

**BRANDON SANDERSON'S**

# MISTBORN

ADVENTURE GAME



**A HOUSE  
OF ASHES**

A COMPANION NOVELLA TO  
THE MISTBORN ADVENTURE GAME



# A HOUSE OF ASHES

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# WELCOME TO THE MISTBORN ADVENTURE GAME

The Mistborn Adventure Game lets you take a personal role in the bestselling world of Brandon Sanderson's New York Times best-selling novel series. Brandon and the Crafty Games team worked hard to flesh out characters, settings, and even some new twists on the Mistborn magic systems that have yet to appear in the novels, and the Mistborn Adventure Game includes an original story by Brandon called "The Eleventh Metal," which bridges the novel and game settings.

We want you to feel at home creating Heroes in a place where so much is new, even to dedicated Mistborn readers and fans, and so Crafty Games commissioned an extensive portfolio of Mistborn fiction designed as a gateway for novel readers and role players alike, to help everyone enter and understand the world. In time it became apparent, however, that this fiction, which amounts to a novella in length, wasn't the best fit for the full game release, and so we're providing it here, separately, for your reading enjoyment.

This work is best read in its original context, as a companion to and enhancement of your enjoyment of the Mistborn Adventure Game.

If you're discovering this world for the first time through the Mistborn Adventure Game, be sure to experience Brandon Sanderson's Mistborn novels as well, published by Tor and available through book retailers everywhere.

**[www.brandonsanderson.com](http://www.brandonsanderson.com)**

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## A FRIENDLY REQUEST

*A House of Ashes* is Crafty Games' very first foray into ePub development, and we'd love to hear how the ePub version of this release performs on your reader.

Once you've had a chance to enjoy the story, please email us at the following. Please include the make, model, and OS of your reader device, along with the name and release/update version of your reader software, and either a) confirmation that the file opens and reads well, or b) a list of issues you experience. Your comments will help us tremendously in presenting the final ePub edition of the full Mistborn Adventure Game. Many thanks in advance!

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# 1

## THE ALLOMANTIC UNDERGROUND



He hid in the shadow of a large tree as the soldiers came, carrying their unfortunate cargo. Burning Tin, he smelled the sharp, mineral stench of blood, and heard the arrhythmic thump of the skaa corpse landing awkwardly in the ditch by his feet. The watcher pulled farther back into the shadows, avoiding the eyes of the soldiers as they marched past him towards the manor in the distance. He looked back, seeing the skaa in the fields turn back to their sad labors in the remainder of the day's light, seemingly unconcerned about the recent death of one of their own.

The watcher waited until the sun set and the mists began to collect along the road like dust devils at his feet. He looked down the road towards the manor with his Tin-enhanced eyes, and when he was certain no soldiers would be coming, he started in the other direction, heading towards the skaa hovels. His eyes picked up the trail of blood that the soldiers left behind, leading into the fields. The watcher sighed to himself and remembered the words of the Survivor of Hathsin. There would come a day when the skaa would repay the Lord Ruler in full for all that he had done to their people. The tinder was there and the bones of the fire had been built; all that was needed was the spark of revolution.

Pulling his hat low over his eyes, the visitor looked for all the world like a skaa from the Eastern Dominance — though few skaa ever traveled, and even some nobles were unlikely to travel at night while the mists were out. But tonight was different. Tonight was the Survivor's night. Skaa who had heard the message of the Survivor, who lit their own candles from the bonfire of his rebellious spark,

spread out through the Dominances to share his message with the beaten and downtrodden. All through the world, similar scenes were unfolding, in similar hovel encampments — scenes of *hope* being brought to the people who had never even heard of the word.

He knocked on the door to the hovel, gently and slowly. Soldiers wouldn't knock, after all. His enhanced senses picked up the scent of thin soup cooking, and the low murmur of conversation. They would likely be talking about the senseless murder that afternoon, which made this a perfect time to open their hearts and minds to the idea of rebellion.

Conversation ceased at the sound of the knock, and the door opened a crack, revealing a suspicious young man staring out at the stranger. The young man looked the watcher up and down, taking in the visitor's hat, pack, walking stick, and strange clothing, and most unusual, the smile on his face. "Who are you, and what do you want? We don't want any more trouble this day."

The stranger bowed slightly and tipped his cap. "My deepest condolences on your loss this day, friend. My name is Tel, and by the grace of the Survivor of Hathsins, I have come to spread a message of hope to the skaa. May I enter?" He smiled again, and a tendril of mist started snaking around his feet. The skaa hastily grabbed Tel, and slammed the door shut behind him, locking it with a heavy wooden bar.

Inside was a tableau repeated a thousand times in every skaa tenement house and hovel in the land. A group of forty or so skaa clustered around in groups spread through the cabin, fitfully eating their daily gruel. It hurt Tel to see his people living like this, with no chance to break the chains of their existence. The Lord Ruler had crushed their spirit, but the Survivor of Hathsins had found a way out, and it was up to folks like Tel to spread the message.

He walked up to the fire and warmed his hands in the steam cloud above the pot of gruel. Speaking to no one in particular, Tel again offered his deep regrets over the death that afternoon. "It is a shame, my friends, that the nobility treats us like cattle. No, worse than cattle, for I have never seen them beat a cow until it could no longer walk, nor have I seen them throw a bull's carcass into a ditch with pride and with not an ounce of regret."

The room became deathly quiet. An old woman looked up from her bowl suddenly, anger in her eyes. "And who are you, stranger, that you dance in here pretty as you please with empty words? The lord send you to taunt us, did he? Well I'll not fall for it at all. He may rule us in the fields, but here in the home, we still have our hearts. If you've nothing more to say, I'll ask you to be gone and leave us be." As her wooden spoon clattered back into her empty bowl, murmurs of assent could be heard from others in the room.

Tel turned to the crowd and lifted his hands in a conciliatory gesture. "Friends, I assure you that I am no stooge for the nobility, nor am I a spy sent by the Lord Ruler's minions to report back on the skaa. I am a skaa like yourselves, and I have come bearing a message from the heart of Luthadel itself. Give me but a moment of your time, and hear me out, and then I shall be gone from your lives. Just a moment is all I ask."

No one in the crowd replied, but more importantly, no one stood to stop him. *Well, even the Survivor had to start somewhere*, Tel thought. *As long as I can plant the seed, the tree of revolution will grow itself*. Taking a deep breath, he thought about the message he was told to spread, and began to speak.

“Brothers and Sisters, what happened today was a crime, one that has been perpetuated on the skaa for a thousand years. Every day of every year of the tyrannical rule of our slave master, countless numbers of our fathers and mothers, brothers and sisters, and sons and daughters have been taken from us, simply due to the whims and fancies of the Lord Ruler and his bootlickers in the so-called “nobility.” Today we saw one of our own sons die under the whip of some soldier simply for being in the wrong place at the wrong time. Perhaps his shadow had fallen on the soldier’s boot, or a drop of his sweat on the soldier’s arm. Perhaps the soldier simply had a fight with his spouse and chose to take it out on one of us. There is no rhyme or reason to these crimes, only perpetual injustice. And the only ones who suffer are us.”

Tel’s voice grew louder, and his gestures became animated. The skaa stopped eating and watched him, some nodding to his words. A younger man leaned against the wall of the cabin, directing a disgusted look towards Tel. “And what would you have us do, mister magic man? Poor Yazi was cut down like a sheaf of wheat for looking up when the soldier passed. This is our lot in life, and what we were created to do. We serve at their pleasure and live at their pleasure. Speaking like this will only bring them down on our heads like so many angry wolves. Pah!” He turned and spit on the ground. Tel walked over to him, and pat the young man on the shoulder.

“What is your name, son?”

The young man looked away. “Alem,” he replied.

Tel turned Alem back to look at him. “Alem,” he repeated. “Well, Alem, you are absolutely right. This *is* our lot in life, and we *do* live at their pleasure. Right now. But it does not have to be this way forever!” Tel turned back to the crowd, who were now completely focused on his words. “Brothers and Sisters, I did not come here to this encampment to simply fill your ears with false hope. I come here with news that there is a better way to live, and more importantly, a way to fight back. Though we may never defeat the Lord Ruler, we *can* make him relent.” He scanned the crowd, meeting every eye with a fierce look. “I repeat, my friends, we have found a way to fight him, and more importantly, a way to win.”

Immediately, the collected skaa broke into hushed catcalls and angry retorts. “Rebellion has been tried before,” cried out an older man sitting by the fire. “What makes you think yours will work where so many have failed?”

Again, many of the younger skaa nodded their heads as the elder spoke. Tel’s eyes lit up. *This is it*, he thought. *This is the moment they say Kelsier speaks about, when the people would be ready to hear his message*.

The room hung in silence for a moment. A boy cracked his knuckles, and the sharp noise echoed through the chamber. Tel opened his arms wide. “Friends, the reason the rebellion will work this time is because we have a leader who understands who we are fighting against. A leader who has seen the worst the Lord



Ruler has to offer, and who has come through it, not only alive, but stronger than ever before, stronger than even the highest noble or Obligator. In trying to crush his spirits, the Lord Ruler merely made his soul into an indestructible diamond. Brothers and Sisters, our leader, our guide and teacher, is Kelsier, the only man to survive the nightmares and endless torture of the Pits of Hathsin.”

If Tel had thought the group agitated before, he could only describe their reaction now as explosive. People here had heard of the Pits, and it seemed, had lost family and friends to those mines of no return. Everyone knew the stories, after all. Skaa who went to the Pits never came back.

Tel held his hands up and motioned to everyone to calm down. “Yes, my friends. It is true. Kelsier is the Survivor, and in him is the survival of every skaa. He was sent to the nightmare hole to dig out the wealth and power of the Lord Ruler, in handfuls of shiny metals, and instead of dying in those jagged crystalline mines as expected, he came out with a treasure greater than any mere chunk of Atium. Kelsier, the Survivor, came out a true Mistborn Allomancer. Yes, you have questions, and I assure you I will answer them all, but for now hear my words. I have seen the Survivor perform miracles of Allomancy before my very own eyes, flying through the sky on the wings of metal, calming down soldiers before they could burn down skaa tenements in Luthadel, and performing feats of strength unknown to any but the nobility.

“Yes, Brothers and Sisters,” Tel said, looking around to each person individually, “The Survivor of Hathsin even discovered my powers. I was once like you, a skaa slave in the outlands, the son of a woman who had been taken by a nobleman. She hid me from his gaze, and sent me into the city far away to hide with family. The Survivor’s men found me, and trained me in the ways of Allomancy. I was their scout — a Tineye. And I was chosen to help spread his message far and wide. Even now among you there are people just like me, the hidden children of nobles, or the children of children. Within all of us is this latent Allomantic mystery, and unlocked, this power will level the field.”

Tel jumped up on to a chair and raised his hands high. “The secret power the Lord Ruler holds over us is Allomancy. He has held us in slavery for a thousand years, forcing us to supply his Empire with food, mine his Atium, and act as beasts of burden for his every whim. He has had us tortured and killed for no reason but his boredom, and he has been untouched because we fear his power. Well the Survivor of Hathsin has come, and with him has come the power we feared for so long. My friends, we have nothing to fear anymore. We can fight, and we *will* win. We simply must believe, and respond when Kelsier calls.”

He stepped down from the chair, and was immediately set upon by the skaa, who shot question after question at him.

Raising his hands again, Tel said “Peace, my friends, peace. Are there any among you who can read?” A mere few of the skaa raised their hands. Tel reached into his pack and pulled out a sheaf of papers. “Kelsier had these commissioned. They are treatises on the art of Allomancy. With these, you will be armed with knowledge that the Lord Ruler has held from us for too long. Know your enemy, and you will never be caught off guard again.”

The skaa crowd looked nervously at each other as the printed words were passed to those skaa who'd been taught to read. "Read these, study these," said Tel, "and then burn them. Do not get caught with these. They can't know what's in your memories or your heart, but they may find what's hidden in your home."

With a handful of the papers dispensed, Tel sat and answered questions of the skaa. Yes, it was going to be a long and difficult journey ahead, and no, it would not happen immediately. The elderly woman who had questioned Tel early on gestured for him to come over. "You have started our children on a dangerous course, young man. Your words give them dreams and delusions, and many will die along the way. So many deaths..."

Tel put his arms around her quaking shoulders. "Don't cry, grandmother. The road is dangerous and, yes, many will be lost in the battles that lie ahead. But each of us that lays down our life fighting for justice will be another brick paving the road to freedom for the skaa. And isn't that worth fighting for? Isn't that worth dying for? The Survivor himself is ready to die for all of us. It is only fair that we be equally ready to die for him, and for all the skaa past and present."

He looked out across the cabin. "Who knows? Some of those sitting here may well be the saviors of our entire people. All I can do is light the spark in their hearts."

