Epilogue

The Beginning

He had spent four nights in the shadowy embrace of the mountainside scrub. He'd sucked water from wiry leaves, and food came in the form of any insect stupid enough to pass him. It was barely sustenance, but somehow – anyhow – he was alive. Just.

The red-cloaks had come searching, great swathes of them crashing through the undergrowth. Dozens of feet came within touching distance, but it was incredible how inept the search was. They hadn't done proper looking – simply pushed their way through shrubs and hoped that they would stamp on him. But he was tucked up real tight under a twisted root, half-submerged in moist soil, so they hadn't stamped on him. He had been living with the worms – which had also been food – and in not moving he had beaten the red-cloaks at their game. For two days the search party rummaged in the shrubbery, but he outstayed them by another two. Night was at its fullest when he stirred himself from a semi-sleep and crawled from his sanctuary.

There was a crack, and something sharp and cold touched his neck. He twisted his head ever so, and the sharp thing glinted. A sword. He'd outstayed all of his enemies except this one. It was over. He slumped and sighed.

“Please, run me through. I've done most of the work for you already.”

The red-cloak chuckled lightly. Not the sort of sound he expected from a red-cloak. He twisted his head again, and there was no red-cloak: this man wore a grey cloak, and simple clothes. The sword retracted from his neck.

Something slapped the ground in front of him. It was soft and brown and wobbled about. A waterskin. He took it greedily, un-stoppered it, and guzzled the liquid down. Sweeter than any ale. Water inside him, he wiped his mouth and looked up at the man.

“Who are you?”

The man kinked a smile. “Someone who is interested in your unique skillset.”

“And what skillset is that?”

“Killing, of course.”

He swallowed but nodded. It seemed to be the only skill that he had.

“And what are you going to do with me?”

The man’s smile stretched. “Finish your training. Come. We start tomorrow.”

“Wait.” A part of him wanted to revolt and go his own way, go back to Red-Cloak’s homestead and wait for that letter. But what would he do when – or if – the letter arrived? He had survived this long on his own, but didn’t know how long that would last. Besides, he could slip back and retrieve the letter whenever. It wasn’t like anyone else would lay claim to that hovel that Red-Cloak had called home.

So instead of objecting, he rose to his feet. “What do I call you?”

The man bobbed his head and slid the sword back into its sheath. “You can call me Employer.”

“That’s not a name.”

“On the contrary,” Employer smirked. “It’s the only name you’ll ever need.”

And with that, his new master walked off precisely. Something told him that this one was going to be more annoying than Red-Cloak.

The Breaking of Godslost Series



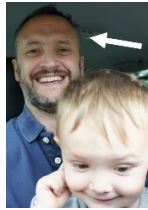
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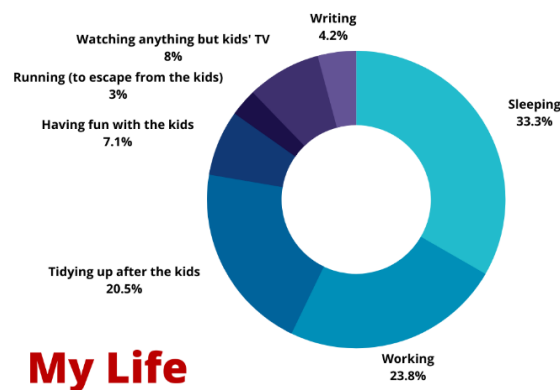
A Bit About Me

If you've made it this far, then thanks for reading – it really is appreciated! Hopefully this section of the book finds you in a good mood, and you'll be willing to let me indulge a little by telling you about myself. Not interested? Well, you can always skip ahead.

First up, this is me:



In case it's not obvious, I'm the one at the back – where the arrow is pointed. But a photo isn't really getting to know someone, is it? So, that's why I thought I'd lay my whole life in front of you in this handy infographic:



As you can see, there's only a little slither of time for writing – right up there at the top. Not that I'm complaining or anything, but hopefully that explains why it has taken 17 years (yup, that's **seventeen**) to get these stories down onto digital paper. Hopefully it'll get quicker with practice...

In the meantime, if you fancy finding out more (or indeed saying hello), then please do. These are the best ways of getting in touch:

Website: www.jhockley.com

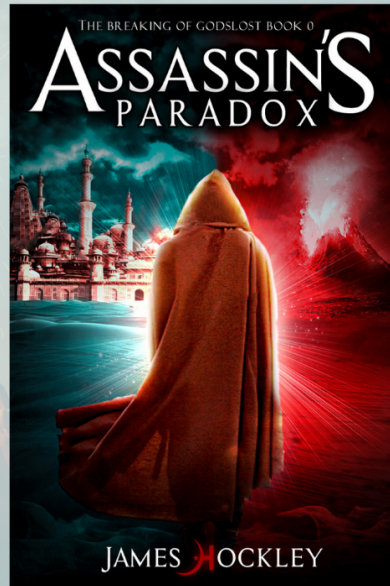
Email: jh@jhockley.com

It may alarm you to notice that there isn't a link to a Facebook page at this juncture. Sorry about that. As you will see from the infographic, there isn't any time put aside for social media, and so the Facebook page I did once setup became a desolate waste-ground that wasn't helpful to anyone. So it got binned. Maybe one day it will get revived, but in the meantime come and visit me at the website or ping me an email – it'd be great to hear from you.

Oh, and if you haven't already stumbled across the rest of Alidinia's adventures – in a novella called **Assassin's Paradox** – then keep turning the pages because there's more on that in a moment. Otherwise, I will bid you adieu and say goodbye for now. Happy reading, and all the best.

Read on...

"Merciless; ruthless; cold.
And faints at the sight of
blood."



JAMES HOCKLEY 

Turn the page to find out more...

Assassin's Paradox

Book 0 of the Breaking of Godslost Series

“The silence is unbearable; this silence of the north. For generations, the north has railed against oppression, but the Empire has finally smothered its prey. The rules have been re-written.

But there are those who still remember, and in Alidinia, the north has cause for hope. He is destined to avenge his ma and free the north, but maybe not today. Because the problem with rebellion is that it's more than a one-man job, and right now he is all alone. The silence of the north is absolute.

Finally, an opening. But just as his rebellion moves into view, so he is snared in the grip of the very people he is trying to crush. And yet, from the service of those he would topple, the scale of the game takes shape. Even the stories cannot prepare him for the murky truths lying hidden in plain sight.

The pieces are in place; the play is set; and he has one advantage over his foes: he is of the north. Properly of the north. Against all odds, he is on the cusp of unravelling a great conspiracy, but maybe that is not enough. Even a northman must respect the long game.”

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“Merciless; ruthless; cold.
And faints at the sight of
blood.”

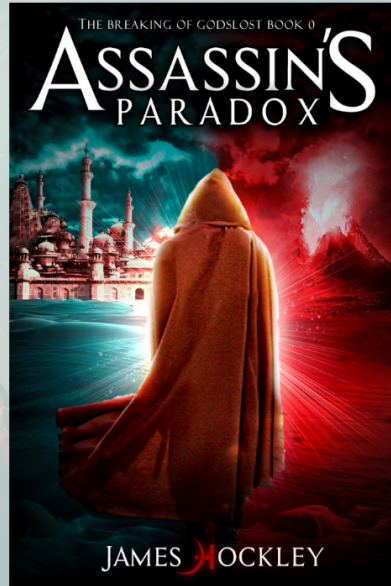
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