The elderly woman gave him a quick hug. "Go now, while they are still distracted. We need to sleep and prepare for our daily tasks lest the soldiers come down on us again, and none will be able to do that while a stranger is in their midst. And surely you have more hearts to ignite."

She looked him in the eyes again. "Thank you, Tel. The Survivor's message won't die out here."

Tel stepped out into the night, the mists wrapping around him in silent tendrils, and scouted the ground ahead as the hovel door was bolted shut behind him. Another day of labor would dampen the spirits he'd raised tonight, but perhaps something would take root among those skaa. One day, Tel hoped, he would find Kelsier again, show him the pamphlets they'd made, and tell him of the skaa whose lives had been changed by demystifying Allomancy. One day, Tel hoped, he would see the Survivor of Hathsins again.

With that, Tel stole away into the mists, off to the next skaa village, pamphlets in hand.



## POWER AND FREEDOM

Brothers and Sisters, fear the mists no longer! You who hold this document in your hands or hear these words read aloud are the heirs to a vast and complex power that the Lord Ruler has spent a thousand years denying you. You may hold the power to see farther than any normal man or woman. You may Push and Pull metals about like leaves in the wind. You may awaken fierce emotions, or soothe rioting crowds. You, friends, may be Allomancers!

Through doubtlessly foul means, the Lord Ruler has managed to limit the powers of Allomancy to his craven bootlickers in the so-called nobility. And even among the nobility, the ability to access these powers is incredibly rare, and these families guard their secrets dearly. But their refusal to see the skaa as true people will also be their downfall, for you see my Brothers and Sisters, Allomancy can be transmitted. Those foul nobles may have their way with us, but as a trade off, the traits that can access the powers of the metals stay with us for five generations afterwards. This is why they kill us. This is why we fight back.

Generations of trial and error have led us to discover the following truths about Allomancy, its uses, and its users. May these materials serve you, and those you share them with, well. And if we fail in our challenge to destroy the Lord Ruler and destabilize the horrific conditions of the Final Empire, may you pick up our fallen swords and fight on. This fight must and will be won. If not today, then tomorrow. If not tomorrow, then soon. We will fight, and we will die, until there is no need to fight or die any longer! Be brave, skaa, and use the Lord Ruler's Allomantic gifts against him!

\* \* \*

In the Allomantic world, we know of ten metals that can be burned, or used, to create effects. Of these, four are physical in nature, four are mental in nature, and two are special cases. A person who can burn any one of these is a *Misting*, and those rare people who can burn them all are *Mistborn*. Learn these metals and their powers, for even if you cannot burn these metals, you must know how to recognize their use, and learn their strengths and weaknesses. The Lord Ruler has untold numbers of Mistborn and Mistings available to him, and will not hesitate to use them to destroy us all.

Before we delve into the powers, let us understand the fundamentals of Allomancy. The base eight metals come in pairs, with linked but distinct effects. Half of these powers “Push” on something, while the other half “Pull” instead. Pushing and Pulling are the fundamental forces that make Allomancy work, so you need to pay attention to what does what. Also, in addition to being burned, these metals can be *flared*, causing their power to increase significantly, but for a much shorter period of time. Flaring metals is a last resort, an emergency measure that should always be used with caution.

To understand your power, you must first learn what it is. As mentioned, the metals are divided into Physical, Mental and the two special cases. Each of these categories are divided into Internal and External metals, and these are further split

into linked pairs of a base metal and its alloy. It may seem overwhelming, but we are fighting the Lord Ruler, and any information we have is a treasure he can no longer deny us.

First, the Physical Metals. These very obvious powers, and can be discovered by even the most casual observer. They focus on producing flashy, direct effects that impact specific objects or people, as opposed to groups. Allomancers with these abilities tend to make up the military forces of the noble houses.

## THE PHYSICAL METALS

### ***IRON, EXTERNAL PULLING METAL***

Iron burners, also known as Lurchers, are most commonly found among the nobility's defensive forces, acting to protect soldiers and Allomancers from archers and Coinshots. Iron is often seen as a defensive power, as it allows the burner to see blue lines of various weights connecting to nearby sources of metal and Pull on them, physically bringing them closer to the lurcher. As such, metal projectiles can be dragged off of their course and deflected by a thick wooden shield the Lurcher carries. Other uses for Iron include Pulling armor, buttons, belt buckles, coin purses, and other accessories in order to Pull the target off balance or deprive him of his potential weapons.

But these are just how we have seen the nobility use these Mistings. Iron is an incredibly versatile metal, and a bit of knowledge about how its force works opens up the uses of Pulling quite significantly. When Pulling, the lighter or less tightly fixed object moves. For instance, if a lantern bracket is tightly bolted to the side of a building, a Lurcher can burn Iron to drag herself off of the ground to the bracket, the way a spider might climb up a strand of webbing. Similarly, a Lurcher in a tight position could use Iron to slam doors shut between her and pursuers, or Pull on barrel hoops to create obstacles to trip up horses following behind her.

It is incredibly important to remember, Brothers and Sisters, that Ironpulling is dependent on the Lurcher's own weight. If a man tries to Pull himself to a lighter, unsecured metal object, he may find himself surprised and dismayed *when it* is Pulled and comes hurtling at him! Always be certain that a target is stable and will do what you want. Be warned that you cannot use Ironpulling to remove metal embedded in other Allomancers, so earrings and other piercings cannot be affected. Thus if you run into one of the Lord Ruler's horrific Steel Inquisitors, your best bet is to run away while making it hard for them to follow, rather than trying to take them head on.

### ***STEEL, EXTERNAL PUSHING METAL***

Steel is Iron's alloy, and like all Allomantic pairs, acts functionally opposite to its counterpart. Where Iron Pulls metals in, Steel launches them out from the burner, giving rise to the name *Coinshot*. It's disgusting to think that while skaa beg, steal, and starve on the streets, the Lord Ruler's goons and sycophants think so little of money that they have Coinshots practically throw it away. Steel-burners take pouches of boxings and clips with them wherever they go, and flick



them out with incredible accuracy. These projectiles tear through targets like arrowheads. Nobles use Coinshots as combatants, positioning them with Tineyes to act as scouts and manor guards. Sadly, they have also been used as crowd control, to wound large groups of skaa simply by throwing a pouchful of coins into the air and Pushing on them all at once.

When burning Steel, a Coinshot sees blue lines of varying weight leading to every piece of metal in the area. By mentally “grabbing” one of those lines, he can then Push away, causing either the object to fly away, or the Coinshot himself. As with Ironpulling, Steelpushing is a reactive force, so Pushing against something bigger will not cause it to move, so much as cause it to act as a spring-board. Smart Coinshots know how to quickly travel great distances by dropping coins and Pushing off of them. As the coins on the ground have nowhere to go, the Allomancer himself is launched into the air. The difficulty, of course, is in the landing. Mistborn seem to be able to activate their Pewter powers to lessen the rough effects of crashing from height, but a clever Coinshot once figured out that by carefully manipulating the amount of force used to Push on coins, a slowed descent is possible, almost gliding to the ground like a bird. Of course, this takes a great deal of discipline and practice.

In any potential conflict, Coinshots are the first line of defense. Their capabilities at range soften up the enemy and are often times the difference between winning and losing a conflict. The greatest danger to a Coinshot, ironically, is the Coinshot himself. A deflected coin forced back, a bad shot ricocheting incorrectly off of a wall, the very bag that holds all of the coins, these are all things that can be used to harm or kill outright any unfortunate soul caught off guard. More than one Coinshot has found himself thrown back because he Pushed away from something with much greater weight — or a better anchor — than he assumed.

### ***TIN, INTERNAL PULLING METAL***

Tin is a self-enhancement metal, granting vision, hearing, taste, touch, and smell a magnitude greater than any other mortal. A Tineye can hear conversations from great distances, see dangers come from far away, and taste poisons and other irregularities in food. The Tineye is scout, informant, spy, and security all wrapped in one body. Indeed, if any one Misting could be said to be the most dangerous to any skaa rebellion, it may be one of the Lord Ruler’s Tineyes, able to see and report on actions without ever being detected themselves. Moreover, when nobles host their extravagant balls and parties, it is quietly expected that each participating faction will have their own Tineyes roaming the premises surreptitiously gathering information on each other.

The trade off, friends, is that the same power that allows Tineyes to see through the mists causes them to go temporarily blind when a bright light is flashed in their eyes. The power that lets them eavesdrop on conversations causes immeasurable agony when confronted with loud noises. A stunned Tineye is effectively useless, and easily subdued. Hazekillers, noble soldiers trained to fight against Allomancers, sometimes carry sound-sticks to shake Tineye eardrums and take them out of the fight.

Tin is an extremely seductive metal, and those who can burn it often leave it burning as much as they can. The absence of its power makes normal life seem dead, greyer, and blander by comparison. Addiction to Tin can be extremely detrimental, and leave Tineyes hypersensitive to even mundane concerns such as daylight or quiet conversation. Be careful, friends.

### ***PEWTER, INTERNAL PUSHING METAL***

Where Tin Pulls in external energy, Pewter pushes the Thug's internal energy outwards, enhancing strength, stability, endurance, and healing, all while staving off fatigue. A Thug, or *Pewterarm*, as they're known to the more sophisticated, can fight at peak efficiency for hours, and run for miles without tiring. If Coinshots are the artillery forces, Thugs are the bulk infantry.

It is important to note here that Thugs do not change outward appearance when their Pewter is burning. They can hide as servants or assistants and never reveal their powers until the trap is sprung. It is also important to note that Pewter doesn't automatically make one a trained and amazing fighter. If a Thug does not know how to properly throw a punch already, all the Pewter in the world may not help him win a fistfight, and certainly won't help against a much larger and trained opponent. However, there are other things a slight Pewterarm can do that a bigger thug could not. Wearing metal, a slighter Pewterarm can be thrown forward by a Coinshot into battle like a catapult stone, landing solidly and confusing the enemy. And in times of great danger, burning Pewter can keep a body alive through greater punishment than would be normally possible.

Just like Tin, Pewter hides a deep, seductive allure that can be detrimental to thugs who keep it on for too long. When Pewter runs out, all of that fatigue and pain that was shoved away comes flooding back, hitting with the force of a charging koloss. Thugs have been knocked unconscious for days due to so-called Pewter drag and rendered useless for weeks after while their bodies recovered from the exertion. Again, be cautious.

## **THE MENTAL METALS**

Next, the mental metals. These are far less obvious than the physical metals, and perhaps far more dangerous to large groups of people. These powers require great practice and deftness to be used to their best potential. Moreover, it takes a keen sense of observation to detect mental powers, and even then one cannot be sure of what's real and what's manipulated. The Lord Ruler makes extreme use of these Allomancers, favoring them for his Obligators and Inquisitors, and using them to keep we skaa docile. Extreme caution is warranted.

### ***ZINC, EXTERNAL PULLING METAL***

Of the mental metals, Zinc is easily the most exciting to the casual observer. Zinc Pulls on emotions, enflaming them and making them the sole focus of the target's attention. A crowd calmly wandering a market square can be brought to complete chaos by a skilled allomancer, leaving little wonder why Zinc burners are known as Rioters.

Rioters are not mind readers; rather, they're people readers. They learn how to observe complex and detailed emotional responses, and manipulate what they find to achieve desired results. A talented Rioter does not even need to use their power to understand what a person is thinking, as their emotions are as plain as day. And it is not just anger that a Rioter can awaken. A normal person walking by an alley may not be inclined to follow a sound they hear from the darkened recesses, but a Rioter can enflame that curiosity over any self preservation emotions and force that target to check out the disturbance. Conversely, a Rioter could also enflame a person's sense of propriety and preoccupation in order to hide any accidental noises.

The trick to understanding Rioting, and its opposite power of Soothing, is to know that emotions are incredibly complex, and a deft and subtle touch is required to manipulate an emotion without letting the subject know they are being affected. If a Rioter is asking for information from a bartender, they could enflame that person's natural helpful nature without much trouble. Ask the same questions to a soldier guarding a jail cell, and efforts to manipulate emotions are sure to be noticed! Stay vigilant, and keep your touch as light as possible.

### ***BRASS, EXTERNAL PUSHING METAL***

At first glance, Brass seems like a less powerful version of Zinc. Rather than enflaming and enhancing emotions, Brass Soothes them away, dampening powerful feelings and severely lessening their impact on the target. That chaotic marketplace could be brought back to complete placidity by a well timed burst of Brass smothering the feelings of excitement and agitation.

Soothers are far more subtle than they first appear, however. A soother could melt away feelings of distrust and leave people far more willing to talk than they might have been initially. They can make people think that no, that store fire really isn't important enough for me to break my routine, and someone else will come and deal with it. Most importantly, though, is that a Soother can effectively Riot a person by deadening all emotions except for the one they wish to have highlighted. Though not as bombastic as their Zinc burning companions, Brass burners can do the job when called upon.

Zinc and Brass are more linked than any other metal pairs, and work incredibly well when complementing each other. Soothers and Rioters are not mind readers, nor can they force a person to act in a certain way, but in conjunction, they can be used to completely shut down emotional feedback. Those feelings of despair that permeate the skaa slums are not just from our oppressed lives, but from the work of Obligators who crush our spirits and Sooth away any joy and happiness, while Rioting helplessness and defeat. Sadly, the only counter we know is to truly understand emotions, and recognize manipulation, which is difficult even without Allomancy!

Rioters and Soothers are remarkable negotiators and diplomats, but in the war with the Lord Ruler, their strongest skills lie in rallying the skaa against his forces, and in demoralizing those conscripts who he has enslaved.

## ***COPPER, INTERNAL PULLING METAL***

Copper is not as flashy as the other metals, but in many ways those who burn it, known as Smokers, are the lynchpins of many Allomantic teams. Copper has only one effect: hiding the usage of Allomancy within the radius of its “coppercloud.” Without that effect, non-noble Allomancers would never be able to use their abilities in safety. A Smoker has one big advantage, however: when they burn Copper, they become immune to the effects of emotional Allomancy. As the Lord Ruler relies heavily on stamping out any potentially rebellious feelings through judicious use of Zinc and Brass, the benefits of immunity become immediately visible.

To put it bluntly, Brothers and Sisters, any Allomantic excursion that lacks a dedicated Smoker is a plan destined to fail.

## ***BRONZE, INTERNAL PUSHING METAL***

Bronze burners are known as Seekers, because where Copper hides, Bronze finds. Burning Bronze allows the Allomancer to detect if any Allomantic metals are being used in the area, down to the specific location. Highly skilled seekers can even determine exactly what metal is being burned and how strong. And the very best of them can even determine exactly what emotions are being manipulated by Zinc and Brass burners. It is no surprise, then, that many of the Lord Ruler’s most feared hunters are Seekers. Inquisitors especially use the metal continuously to search for skaa Mistings. These skaa are then beaten, carried away for sinister and secret rites, or murdered on the spot.

Bronze works by feeling pulses, which in turn help define metals and their categories. Pushing metals pulse towards the seeker, while Pulling metals move away from. Internal metals give off long pulses, while external metals give off shorter ones. Finally, the various metal groups, be it physical, mental, or other, give off different patterns. Understanding the combinations can immediately pinpoint the exact metal being burned, and where it originates. When every noble house has a veritable army of Mistings and Mistborn at their disposal, knowing when and where they are coming from, and with what powers, can be crucial to survival.

## ***GOLD AND ATIUM***

Finally, the two greater metals, which do not fit into the other categories. These two metals, Gold and Atium, do not have alloys that we know of, and do not relate to each other in a way that we can determine.

## ***GOLD, INTERNAL PULLING METAL***

Gold allows one to see into their own past, at the potential people they might have been had choices been different. Allomantic research has not really given a good purpose for this metal, though it is almost certain that the Lord Ruler has found a way to keep the truth from the masses. The ancient texts call Gold burners Augurs.



## ***ATIUM, THE GREATEST METAL***

Atium is the basis of the economy of the Final Empire, and the most powerful of all Allomantic metals. It allows the burner to see into the future for a short period of time. Burners of Atium, or Seers, see what a person may do in the coming moments. In battle, this means perfect reflexes, perfect defense, and the ability to attack preemptively where a person will be in a moment. It is the metal that gives noble houses their power, and allows the Lord Ruler to maintain control.

Atium is the cause and source of all of our misery and bondage. Every day for a thousand years, skaa men and women have been worked to death in the Pits of Hathsin and other such torture chambers. Our survival has been contingent upon finding these foul rocks, and we have supported the Lord Ruler's vile regime with our blood and souls. We have paid for this Atium a thousand times over, and now we will take it from him.

Allomancy is the Lord Ruler's way of separating his elites from his slaves. We have stolen the power from him, and will fight to the death to keep it. Through our misting and mistborn brothers and sisters, and the techniques in this pamphlet, the skaa rebellion will undermine and destroy the Final Empire once and for all. Be strong, and we will prevail.

## 2

# JOURNEY TO LUTHADEL



Grandfather Bylerum used to say, “It’s the Lord Ruler’s land and the Lord Ruler’s rocks but we make them beautiful.” He said it about the metals dug out of the dirt on Bylerum lands, hunks of dull dun-colored stone chipped out of the dusty ground. He said it about the skaa who toiled in those mines, their hands and faces bloody and muddy with ash and clay. He said it about the sprawling plantation grounds where the Bylerum name was raised up like the hardy grain and polished like a sturdy ingot.

The plantation was the pride of the Bylerum family since even before the mines were started — it had been given to the Bylerums by House Buvidas, making them a new and distinct noble house, just four generations ago. The mines had long been the source of the Bylerum wealth and stability, but they were where work was done, a place of dirt and skaa laborers, where necessity met sweat. The plantation house and its fields were what all those stones and all that money was for. It was a patch of ground that the Bylerums could beautify with plantings and song, to add some measure of comfort to the land beneath the red sun, to celebrate rare plenty and the land given up to them by the distant Lord Ruler.

House Buvidas granted the land to Gurgess Bylerum, who died not long after and bequeathed it to his only son, Bronham — the wise, temperate, and ever-reliant father figure who made Bylerum into a proper name in the Southern Dominance of the Final Empire. Under his guidance, the name came to be synonymous with hard work, quality merchandise, and honest dealings. It lacked the lofty status and fearsome reputation of the Great Houses of the capital city of Luthadel, but it was spoken of by many lords and ladies with respect despite mere decades in the noble scene.

It was Bronham Bylerum that all the living Bylerums regarded as Grandfather Bylerum. It was Bronham who knew how to manage every aspect of the house's business, from coffers to coffins. It was Bronham's shadow that fell across the plantation even now, years after his death.

It was Bronham's ghost that the family invoked to haunt his children and grandchildren with the phrase, "That's now how Grandfather would do it."

Bronham had two sons with two wives. The elder son, Bycroft, stood to inherit everything and seemed to Bronham to have "fine, delicate hands well suited to counting and spending money," but it was Bronham's younger son, Burgh, who had the heart and the head to rule the Bylerum estate. The boys were close but unlike in so many ways — to Bycroft, living in their father's shadow was like living beneath a looming specter, but to Burgh it was merely like living life in the comforting shade of a tall tree.

One day, not long before he died, Grandfather Bylerum brought his sons together on the plantation's sole, low hill and stood them before him. He put a hand on each son's shoulder. "Boys," he said, though they were both grown men, with children of their own by then, "all of this shall be yours. I know that each of you, alone, will make mistakes but I trust and hope that, together, you'll keep our home beautiful and content." In the distance, against a backdrop of ash and dust kicked up in the fields by the feet and hoes of skaa laborers, Bycroft and Burgh's own sons played at sword fighting with empty scabbards, chasing each other across the ashy clay. Behind the Bylerum men, the Ashmount called Doriel billowed thick gray clouds into the sky.

Ever since he was a boy, Burgh kept a map of the Final Empire up in the welcoming hall of the plantation house. On that map, the Bylerum lands appeared as a handsome sketch of the plantation house surrounded by etchings of grain and legumes. The etchings covering a great deal more of the map than the modest Bylerum farms and mines covered of actual ground. On Burgh's map, the plantation seemed to sprawl.

On the ground, when viewed from any angle, it lately seemed like wide fields of hardy scrub and tough brown croplands. At the heart of it all, beneath the red sun, a cluster of clapboard shacks and clay-brick buildings huddled at the feet of a hulking manor house. That manor, built on a wide, low arch of red stones, seemed very much like a bridge with a pillared plantation house built atop it — a bridge that ran from one dusty field of grain to another. Under the house's great arch, wood and iron furniture was laid out amid the lingering foundations of simpler buildings. From there, the Bylerums would often sit and watch the sun rise and set on their pastoral lands. From there, they could read or play in the air while the house blocked out the ash that ever fell down on their lands.

The foundations that poked from the clay beneath the house were all that remained of old skaa buildings, from the days when the field skaa dwelled beneath the arch. Until Grandfather Bylerum's first wife complained about the smells of skaa porridge wafting up into the house, the skaa would end their days sweating ash off their bodies and reclining on the roofs of their little homes, between thatch and arch, to survey the lands they cultivated and tilled for their masters.

Now the Bylerum skaa dwelled in clay huts dug halfway into the earth, each hut a little arch of baked clay with clapboard walls, like an inverted image of the great manor house. Some skaa still climbed atop their huts to take in the view of the Bylerum lands, but every one came down smeared and stained with ash.

So it was when the coaches arrived at the plantation to carry half the Bylerum family away to the capital. Tieran Bylerum, eldest son of Burgh Bylerum, leaned out his open window and squinted into the sunset, watching the coaches pull their long shadows across the scrubland. Horses — a rare sight this far from any city or canal — pulled three dirty coaches up the Bylerum road, under the meager branches of half-dead trees that lined the way, and circled themselves in the simple turnaround in front of the manor house. Hired coachmen in finely tailored coats, too dark to show ash stains, tipped their hats.

Each coach's patterned, dark leather hide was streaked with ash tossed up from its wheels and dotted with ash stains fallen from above. Inside, however, each was plush and supple, full of tea-colored leather or red-velvet upholstery kept relatively clean by simple shuttered windows.

Burgh Bylerum stepped out onto the high, elevated porch that ran the length of the manor house's front face and peered down at the coaches. Tieran and his brother, Ufrim, came dashing down the creaking stairs and followed their father to the railing. Everything was bathed in rich light from the long rays of the setting sun.

"Late," said Burgh. "We'll have to wait until morning, now, just so the horses can see where they're feet are falling."

"We'll be lucky to reach the canals by noon," whined Ufrim. "How much must we pay blasted coachmen to coax the slightest bit of damned punctuality out of them?"

Burgh said nothing, so Tieran ventured an opinion: "We're paying more for comfort and safety than for speed, aren't we? I'd doubt there are any shortcuts across the scrub between here and the canal, Ufry."

Ufrim pursed his lips and wagged his head in dismissal.

"Have them tie their horses in the stables. In the morning, have the manor skaa see to the baggage," said Burgh. "You two oversee it all. Let's have everything bundled and belted down and ready for the road at an early hour, yes?"

"Yes, father," Burgh's sons replied.

"Don't load up the coaches until dawn. We may yet make good time out to the canals."

"Yes, father."

Burgh clapped them each on the back and strode back into the gloomy half-light of the manor, his voice echoing into the house as he said, "Everyone who is lucky enough to ride for Luthadel, be ready come morning!"

Tieran turned to Ufrim. "Horses or coachmen?"

Ufrim dug a coin from his purse. "Heads," he said, then flipped it, caught it, checked it. "Heads."

"So I'll see to the horses?"

"No!" Ufrim laughed. "I'd rather handle dirty horses than miserable skaa."



Tieran nodded and headed off to pester the manor's valet. The coachmen — well dressed, especially for skaa — had their clothes beaten free of ash and their stomachs filled before the next ride. They ate and slept with the indoor skaa, up in the attic.

Tieran did his best to get word of the canal yards out of them, but they wouldn't dare to gossip with a noble they didn't know. A trained skaa servant knew better than to test patience or tolerance with gossip that might offend or shock a noble. Besides, rumor was currency on the road, tradable for a splash of ale or the cozier corner of an inn room, useful for buying sympathy or respect. To give it away, even to a noble, was folly.

When Tieran asked, "Any good tales from the waterways?" as he led the coachmen through the kitchen to the servant's stairs, their spokesman knew what to say. He was a round, dusty man in a beaten-up top hat, his face caked with soot.

"Alas, none worth a noble's ears, sir."

Tieran nodded to himself. "Well," he hoped out loud, "maybe we'll get a chance to talk on the ride tomorrow."

"Wouldn't want to take my mind off the task, sir."

Tieran nodded again. "Right. Well. Up these stairs you'll find a common room to sleep and a balcony where you can shake out your clothes. Skaa take soup in the kitchen after we've eaten."

"Of course, sir."

"The valet knows the rest," Tieran said as he headed back through the kitchen and down the outdoor stairs toward the stables.

The stables were slowly splintering away at the Bylerum house, as the Bylerums kept only a modest coach and a few horses these days. As Tieran crossed the brown grass between stable and home, and approached the open stable doors, he heard Ufrim yelling inside. "Feed them, then! But the cost of oats comes out of their fee!"

Ufrim came out of the doorway into the remains of the dusk, saw Tieran, and turned back to kick a skaa stablehand in his ass. "You tell them that at dinner — that they're welcome to *your* soup but not to *our* oats."

"Everything all right?" asked Tieran.

"Lord Ruler give me the strength to suffer skaa nonsense, I swear," Ufrim sighed and spit into the dust. "Half a day late and they expect to eat for free?"

"Things seldom go quite as planned. We'll be on the canals and headed into Luthadel soon enough," Tieran said. "Then you'll only have well-dressed servants to fret about."

"Yes, and also coachmen and *bloody stablehands*!" Ufrim laughed toward the open door. Then he punched Tieran hard in the arm.

"Ouch! What was that?"

"One last row before we become respectable city folk," said Ufrim.

Tieran went to punch his brother but Ufrim grabbed his wrist and held him fast.

"No, no," said Ufrim, "it's over. No more fighting. Proper gentlemen from now on."

“Fine, then,” said Tieran, heading back toward the house.

Ufrim hit him again.

“Don’t let father catch you doing that,” laughed Tieran.

“He knows you deserve it,” Ufrim laughed as they went up the stairs and into the manor house to spend their last night as rural lords.

\* \* \*

Tieran woke to the sound of his father’s deep voice echoing through the plantation house. He was soon cleaned and dressed and downstairs in the meager early light of pre-dawn, when angled rays came muted through the last fingers of receding mist to reveal the thin haze of ash hanging in the air over the fields. Tieran scratched at his close-clipped beard and took in a deep breath, his throat itching against the ash. He felt like he stood in the threshold of a great doorway; behind him was the familiar and before him was the future.

*The future, he thought to himself. Where I may be more than just a nephew or cousin to decision-makers. Where my choices may raise new walls and new wealth for the family.*

Tieran reached into his long coat and quietly drew out a diminutive glass vial filled with gold flakes and alcohol. As he walked amid the bustling skaa, loading bags and boxes onto the coach backs, he popped into one of the coaches and took a furtive swallow from his vial, stomaching burning liquid and scratchy gold. Then he reached within himself and activated the Gold in his body, burning it slowly like damp paper in a weak fire.

Across from him, on the opposite interior bench of the coach, a ghostly figure manifested. It was Tieran himself, but not himself — Tieran as he might have been. It was a vision of how Tieran might be, right now, if Tieran had been different in the past.

The ghost of his potential was taller, more fit, with a lordly posture and a richly textured coat with patterned lining. A gold brooch gleamed on his chest emblazoned with the emblem of Bylerum in gold. This incarnation of Tieran exuded an easy confidence, made eye contact with the real Tieran, and smiled comfortably. Then it looked out the window of the coach and its smile faded...

“What are you doing in there?” demanded Burgh Bylerum, slapping a hand down on the coach door.

Tieran started and his Gold-induced vision faded away. “Father, I was... I’m just—”

“There’s work to be done out here. You’ll have hours, yet, to sit on your behind when we can finally be moving. Get to work!”

“Yes, father.” Tieran stepped out of the coach and grabbed for the first piece of baggage he could find. It was a box for his cousin’s gowns.

“I’ll handle that, sir,” one of the coachmen said, taking the box. “Pardon me. Thank you, sir.”

Across the yard, Ufrim was cursing out manor skaa, perhaps for old time’s sake. His face was red and a vein bulged in his neck.

At the foot of the house stairs, Tieran's cousin, Arice, was saying her good-byes to Tieran's youngest brother, Ostice. She mussed his hair and kissed him on the cheek, which he despised.

On the porch up above, Tieran's cousins, Cordal and Carrow leaned over the railing, watching the skaa mill about and laughing at some shared joke. They had on their faces the same relaxed confidence Tieran had seen on his ghost.

*Perhaps if I cared not one whit about the fate of the house and trusted skaa and kin to do all my work for me, I'd be carefree, too,* Tieran thought to himself. He couldn't decide if he loathed or admired the man he might have been. He felt like he hadn't yet finished becoming himself as it was.

Tieran, the eldest son of a second son, stood to inherit his father's half of the Bylerum estate but, like his father, he had inherited little of the Allomantic potency that made some nobles so dangerous, so adventurous, so powerful. Cordal and Carrow were both Mistborn, both born to Allomantic power in addition to the privileges and luxury of their position as noble-blooded men. Cordal would inherit but Tieran, no doubt, would end up doing so much of the work to maintain or grow the family's name. Just as it was with their fathers, Bycroft and Burgh.

"Everything will be different in the capital, young man!" A hand patted Tieran on the shoulder.

Tieran looked behind him as his uncle Bycroft swept by in the midst of the milling skaa, smiling and waving up his daughter Clara, who was staying behind. Bycroft was dressed more for sport-hunting after voles than for a proper journey, with high boots and a colorful coat already speckled with ash.

Bycroft was headed with outstretched arms to talk to Burgh, who stood waiting with his arms crossed, shaking his head.

This was all Bycroft's idea, after all.

Bycroft was restless. He felt left out of the grandeur and splendor of the capital. He grew tired of hearing news weeks late, of being called Lord Bylerum only by skaa and kin and neighbors. He wanted repute and respect that he felt he couldn't get on the plantation. Everyone knew it.

Burgh, on the other hand, wanted only to maintain the family's safety and security. He believed in the value of the bird in the hand.

But Bycroft was the older brother and at least half of the family's wealth and decisions were his, and when he gathered the Bylerums around the hearth and said he was going to Luthadel to explore new trading options and make new arrangements for selling the metals drawn up from the family mines, the youngest generation was delighted. All the young Bylerums asked when they could go to Luthadel. No one seemed to consider who would stay behind to run the plantation and the mines.

Burgh wouldn't have that, though. The plantation hardly required the whole family to run it — Burgh's head and a hundred skaa hands were surely enough — but Luthadel was "no playground," he'd said. He drew on his pipe and, after a mouthful of smoke, tempered the message. "This isn't a jaunt," he'd said. "Those who are going to the capital are going to work. To enrich our family name and our family fortune. To secure our futures. To find wives and husbands. To make

themselves useful to the Final Empire.” He drew on his pipe again and the room waited on him. “Understand?”

Now, as Tieran walked up on his father and uncle, he could see the split between them as clear as if it were a crack in the earth. “Brother, the farm is yours,” Tiern heard Bycroft say as he took Burgh by the shoulders. “Make father proud here. Find us more metal. And I’ll make the most of it all in Luthadel.”

Burgh glared at Tieran. “Not now, son. Go gather everyone up and get them ready.”

“Yes, father,” Tieran said and started off. As he left, he heard Bycroft continue on.

“Don’t be lonely here, brother,” Bycroft said.

“I have Marella and Ostice and Clara to keep me company,” Burgh said. “And plenty of work to keep us busy here.”

Tieran couldn’t hear any more of their talk. He waved to Cordal and Carrow, who fastened their fine black jackets and brushed the hair out of their eyes on their way to the coaches. He tapped Arice on the shoulder and she nodded and hugged Clara, saying, “I’ll write you every day!” He walked up to Ufrim and Ostice and said, “Time to go, gentlemen.”

Ufrim nodded and looked down at young Ostice. “Keep an eye on things here for us, young master,” he said. “Father’s counting on you.”

Ostice pouted. “When can I see the capital?”

Ufrim smiled and said, “When you’re older.” It was a favorite refrain of their father’s. “Or maybe,” he added, “you can come out for my wedding. It won’t be far off, I imagine. Not all of us are as shy as Tieran,” Ufrim said, slugging Tieran in the shoulder again.

“Stop that!” said Burgh as he approached. “That behavior stays here, Ufrim.”

“Sorry, father.”

Burgh glared. “Always sorry. Come on, button up, we’re almost off.” The boys paused and looked at each other. “We, father?” asked Tieran. “Where are you going?”

“I’m seeing you off at the canal yards. I want to talk to you two on the way. Ostice,” Burgh pointed at the manor house, “go to your mother and remember that she is the master of this house until I return.”

Ostice kicked a clod of dirt and stomped off to the manor house.

Something caught Burgh’s eye, then. “Ah, good,” he said. “Almost ready.”

Across the yard, four skaa lugged a heavy metal cube toward the last coach. As they went to hand it off to the coachmen, their sweaty, ashen hands slipped and one corner of the cube went into the dirt. The skaa on that corner winced and looked toward the sky.

“Careful with that! Damn it!” Burgh stormed over to them and backhanded the sweaty-handed skaa to the ground. “It’s delicate inside.” Burgh crouched down and put a key to a slot on one face of the cube. It was a safe. Burgh pulled open the door and ran his hands over the object within: a terra cotta rectangle packed firmly in a nest of straw and hay. Satisfied that it was intact, he adjusted the straw and shut the door.

“It’s well packed, Burgh,” said Bycroft as he approached. “We’ll take proper care of it when we get to Luthadel, if it gets mistreated on the way.”

Burgh looked at his brother, rose to his feet and held out the key. “Do,” he said. “Take care of it as you would care for my sons.”

Bycroft took the key and held it up between them. “I will,” he said.

\* \* \*

Cordal and Carrow rode together in the forward-most coach. Lord Bycroft Bylerum and his wife, Atalyra, road with their daughter, Arice. Tieran, Ufrim, and their father rode together in the last coach in the caravan. After leaning out the windows and waving back to their mother, Marella, and all the family staying behind, the brothers rode in silence, rocking back on forth on the unpaved road across Southern Dominance. Burgh looked out at the scrublands they passed by.

“Do you know how rarely I see anything beyond these lands? I haven’t traveled since I was your age,” he said, nodding towards Ufrim. “Of course, I was much more respectful at your age.”

Ufrim frowned.

“Is that why you’re coming all this way?” Tieran asked.

“And paying for a coach to make this whole trip back?” asked Ufrim.

Burgh sat in silence for a long while after that, so his sons sat in silence, too. They traveled north along the border of the Eastern Dominance, watching the red clay of the scrublands yield to heartier black soil and long brown grasses, all dusted with the ash that fluttered lightly down. The ashmounts were forgiving that day. Rocks in the roadway tossed the coaches from side to side.

Finally, Burgh leaned forward. “I need to talk to you both about your job in the capital.”

“Our *job*?” asked Ufrim.

“Yes, Ufrim. You’re not going on any vacation. I’m not exaggerating when I say that the success of our house depends on how you all handle yourselves in Luthadel.”

Tieran looked to Ufrim for a reaction but Ufrim just glanced out the window, then back at his father. He opened his mouth to say something, then thought better of it.

“Good, then,” said Burgh. “Now listen. Out here we have some measure of respect and authority among the plantation estates and minor houses, but to the Great Houses of Luthadel we are... nothing. We are toys to them. Our goal is not to *change* that, but to earn some modicum of respect without endangering everything that Grandfather Bylerum built for us. Do you understand?”

Tieran nodded. Ufrim said, “Uncle Bycroft said—”

“I know what Bycroft said. He’s full of enthusiasm and plans and that’s fine, to a point. He and his boys have plenty of enthusiasm and plenty of plans for the lot of you. They also have a willingness to risk more than we can afford to lose.” Burgh paused. “You must act as ballast against their eagerness.”

“Ballast?” asked Ufrim.

“Offer temperate counsel. Advise him to be cautious. Right now, Bycroft thinks he has his plans for Luthadel all sorted out, but he’s not ready to be treated the way they’ll treat him. When he gets within reach of the Great Houses, they will yank on his collar like he’s their dog.”

Tieran’s eyes were wide. Their father had never spoken of his brother this way — never confided in his sons like this.

Ufrim chuckled.

“Bycroft is dazzled by the splendor and the glamour of the capital, but we as a family cannot afford to be. We need *you* to keep your heads. Bycroft’s name and our family’s station will get him into parties and meetings, but he needs you to watch his back. You know that Cordal and Carrow aren’t going to do it,” Burgh said. “They’ll be swept up as surely as Bycroft.”

“Father—” Ufrim started.

Burgh held up a finger. “Remember your place. Avoid greed. Do not lend money or accept any money lent to you. They’ll call you provincial or rural or rustic and they’ll mean it as an insult. Let them. Be *smart*. Never lend a hand unless you’re ready to lose a finger. Do you understand?”

Tieran looked at Ufrim.

“Do you not trust us, father?” Ufrim asked.

Burgh’s eyes darkened. “Ufrim, I am trusting you. Right now.”

“You think we’ll betray our own family? You think we’re too gullible to—”

“I think you’ve never had to fight. Either of you. I think you’ve never been in real danger. I think you’re in danger of mistaking what happens in Luthadel for some kind of game, but the lords and the ladies and the Mistborn of the Great Houses, they can ruin you,” Burgh looked from one son to the other. “They can ruin us all if you’re not careful.”

Ufrim furrowed his brow. “We’ll be careful, father.”

Tieran looked from Ufrim to his father and back. He knew better than to butt in now.

Burgh put his hands together in front of his face and then drew them apart, palms out, which meant he was expecting his sons’ attention. They gave it.

“There is more I must tell you. A secret.” Burgh put his palms on his knees. He paused.

“The safe?” asked Ufrim.

“No, not exactly,” said Burgh. “We, House Bylerum, are not well.”

Tieran leaned forward, his head tilted to one side. Ufrim looked out the window as the coach rocked over a stone. “Father?” asked Tieran.

“The mine is not producing ore as it once did, yet a new mine has opened in the Eastern Dominance that is competing with us in the nearest cities, from Austrex to Fareau. We haven’t produced a suitable gem in many weeks. The metals we dig up are fine in quality but short in quantity. It’s not enough to sell to foundries or smithies for use in weapons, jewelry, buildings. Not anymore. What we have are worthy metals, but not for industry. Perhaps with new customers who need precious metals in smaller quantities...”

“Like Mistborn,” said Tieran.



Burgh nodded. “That’s right. Mistings and Mistborn of the Great Houses use and stockpile fine-quality metals. Their hunger for them seems boundless and they often pay more for less for the peace of mind they demand. For the certainty of quality.”

“Metals for Mistings and Mistborn demand precise measures,” Tieran said to no one in particular.

“So we must make contacts with metalsmiths of repute. We must get our metals into lucrative and steady hands. We must find a new way to turn our dwindling fortunes into stability for our futures... or we may be penniless far sooner than I care to admit.”

“Uncle Bycroft knows all this,” said Ufrim. “Yes?”

“Of course,” replied Burgh.

“Then why do you think he’ll risk our honor and our fortunes on—”

“Your uncle has the idea that a loan of cash from a Great House would afford us the money to seek out new mines and put our skaa to work in other places. A pittance to the Great Houses could be a windfall for us. But all we have to promise in exchange for such loans is our house and the plantation. If things do not go our way, we could lose what we have now to a Great House that won’t appreciate — won’t give one damn — for what we’ve made. Your uncle, whether he really knows it or not, would just as soon see us absorbed into luxury and comfort in the capital, even if it meant surrendering our familial lands and losing our name.”

Ufrim nodded. “So we’re to spy on Uncle Bycroft on your behalf.”

“I wouldn’t put it that way—”

“But it’s what you mean, isn’t it?”

“You are my men on the inside, yes. You are the voice of temperance and reason. You’re there to remind him that the family plantation and all his kin are counting on him.”

Tieran scratched at his beard. “What about Cordal and Carrow. Won’t they—”

“They are Mistborn and hooligans, besides. I imagine they’d be happy to liquidate the plantation and rejoin the ranks of House Buvidas in Luthadel or even move to Austrex and live like urban kings. They’re content to spend money and create nothing.”

Tieran and Ufrim each looked out their own side of the coach. Without quite thinking about it, Tieran burned the last of the Gold in him. Out of the corner of his eye, he caught the vision of himself seated across from him, next to his father. Tieran turned his head to look at it — to look at himself — and noticed in a new way the dirt under the vision’s fingernails, the clay entrenched in the wrinkles of its hands, the ruddy fingertips and a smudge of ash on his brow. The vision’s finer clothes were stained with sweat at the cuffs and collar and marked with ash.

Then Tieran noticed his father looking at him.

The vision turned as Tieran turned to look at Burgh and faded into nothing. Tieran guiltily looked at the floor of the coach, then back out the window.

His father didn’t like Tieran using his Allomantic ability — called augury by those who knew Allomancy — just as he didn’t have much time for talks of what might have been. Burgh Bylerum liked things to be solid as clay or stone,

“as real as rocks,” as he’d say. Burgh had beaten his sons until they “Snapped” and revealed their Allomantic abilities, like any proper noble should, but he was unsurprised to discover they were mere Mistings, just as Burgh was. Tieran had inherited Burgh’s knack for burning Gold, even, which Burgh had always regarded as a damning temptation rather than any sort of “power.” Ufrim, on the other hand, burned Pewter, which redoubled his physical capabilities... but was viewed as Burgh as a shortcut to hard work and a potential waste of Pewter that could be sold to smiths and jewelers. In truth, Burgh was concerned that his son would become addicted to the easiness of Pewter-fueled labor and sport and become dependent on the metal. Burgh viewed that as a failing of character.

So Tieran looked away until he could feel his father’s gaze move off of him. He didn’t want to have another conversation about his character or Ufrim’s. Not now.

Ufrim finally broke the silence. “You didn’t want any of us to go to Luthadel, did you? You’re just hoping that Bycroft will be scared into appreciating the mines and the farm and come back home and listen to you like you always wished he had.”

Burgh looked at his son. “Am I?”

Ufrim looked back at him. “Do you want him to fail?”

“No.”

“So how can we best please you in Luthadel?” asked Tieran.

Burgh sighed. “By defending our house’s integrity and stability. By acting like honorable sorts. By protecting what we have even when those who might seem to be our friends want to meddle with it. And by respecting what Grandfather Bylerum made for us and not squandering it.”

Ufrim and Tieran looked at each other, then back at Burgh.

“All right, then, father,” said Ufrim.

“I’ll do my best, father,” said Tieran.

The coaches entered a stretch of meager woodlands, brown-leafed branches scratching at the walls and roof. Burgh and his sons rode on in silence and Tieran watched a hind bound away into the woods.

\* \* \*

“You’re Burg Bylerum?”

“It’s not Burg. It’s Burgh.”

“Burrow?”

“Close enough.” Burgh looked around for some other skaa to talk to.

The canal yards were a mess of squat stone towers, ash-streaked warehouses, unkempt tenements, and a tangle of shacks and tents that Tieran could hardly fathom. How, when a skaa went out to work in the morning, did he find his way home after?

It was noisy and smoky and smelled of mud and horses and stagnant water. Long, narrow barges slid through deep, man-made canals, lined with wood planks and stone barriers, pulled along by horses or teams of skaa. Here, at the end of

this canal line, the barges were modest and the teams were small, but just outside Luthadel the canals were supposed to be wide as rivers and traveled by luxurious skiffs for Obligators and nobles. Here, though, tiny, flitting insects hovered in the air all around the canal ports, which forked off the main artery like tree limbs, ending in simple wooden loading docks. Some docks sported sturdy wooden cranes, others made due with ropes and pulleys, most relied solely on skaa strong-backs and stevedores to move crates on and off of narrow barges.

Burgh grimaced and leaned toward the stevedore he was trying to hear. “Say that again,” he instructed.

“I said,” went the stevedore, pointing at a paper in his hands, “if you want to load before the canal clogs with barges, you’ll need more hands.”

“More hands?”

“Yes.”

Ufrim’s shoulders fell. “These damned canal skaa,” he said to himself, then turned to the stevedore. “You damned canal skaa. Perhaps if not every barge was trying to get into the canals at once?”

“Begging your pardon, sir,” said the stevedore, “but every one of two-dozen barges is bound for Luthadel and they all believe their business is pressing. Extra hands make everything go faster.”

“Extra *coin*, you mean.” Ufrim wasn’t accustomed to talkative skaa, and certainly not skaa who could make demands.

“It’s all right, Ufrim,” Tieran offered.

“Is it?”

Burgh, ignoring Ufrim, leaned in again. “Two more hands, then. Let’s not waste any more time talking when we could be loading, eh?” Burgh counted out a few coins for the stevedore.

“Yes, milord,” the stevedore said. “Very good, sir.”

The stevedore and his fellow skaa got to work, hefting crates and baggage from the coaches with practiced precision. All the while, the coachmen sat atop their coaches and kept wary eyes on the many canal-yard folk milling about the coaches, passing on their way to other docks, pursuing pushcarts filled with simple biscuits for sale, and hawking wares like hats and gloves.

Tieran watched it all, drew in the smells of the warm biscuits and the strange spices, and considered the fates and origins of these people. These canal skaa — so often disheveled or outlandish in their hats upon skullcaps and fingerless gloves and strangely patterned vests — were not like the laborers at the Bylerum farm or the diggers in the mines. They had their own lingo and accents and a kind of undeniable pride and certainty in themselves and their lot. They laughed in sight of their betters, leaning back into belly laughs and showing off mouths of insufficient teeth. One wore a stack of half-a-dozen hats on his head and sang a petty song about his “canal-worthy hats for sale!” A skaa woman came followed by a small but vicious dog, unleashed and yapping, and they strutted through the crowd with a purpose. A pair of great hulking men in snug black suits stood atop precarious crates, looking down on everyone else, their hands on squared-off wooden batons.

Amidst all the colorful canal skaa were the more common strongbacks in their simple tunics and breeches, sweat dripping from their hair, hands sheathed in fat leather gloves. Tieran watched one without those gloves hoist a crate from their coach and deposit it on the pier near the barge. He cursed loud and went to pluck a splinter from his palm.

Then Ufrim was there. “We’re not paying you lazy roustabouts to clean yourselves! Mind those boxes!” Ufrim walked up and kicked the skaa in his rear. “Do you hear me?”

The skaa stared at him. He looked ready to fight back.

“Are you deaf, now, too?” Ufrim struck the strongback across the face with his knuckles.

Tieran closed in but Burgh was already on the scene and he pulled Ufrim away. Tieran came upon them in the midst of their conversation.

“But they’re already gouging us, father!” Ufrim whined.

“These aren’t your laborers, boy. You can’t just take a boot to them whenever they displease you. You must—”

“He didn’t take his beating like—”

“You’ll find many skaa of this sort in the capital, Ufrim. You’ve got to control yourself! No matter how unhappy it makes you, we can’t get these things to Luthadel without them. Your cargo — all your things — are in their hands. What are you going to do?”

Ufrim raised his hand over his head to protest.

“No,” Burgh said. “No. Think about it.”

Ufrim dropped his hand and fumed. Tieran finally got close and patted his brother on the shoulder. “We’re all on edge, Uf. Taking it out on these skaa won’t make the canals move any faster.”

Ufrim slid out from Tieran’s hand and said, “What do you know about it, farm boy?” Then Ufrim punched Tieran in the arm one last time.

In a flash, Burgh had Ufrim in hand and was dragging him back to the coaches. “That’s enough of *that*!” he yelled.

The dockside quieted. Skaa paused and stared. Strongbacks cleared a path for Burgh and his son.

Burgh threw Ufrim against their coach and held him there with one hand. Ufrim, stunned, just stood with his arms at his sides, awaiting a scolding or a solid thwack. Instead, Burgh pointed a finger at a nearby strongback. “You!”

The strongback dipped his head in response.

“Follow this boy,” Burgh commanded him. Then, to Ufrim: “You, march onto that dock and find every bag that’s yours. Show them to this man and he will load them back onto the coach.”

“Father...”

“No. No. You’re coming back to the plantation with me.”

“Father, no!”

“Perhaps you’ll see Luthadel *next* year.” Burgh dropped his hand from Ufrim’s chest. “Now fetch your things.” His face was red but he was frighteningly still.

Ufrim seemed on the verge of collapse. His shoulders fell. He had to slink around his father to get back out to the dock. The strongback was on his heels.

“Milord?” the strongback asked quietly.

Ufrim pointed to a blue bag and a footlocker. The strongback stacked and lifted them.

As Tieran watched, his brother’s belongings were loaded back up and Ufrim was ordered back inside the coach. The coachman above looked grave. A pair of lanky skaa in tall hats chuckled as they pointed at Ufrim’s coach.

Through it all, Burgh maintained his poise. When Bycroft stepped out of his coach, where he’d been waiting to avoid the ashfall, he strode up to Burgh and hugged him. Burgh didn’t hug him back.

They talked, Bycroft with his hands on Burgh’s shoulders again, but Tieran just watched from the other side of the dock. Burgh nodded towards him and Bycroft followed the gesture with his eyes and nodded back at Burgh. Tieran just stayed still until the talkative stevedore approached him.

“Pardon, milord.”

Tieran turned his head, his eyes following after a moment. “Yes?”

“Can I have you put your mark on this for us?”

“I’m sorry,” Tieran said and nodded back towards his father and uncle, “but you have to get it from one of them.”

The stevedore was visibly disappointed.

“They’re the masters of the house,” Tieran said.

\* \* \*

Tieran’s farewell was short. His father took him by the shoulders, looked him in the eyes for long moments... and said nothing. Burgh only nodded, as if they agreed on something unspoken and although Tieran felt like he didn’t fully understand, he nodded back anyway. With that, his father was gone into the crowd of skaa milling along the canal and then visible above them on the step of the coach, waving.

“You are your father’s man in the capital,” said Bycroft, coming up beside Tieran.

Tieran nodded, still looking at his father. Finally, he waved back and his father disappeared into the coach, which shortly after was headed back toward to the plantation.

“We’re glad to have you,” Bycroft said.

“Thank you, uncle,” Tieran said. “I’m looking forward to seeing the city.”

Bycroft smiled to himself. “Aren’t we all.” Bycroft donned his hat. “Let’s get to it, then.”

\* \* \*

Travel by canal was a practiced, reliable process. Canals were the favored venues of travel in the civilized hubs of the Final Empire because they were

orderly bottlenecks, easy to monitor, easy to regulate, and virtually impossible to sneak onto or away from. You couldn't just take a canal barge off the watery path or circumvent a checkpoint in a canal-bound skiff. Canals made it easy for the Obligators of the Steel Ministry to know where people were coming from, where they were headed, and — more importantly — to find them along the way.

Tieran expected the journey of the Bylerums along the canal, bound for the capital, to be only as interesting as the conversations he could strike up with the colorful skaa who worked the route. Then he saw the fires burning up ahead.

The skaa skiff pilot went to Bycroft while his crewmen unhooked the craft from the starboard horses and steered it towards the eastern bank. Beyond the timber-reinforced edge of the canal, a pair of bonfires burned bright yellow in the fading afternoon light. Between the bonfires and the canal bank, a row of standing soldiers in breastplates and helmets guarded a row of kneeling skaa with bowed heads.

Ashes blew off the fires and mingled with the thin ash that fell from the sky. Tieran watched, as they drew closer, and noticed the bonfire ashes were wide and flat and black with glowing orange edges — the remains of burning papers.

Cordal and Carrow joined their father and the pilot at the front of the skiff. They conferred in whispers. Tieran didn't know if, as a Bylerum, he should join them or, as a cousin and nephew, he should leave them be. *No better time to start doing father's work, I suppose*, he thought to himself and approached.

"We weren't expecting another checkpoint until we approached Luthadel," Carrow said curiously.

"As I say, this is not on our map. But Obligators are free to set up checkpoints wherever they please. I apologize for the delay, but it's up to the Obligators how long we are stuck here."

Bycroft scrunched up his face but nodded. "Nothing we can do, then, but make this as quick as possible. You, I assume, have nothing to hide?" he asked the pilot.

"My crew are good, loyal sorts, my lord."

"And you know how best to please an inspecting Obligator?"

The pilot looked at Cordal and Carrow, then back to Bycroft. "Swift and honest cooperation has always served to—"

"Very well, then." Bycroft turned back to his nephew and sons. "Let me speak with the Obligator. I'll get us moving again."

Within a few minutes, Bycroft was back on land, talking with an Obligator of some middling rank, his tattoos radiating from his eyes like depictions of jagged sunrays. The Obligator waved toward the skiff and Bycroft gestured as if to welcome him aboard... then touched the Obligator on the arm and whispered something in his ear. The Obligator looked him in the eye and nodded.

Tieran stood with Cordal, Carrow, and Amye near the center of the skiff, where their belongings were stacked up and lashed down. Carrow sat atop the largest crate, containing a treasured portrait of Grandfather Bylerum and some furniture.

"Father's letting the Obligator know that we have items on board he'd rather



the skaa not see.” Carrow was burning Tin, no doubt, sharpening his senses. He could hear the Obligator and his father easily enough from there.

Cordal chuckled. “Telling him outright, is he?”

“I think he just wants to be out of here,” Amyse said.

Carrow shrugged. “It sounds like they’re interested in searching the skaa, not us.”

“The skaa?” asked Tieran.

Carrow nodded. “Something about smuggling and sedition against the Ministry and the Lord Ruler.”

Tieran’s eyes went wide and he snapped his attention back to Bycroft and the robed Obligator. Tieran positioned himself to be close when the Obligator boarded the skiff. He came aboard with a trio of serious-looking soldiers in dark clothes and bright bits of armor.

“Everyone cooperate,” Bycroft said loudly to Bylerum and skaa alike. “*We* have nothing to hide.”

Tieran leaned in toward his uncle. “What are they looking for?”

Bycroft held up a finger to quiet him but the Obligator, perhaps a Tineye himself, had heard Tieran’s question. He stepped over to Tieran and looked him in the eyes. The Obligator’s eyes were dark and shiny there at the edge of the bonfire’s light. “We are looking for skaa carrying seditious tracts, like this one,” he said holding up a folded sheaf of pages, bound with string. Tieran spotted, in the tract’s heavy type, the names of metals like Copper printed in bold face.

Tieran looked confused but understood what he was seeing: the tract was meant to educate the skaa about Allomancy.

“Have you seen any of these skaa reading? Hiding papers? Conspiring?”

Tieran shook his head. “These skaa read?”

The Obligator made a displeased sound and turned to Bycroft. “We’ll have you on your way shortly, Lord Bylerum,” he said, then spun around to address the rest of the skiff. “All skaa, line up!”

The skaa crew members lined up with a speed borne of practice.

The Obligator stepped up to the skaa nearest the front of the skiff. “Search,” he said. A soldier stepped up to search the skaa crewman, pulling up his shirt, pulling down his trousers, and sticking gloved fingers into the skaa’s mouth.

The Obligator continued on. “Search,” he said, indicating the third skaa. “Search,” indicating the fourth. “Search, search, search,” selecting three more out of the final stretch of line-up crew. Each skaa reacted with practiced pliancy and half-buried humiliation. Common farm-skaa or miners might not have shown their frustration, but these canal skaa weren’t shy about wiping off their tongues or rushing to straighten their clothes after their searches.

The Obligator stepped up to Tieran and his cousins, back near their belongings. “Keep your eyes out on your journey. If you see any skaa passing papers around, speak up. Tell an Obligator,” he said.

Amyse and Tieran nodded. Cordal and Carrow nodded with their usual detachment.

The Obligator once again pulled Bycroft aside, just before departing.

“He says the tracts are probably being printed in Austrex and Luthadel,” Carrow reported, eavesdropping with Tin. “We should beware rebellion fantasies in any skaa we buy in the city,” he said, but Tieran wasn’t sure if it was Carrow’s own idea or a comment made by the Obligator.

Soon the Obligator had disembarked and the skiff crew were tossing lines back to the horses on the far shore, where soldiers had searched the horse-guiding skaa just moments before. Bycroft came back to the center of the skiff and leaned on his dueling cane. “They’re burning those tracts by the box-load,” he said. “And good thing, too. These canal skaa,” he whispered, “they get ideas. They imagine they have more freedom than they do and then harbor notions of secrecy and revolt. I doubt they’d ever act on such things, and indeed many of the poor things didn’t even know what they were carrying,” he waved out at the row of kneeling, doomed skaa as the skiff started moving again. “They have lives too good to throw away on hopes of banditry and starvation in the wild. But their kin in the cities — those we’d best beware of. The ones that read pass along ideas to one another and tell stories.”

Tieran looked over his shoulder as he heard the unmistakable sound of a sword being drawn from its sheath. The commander of the guards on the shore raised his blade and cut down one of the kneeling skaa, then turned to the Obligator with a question on his face. The Obligator waved his hand to hurry things along. Another stroke, another skaa fell.

“We have to be careful about the skaa we choose to bring into our house in Luthadel,” said Bycroft. Tieran looked back in his uncle’s direction but his focus dwindled. “We don’t want to seem like we can’t control big-city skaa. We don’t want such petty hiccups getting in our way, do we?”

Bycroft’s children agreed. As their conversation turned towards the kind of skaa they *would* have in the house — maids and valets, footmen and cooks — Tieran looked back towards the bonfires... and made eye contact with one of the skaa crewmen working the guide-poles. Backlit by the bonfire, so late in the day, Tieran couldn’t make out much of his face, but he saw his wet eyes pick up a bit of light from one of the skiff’s lanterns. Tieran couldn’t remember if he was one of the crewmen who’d been searched or not.

\* \* \*

Luthadel, the capital of the Final Empire, home of the Lord Ruler himself, speared the sky with pointed towers and dark spires.

Palatial keeps rose above the cobblestones, their shadows darkening the teeming streets below. Coaches and pedestrians kicked up a fog of ash, but the noble towers craned above it, their colorful banners streaked with ashfall and fluttering like sails from a mast. Each keep stood with dirty feet and cleaner peaks against a backdrop of smoking chimneys and angled towers capped with metal spars. And all of it seemed to shrink in comparison to the countless jagged peaks of the great and terrible mountainous castle of Kredik Shaw, home and throne of the Lord Ruler.

Tieran found himself baffled by the city in a way he hadn't expected. Turning his eyes to the place where the city met the sky, he was amazed to think that he was taking in the same skyline that the Lord Ruler himself saw every day. He thought of the lords of the Great Houses of Luthadel, whose vision of a city fit for the master of the Final Empire was now Tieran's home, living at the feet of Kredik Shaw — dancing and parleying and living their lives amid the reverberations of power. He looked at the dizzying spires and he wondered if people here ever thought about the citizens and skaa outside the city, ever thought about where their food and metals came from, ever thought about all those souls within the Lord Ruler's vast and utter demesne who dwelled outside the gem at the heart of the Final Empire. How many nobles of Luthadel had never laid eyes on their lands beyond? How many lives, be they skaa or noble, were lived entirely, beginning to end, within the great city?

Yet, at the same time, Tieran saw that the streets were dirty with drifts of ash and, as he'd seen entering the city, heaps of trash and squads of rats and homeless, duty-less skaa roaming the edges of civilization even within the walls of the capital. The cobbles in the streets, even the fine streets, were just cobbles. The buildings were built of stone and mortar and wood and glass, as they were in Austrex. People seemed happily paired, miserably alone, and coldly distant in equal measure. The smells of the city were the smells of any city, of ash and dung and unwashed bodies and burning wood or oil, of spices from the distant South Islands and pungent cactus oils from the Eastern Dominance, of rotting food and cooking meat, of stink and perfumes.

Luthadel was an earthly city, it turned out. Tieran had known it, of course, but Bycroft's promises and visions of the future had stoked Tieran's imagination until it burned so hot that the inevitable cooling that occurred on contact with reality caused cracking in its façade. Tieran looked out from the skiff, then out from coach windows, then out from his own private balcony at a city that was marvelous... but not miraculous.

The capital had become real and tangible and in so doing had traded luster for edge. It was both easier to fathom and more frightening, for Burgh's warnings solidified in the sweaty faces of strangers and the glimpses of richly tattooed, high-ranking Obligators in the streets. At night, the city was the playground of noble Mistborn, roaming and battling for the fates of houses great and small. The knives were real here and every way Tieran turned, he felt exposed to the city behind him. His father had, if anything, understated the danger Tieran felt.

He was here to play the game now and he had to wage himself against the capital players, the best in the Final Empire, for stakes of blood and the right to his own name.

Tieran spent days in a daze, learning the disordered streets around the House Bylerum keep. Purchased by Lord Bycroft and still being staffed with skaa, the house was smaller in its footprint but twice the size of the plantation manor, overall, when all the floors were counted in. Rooms, still undecorated, echoed as Tieran walked through them. Amyse and her brothers laughed in the modest ballroom and the sound carried throughout the floor. Skaa stocking the larder and the

kitchen could be heard throughout the ground-floor corridors. Bycroft, still short a proper valet and not having bothered to learn a single name, hollered simply, “Skaa!” when he needed hands to move a crate or fetch him wine.

When the safe brought up from the plantation clanged in the upstairs great room, the sound carried throughout the family quarters. Tieran arrived with Cordal and Carrow to find Bycroft in the spacious, arched room, considering the opened metal cube with a curious expression on his face. Amyse sat on the safe, looking bored.

“Father?” asked Carrow.

“Hmm? Ah, good. I need your help, boys.”

All three stepped up, but Cordal waved Tieran back. “This’ll take Pewter,” he said.

“No, no,” Bycroft said. “We won’t be needing the safe anymore. We’ll be counting on secrecy over sturdiness. A metal safe would give itself away to a Mistborn from another house,” he whispered. “And they are exactly who I expect would come looking for this. Are the skaa far?”

“They’re all preparing the dining room,” said Tieran.

“Good, then. Boys, pull the clay case out of the safe and put it in the wall, there, where the safe would go.” Bycroft indicated a cubic recess in the wall at about head height, where a thin slate slab had been removed. When the slab was in place, the stone blended into the wall’s decorative work, disguising the recess.

Cordal and Carrow hefted the sun-baked earthenware box into the recess and dusted their hands clean. Bycroft centered the clay box, patted it twice, and set the slate cover back in place.

“That’s it?” asked Cordal. “That’s all the protection we’re giving it?”

Tieran looked from man to man but they seemed to ignore him.

“Not quite,” said Bycroft. Then he stepped toward the corridor and yelled out, “Skaa!”

Tieran finally spoke up. “Can I ask, before the skaa get here—?”

“What’s in the box?” replied Carrow, smiling.

“Yes.”

Bycroft brought Tieran in close to him. “I won’t tell you all, but I’ll tell you this: it is a family treasure from Grandfather’s time. Not jewels or metals, exactly, but precious. Invaluable. A family secret.”

“Secret?” asked Tieran.

“I’ll tell you what it is,” Bycroft said. “One day. But for now, it is safer if we do not talk about it. Understood?” Tieran nodded. “Very good, then. Go and fetch us some skaa with steady hands, will you? I want to hang your grandfather’s portrait.”

Tieran left to bring some skaa and the portrait up from downstairs, but as he left the room he heard Bycroft gather his children together. Tieran lingered, but couldn’t make out what they whispered to each other. Seldom before had he wished so badly for the ability to burn Tin.

\* \* \*

Tieran returned with a trio of skaa and the large, framed portrait of Grandfather Bylerum in their hands. Bycroft quickly took over, guiding the skaa to affix hooks in the mortar and hang the portrait to cover the hidden recess. Cordal and Carrow and Amyse watched as the portrait went up.

In his portrait, Grandfather Bylerum was crisp and poised and proud in noble finery. His face seemed thoughtful to Tieran. Notably, Tieran thought, Grandfather was not painted with hands red from clay or a gemstone pinched between his fingers or the plantation spread out behind him.

Thinking about it, Tieran decided that the portrait wasn't meant to capture the man but to project him to other nobles, to act as a counterbalance to the man Grandfather had been, toiling in the remote fields and overseeing the dark mines. It was meant to make him seem more noble, to qualify him, to document his stature and status. That it didn't exactly resemble the man he was remembered as being was precisely the point.

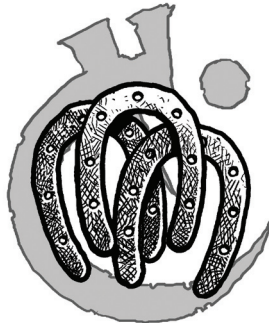
Tieran glanced sideways at his cousins and uncle, all of whom were taking in the portrait as well. He imagined they were picturing their own portraits, their own refined personas, the nobles they would invent and project for the people of Luthadel.

As they did that, Tieran burned a bit of Gold to look upon himself as viewed through Allomancy. Alongside his cousins, Tieran beheld a vision of himself in high boots and a work vest, smeared with ruddy mud — the farmer lord that Tieran had left behind in the Southern Dominance — looking up at Grandfather's portrait, like his cousins. They stood in a row, his family and his specter, looking at their pasts and dreaming of their futures.

*If I'm ever worthy of a fine portrait, Tieran wondered, should I have them paint me as I was or as I wished I'd been? Will they paint me or my specter?*

That was the first time the idea crossed Tieran's mind: What if Grandfather Bylerum had them paint a picture of the man he wished he'd been — the urbane nobleman, not the noble farmer — because he'd been just as uncertain of his choices as Tieran was? Maybe Tieran had the chance to be the man his beloved Grandfather had wished to be. Maybe Grandfather Bylerum's shadow was well tended by Tieran's father and it was Tieran's duty to do not only what his father wanted...but what his father couldn't do himself — like come to Luthadel.

Tieran looked back at his muddy vision and the vision looked back at him.



# 3

## MISTBORN BY NIGHT



They said many things about Lady Chanim Haught — especially when they thought she was out of earshot.

Tonight, as she strode with all the grace and poise of a hunting cat past the elegant dance floor and toward a card table in the corner of House Urbain's luxurious great hall, people stopped talking about her and just watched her move. She had more music in her movement than she had metal, and when she entered a room, she commanded attention without needing to burn Zinc or Brass.

Her attentions were squarely on Turner Urbain, lord of House Urbain and a deplorable wretch in finery, who was seated at the card table ahead. She made no effort to appear congenial. Instead, she let her disgust be plain to any and all who saw her.

Lady Chanim Haught was daring — it was one of the things they said about her.

"Lady Chanim," Lord Urbain said, indicating the young noble seated across from him by way of introduction, "this is Bycroft Bylerum. He comes from some little cottage further South." Urbain smiled and pretended to be embarrassed. "I'm sorry, I meant house. You know, when it's that small, sometimes I can't tell the difference between a house and a vacation home." Many of the assembled gentry laughed, including Lord Bylerum, trying to take his cues from the rest of the capital-city nobility.

It was clear to Lady Haught that Lord Bylerum was in over his head, but he would not be the spectacle tonight.

"You son of a dog and a trollop," Lady Haught seethed, and then slapped Urbain across the face — with the back of her hand.



Gasps rolled out across the room. Urbain rose slowly, moving to his full, considerable height. He was as tall as he was heavy, and took up a great deal of space when he wanted to. A shorter man would have been fat. Turner Urbain wasn't fat. He was *gigantic*. Two-dozen farmland skaa couldn't eat the way Urbain could, not even at their hungriest.

Urbain smiled very slowly down at Lady Haught. From the corner of her eye, Haught noted as Bycroft Bylerum backed up in the seat he'd been given across from Urbain. They'd been in negotiations over cards. She'd interrupted. That was all part of the plan.

"I see that the Lady has gotten my letter. And just in time, too; I was afraid you'd miss out on the event."

She sneered, eyes bright and blue and burning like the hottest part of a candle flame. "You barely gave me enough time to change, you pig. Could you imagine if I'd shown up wearing blue — the same color as your wife — as I had planned? I had to have a new dress taken in at the waist in mere hours. *Surely* you could have given me a little more warning that the Lady Urbain was going to wear blue tonight." Haught nodded across the hall to where Lady Urbain sat stiffly, looking shocked.

"I could have, but then you wouldn't have slapped me. A treat, to be sure. Next time, I'll make you slap me in private." Urbain grinned and sat down, motioning for Haught to do likewise.

She did.

Slowly, the assembled nobles began to understand the situation and the heavy silence broke into polite conversation, mumbled gossip, and a few final snickers.

The message Urbain had sent the Lady Haught read simply: *Terribly dull party happening in a few hours. Come cause a scene? My wife is wearing blue. She looks fat in blue.*

She had sent back the message: *You look fat in everything. I'll be there. I will be considering this a favor as a part of negotiations in regards to Allouette.*

He had not sent a message back. Which meant he agreed to her terms.

Urbain had named the game, set the pieces, and arranged for the opening move. But if he expected Chananim Haught to sit idly by and be a piece on the board, well... that was unlikely. She began by turning her attention to the noble from the South, who was sweating lightly into the collar of his shirt. The curls of her long blonde hair danced over her shoulder and tumbled across her chest as she leaned forward, the daring line of her bodice, at least for now, covered nicely by those curls. Hair as light as hers was highly prized, though currently she'd had her girls die streaks of it bright red with berry juices. It wasn't fashionable yet, but it would be after tonight. She noted a few of the other ladies contemplating her hair already.

Lord Bylerum looked anxious as she focused in on him.

"And since I've never heard of House Bylerum, why don't you tell me what wonderful talent you are bringing to the greatest city in the Final Empire? Tell me you are tailors. I'm always looking for something new to wear. Nothing blue, of course. It suits Lady Urbain much better."

"They mine and mix metals, Lady Haught." Urbain said, shuffling cards and scowling as she absorbed just a bit too much attention. Anyway, Bycroft Bylerum had relaxed with her question, and nodded eagerly.

"I have some of the finest metallurgists, Lady. I tell you, it's nearly magical, our connection to metal." He then reconsidered his words and choked. "I mean, not to say in any peculiar manner. No more potent a connection than any respectable house, I'm sure. I just mean that we're really very good."

Urbain smirked and sat forward in his chair, pushing a vial across the fabric-topped table. The glass of it was etched with a stylized B, a lovely bit of blown glass that caught the light and made the metal sediments inside glisten for a moment. "Perhaps you could have a sample, Lady Haught, and give us an idea of the quality."

She considered the bottle, as well as Urbain's offer. "That would be silly," she said coolly. "That would make me someone with a penchant for eating rocks. Surely you don't presume that I am a Mistborn." Somewhere, near the back of the ballroom, boxings exchanged hands; bets placed on if she'd be outed there on the spot.

"Surely not," Urbain said. "Which leaves us with goods we cannot test and a new potential ally we cannot be sure about." He looked to Lord Bylerum.

A bead of sweat ran down Bylerum's neck.

"Now, that's just cruel," Lady Haught said, turning to say conversationally to Bylerum, "Lord Urbain is known for his cruelty. Really, you should be glad of it. It means he doesn't think you're boring if he's willing to torture you a bit. Ask his second wife about it. She won't be able to answer, of course, Lord Ruler keep her soul, but you can ask anyway."

"Power requires a firm hand, Lady. Something your parents should have considered," Urbain sneered. "A few more beatings might have assured that little Chanin grew up to be a woman of the utmost peak of the social order."

"My father never once laid a hand on me." She said, snatching up the bottle, lifting it to the light, and shaking the flakes soaking in the alcohol inside. "He didn't have to." She turned back to Lord Bylerum. "So, you were going to do business with House Urbain, then? Shooting straight for the middle? Either decidedly rash or brave." She considered the sweaty man. Brave seemed unlikely.

"Was I overstepping? I was told Urbain had need of metals as well as a good market share. I thought that since I was bringing metals into the city, it would be best to work with a House entrenched there. Was I wrong? I hope I haven't offended you, Lord Urbain," Lord Bylerum swallowed. "Or you, Lady Haught. Should I have gone to you first? I'm afraid I'm not sure what House Haught does."

"I'm afraid most of us aren't."

"Other than the Lord Ruler, I'm sure you meant to say," offered Urbain.

She waved him off, then set the bottle down and slid it toward Bylerum. "The truth of the matter is that between business arrangements, politics, and the occasional marriage, none of the Great Houses have a full hold on any one industry. It really depends on the sort of contracts you need, doesn't it?" She smiled slowly, and Urbain huffed. "Don't you think, Obligator Retner?"

To her left, a young bald man in grey robes shifted his weight, drew in a thoughtful breath, and nodded as he took a seat at the table. Over his eyes, he wore the delicate tattooing of an upper middling Obligator in rank and position. He glanced from Haught to Urbain and back before answering the question. “Strictly speaking, most of the Great Houses have fields where they excel, but no, there’s no one house with a full grip on the market. I do not think that was ever the Lord Ruler’s intention. After all, he does so appreciate all the houses.”

“Of course, the Ministry knows best,” Urbain muttered, then leaned forward in his seat, holding up one hand, as if to weigh the Obligator’s words. “Of course, one must be careful in these matters. After all, a misplaced contract, or a social snub at the wrong place and time might well leave a lasting impression. The house you may be passing up may end up being the only one worth dealing with at the end of the day. I may be cruel to my friends; could you imagine how cruel a powerful head-of-house might be to his enemies?” He held up his other hand, the counter weight, the power of an angry house, and tipped the imaginary scale in the direction of this second hand.

Lady Haught moved, snatching up the vial and standing it under Urbain’s second hand, stopping it from hitting the table. “Of course, good product and smart contracts ease a lot of ruffled brows, don’t they?”

Urbain snatched his hand away from the table, forcing her to grab for the vial before it tipped to the side and hit the ground. Boxings changed hands again.

The Obligator cleared his throat. “What exactly is it that you are in need of, Lord Bylerum? What sort of contracts are you hoping to sign while you’re in Luthadel?”

Lady Haught sighed and sat back, perhaps sulking. Urbain better disguised his frustration as the man voiced reason over their game. Only barely.

“Well, that is, I have a number of men I need to move into the city, establish their shops, and then of course I’d have to deal with regular shipments of raw metals into town. It really is rather a lot to do.” Bylerum cleared his throat. “But my family is eager, excited even, to make this move. I really believe we could be an incredible asset to the Great Houses, even though we are currently so humble.”

*Broke seemed more like it*, Lady Haught thought to herself. “If you need to move men and goods, then you might consider my own house,” she suggested. “We have long had a good, strong presence along the canals. While some other houses deal with the physical transports, it is house Haught that currently controls many of the canal locks and security once you enter the outskirts of Luthadel.”

“Better to be robbed by professionals than highway men, that’s how the saying goes, isn’t it, Lady?” Urbain smiled to himself.

She smiled slowly. “Setting up shop in the markets of Luthadel is much easier when you rent for House Urbain. It is not impossible to rent from other houses, or if you have the money, buy for yourself. Nevertheless, of the Great Houses, Urbain certainly does know how to be firm. That might even be a good thing,” she beamed, looking sideways to Urbain who waved the thought away.

“She’s lovely, our Lady Haught? All smiles and confidence. She’ll eat you alive, and don’t you forget it.” Urbain stood. “If you’ll excuse me, I see a few

men I need to speak to. If you are looking to rent from House Urbain, you might want to settle that matter before you make any other local arrangements. It'd be a shame to import your men and goods and have nowhere to put them, wouldn't it?"

Bylerum swallowed and nodded as Urbain walked off. He slowly looked to Lady Haught. "I thought I would have to beg to even be considered for contracts with the Great Houses. It nearly felt as if you were fighting over me." When he confessed this, she laughed hard.

"Oh, dear." She shook her head, standing herself. "If you hadn't been around, we would have fought over the dessert plate. You are possibly less important in the grand scheme to him than what follows the main course. Believe me, there's still a great deal of begging in your future." She pushed the gather of her skirt to the side, the vibrant red fabric rustling as she took a half step from the table. "Really, it's just a question of who you would rather be on your knees in front of."

His jaw fell open, and she left him stammering as she headed for the exit. As she went, she passed Lady Urbain. "I think you look lovely in blue, Lady Urbain. I don't know why anyone would think it makes you look fat." Haught sent a look over her shoulder in Lord Urbain's direction, and headed off to a garden to leave without making formal goodbyes in the most respectable way she knew how — by vanishing.

\* \* \*

If one wanted to cavort and caper around rooftops in the dead of night after or even during an important social event, one had to have a very good tailor. Modular dress was about as useful to Lady Haught as any obsidian blade.

Among a few other tricks, that night's particular gown was fitted with a cord on the bodice that, when tugged, would unhook it in no time flat so that she could just about hop out of it in one motion. Additionally, it was double sided, and when turned inside out, the bodice's fabric was all dark shades of gray, meant to blend with the mists, though not quite as well as a proper mistcloak. Beneath the gown, she wore short pants that fit tight along her healthy thighs and stopped at the knee. Her shoes hid soft but sturdy slippers, and the shoes, like most of her jewelry, could be quickly removed and hidden in pockets in the gown. It made a rather neat package and camouflaged nicely. The only thing she removed from the gown was her mistcloak, which was normally affixed inside the skirt. This she whipped on as she considered her surroundings.

Mist curled and pooled through the shade trees and drowned the shrubs, the weeds, and anything less than waist height. Like many of the noble homes, there were ash-shades to keep as much of the stuff from covering up the garden, but they did nothing to keep the mists out. That suited Lady Haught just fine. She set a few coins down along the walkway, and with her inside-out gown in hand, Steelpushed herself up and away from those coins, so that she landed neatly on top of an ash-shade.

Urbain's roofs were sturdy. Urbain had a few Mistborn in his family and they traveled the rooftops, too.

Lady Haught knelt, then, and hung her gown in one of the taller trees. Wherever else she went, she'd have to double back for it before dawn. Explaining why your clothing was found in another Great House's garden after a party was always tricky. Not impossible — that was how she ended up married the first time — but certainly tricky. So, she'd try to avoid it tonight.

Lord Bylerum wouldn't have the good sense to rush back to his rented room, pack his things, and flee, Lady Haught figured, and so she lowered her weight and rushed along the ash-shades, hopping from slat to slat, all the while Allomantically anchored to the wrought iron spire at the top of that particular building. She didn't quite Pull or Push off that metal spire just yet, but if she lost footing it was almost always better to go up than down.

She kept an eye on to the glowing blue connection running from her body to the metal of the spire until she got just over the ballroom and then let it go in search of other means of entry. A balcony with an open window presented that opportunity, and so she dropped lightly down to it...

...and startled one of skaa serving girls.

"Lady—" she gasped and Haught put a hand over her mouth before she could say the name aloud.

"Hush, child. Relax yourself. You've seen nothing but the mist, am I right?"

The girl nodded and swallowed down hard.

"There, now. Aren't you a pretty thing. Here," Haught held out a hand, and a few coins obeyed her wish, flicking quickly from her purse and landing in her palm with a light slap. She turned the coins over to the girl. "Don't be caught with these. Keep all the balcony windows open. Stay my friend, will you, pretty little thing? I'll take better care of you than that fat pig ever would. What do you think?"

The girl looked at a coin, and lowered her head. "It isn't wise for skaa to make friends in the mist."

Lady Haught grinned. "No, it isn't, clever girl, but it isn't wise for them to upset the mists either, now is it?"

The girl gave this some consideration, and then plucked the coin from Haught's cleaner, lovelier hand.

"There's my clever girl. Now, go and open the other balconies, maybe have some wine set out there. Bait a line or two for your friend in the mist, won't you?" Of course, she soothed the girl with coin as much as by burning Brass. A Mistborn who relied on their powers alone was a Mistborn limiting themselves and their potential. The girl nodded finally and reentered the ballroom.

In these sorts of parties, the skaa servants moved about almost invisibly. There wasn't anything particularly supernatural about it. It was simply that the nobility had been raised for generations to see them as nonentities. They were all but forgotten unless they had a reason to interact. As it happened, in this Great House, there was no reason; the skaa house slaves formed a perfectly functioning machine. Lady Haught had observed them over weeks of parties, determining how hard it would be to utilize them.

Now, she saw the fruit of that study blossom.

The girl she had bought and soothed moved quickly from balcony to balcony. A noble in fine dress that she passed sighed, pronouncing, “What a lovely night. Isn’t it?” As if it was some happy happenstance that let the warm night air in and not a person simply opening the doors. Of course, a bit of mist crept in just at the threshold, but the nobility wasn’t so paranoid as country skaa. They knew what monsters lurked out there.

*What monsters worse than those who lived in the house already, anyway.*

From there, the girl went off and spoke to the other skaa so hushed and cautious that even Haught’s Tin-enhanced ears couldn’t tell her what they said. Soon, though, fine wine had been brought out, carried through the crowd just like bait, as if Lord Urbain had ordered his wealth be put on parade though the party. Skaa brought open and well-displayed bottles to each of the balconies. In that time, Haught pulled herself back up to one of the roofs and waited to see who was worth listening to.

She was rewarded quickly when she spotted Urbain himself slipping out onto a balcony with Bycroft Bylerum. Urbain sat but Bylerum did not — nor did he get an invitation to do so.

“I’m not sure what that witch has told you, but be certain, there is nothing House Haught can do for you. Certainly, they tend to throw a good party or two, but they have no real power in this city,” Urbain said, his words caught and amplified by her Tin-aided ears.

Lady Haught snorted, then raised a coppercloud around herself before very carefully making her way above that balcony. When she was younger, she might have just hopped over there, but now she was more careful, more patient. Age traded raw physical talent for skill. Now, she’d take skill any day.

“I didn’t get the impression you would give my contract the time of day, Lord Urbain,” said Lord Bylerum. “I know that you are a very busy man. I consider it the highest honor that you are even talking to me.”

Urbain snorted and filled a glass for himself. “Do you know how much this bottle of wine is worth, Bylerum? More than the total assets of your floundering keep in total, I’d bet. I had your finances looked in to after you contacted me. You are, as they say, up the river, aren’t you?”

Bylerum choked and tugged at his collar as if Urbain had a hand on his throat. In a manner of speaking, he did. “No. Not, well, we have some other potential contracts. We aren’t completely out of options. My family motto has long been ‘In adversity, seek opportunity,’ after all. While the books might suggest we’re a struggling house, that speaks nothing for our spirit or our talent!” His confidence faltered though, and he didn’t quite believe his own sales pitch.

Urbain had been bluffing. Haught could smell it from her perch just as easily as she could smell the heady wine in Urbain’s glass. There wasn’t any way he could be totally sure of Bylerum’s situation. Not until Bylerum laid it out that way.

*Poor fool.*

“And believe me, Bycroft, your potential talent is the only reason I’m even considering this conversation. I have a mild need to seek additional sources for metals. Discreet ones. You are going to supply me with the metal I need at a deep



discount. You are going to keep the amount you provide to me off your books, however you have to do that. In exchange, I am going to make a formal contract with you to rent property for sales in the city. I will also do you the honor of being your client and buying metals from your little mine.” Urbain drank a gulp of wine. “Make no mistake: though I do so enjoy helping people in need, you are backed into a corner here, Lord Bylerum. But I *am* House Urbain, so really, what other choice do you have?”

Bylerum took it all in, looking dizzy. “I... yes, Lord Urbain. Of course. What other choice do I have?”

“Oh, and one other thing...”

Haught swallowed, she knew Urbain well enough to know that whatever followed as an afterthought like that was going to be devastating.

“I’m told your daughter is quite a beautiful thing. Charming even. She’ll come and stay at my home, as my guest for, say, a month.”

“By the Lord Ruler!” Bylerum gasped

“Don’t blaspheme like that, son, it makes you seem provincial,” Urbain said, taking another sip of wine.

“Lord Urbain, I really don’t know what to say...”

“This isn’t such an unusual arrangement. She’ll be in my safe keeping as a kind of—”

“Honor hostage?” Bylerum asked.

Urbain smiled. “Quite, yes. An honor hostage. The Obligators have boiler-plate contracts for these arrangements.”

“Is this meant to lead up to some kind of marriage between our houses?”

Urbain’s smile faded. “One thing at a time,” he said. “Now, do we have an understanding, or am I going to have to shame what is left of your little house just for the fun of it?”

Bycroft swallowed and lowered his head. “We... have an understanding.”

“Wonderful, I will have an Obligator called at once to work out the details of the contract. I trust you understand this conversation remains between the two of us.”

Well, the three of them, at least so long as Haught decided to keep the back room arrangement to herself. Which wouldn’t likely be long.

\* \* \*

An hour later, and perhaps two good hours before Bylerum would be able to escape Urbain’s party, Lady Haught sat in her receiving room looking at the ceiling and considering the scrollwork along the crown molding. She had not changed back into her neatly retrieved party gown, but instead wore something more somber for the event.

A girl, about her daughter’s age, knelt on the ground in front of Haught, weeping into the woman’s patterned skirt.

The girl, Amyse, a daughter of Lord Bycroft Bylerum, had been summoned to House Haught just as soon as Lady Haught could get the message out. The

woman came with an assortment of glass vials as a gift. Lady Haught dismissed them for now. First, she had to explain the situation, as best she understood it. More importantly, the young Lady Bylerum needed to know how she'd been used in the negotiations.

Lady Haught told herself this was strictly political.

Holding the young woman, stroking her back and telling her, it would be “all right” didn't seem very political.

“I'll have an Obligator I know well go over your father's contracts, my dear. Urbain may not want to explain to an Obligator why he's taking you into his house if he's not interested in marrying into House Bylerum. We'll figure something out. Your fate is, after all, your own. And I have a daughter your age. I'm afraid she's not nearly as lovely or sweet. You'll be alright.”

“But if we don't follow Urbain's wishes, won't he destroy us out of spite?”

“Maybe your father, but Turner Urbain hasn't a good reason to go after you. You're young. You can afford to weather a scandal or three.”

The girl dissolved into tears again. Haught sighed and let her indulge for now. Later — soon — she would see to more direct recompense.



# LUTH





# ADEL





## 4

# AN OBLIGATOR'S DUTY



Any time a noble house held a party, salon, wedding, funeral, shower, or other open affair, the Canton of Finance delegated at least one Obligator to scout out, oversee, and certify any potential business dealings. The Lord Ruler's armies and Empire didn't pay for themselves. If the houses were left to their own devices and allowed to be accountable on an honor system, accounts would be doctored, taxes would be shirked, and Luthadel would fall into disrepair. It was the duty of the Lord Ruler's loyal Obligators to not only be his eyes and hands in such matters, but to project the mystery, majesty, and fear inherent in his very name. Obligators bore elaborate facial tattoos around their own eyes, to remind all that they — and the Lord Ruler — were watching. The higher the rank of the Obligator, the more substantial his markings.

House Urbain was throwing a party for their various neighbors and rivals — an excuse to talk shop, strut, dance, and negotiate business and political arrangements while showing off their wealth and courtesy. It was a glamorous pretense. House Urbain smiled, spent a fortune on food, and dressed its ambitions in the guise of polite business. In exchange, guests pretended not to know, for the night, that House Urbain was ranked next to last among the Great Houses of Luthadel.

Obligator Retner had better ways to spend his evenings than listening to the nobility talk about maintaining their positions of power and furthering their goals. He was here to collect coin and certify transactions on behalf of the Final Empire, and he would do his duty, but his heart had never been sparked by the friction between houses, great or small. He would do his duty for the Canton of Finance but not so well that he would be entrenched in his position — he sought transit to another Canton, not promotion in this one. His tattoos were arcs of dark ink,

ringlets the size of curved fingers, substantial enough to make his wide eyes stand out against them but meager enough to mark him as an Obligator of middle rank.

Obligator Ravis made eye contact from across the crowd in House Urbain's great hall. Ravis's tattoos depicted only modest hooks descending from his eyes — a lower rank for a younger Obligator. He was dedicated to the Canton of Finance with his heart and his head, but had not yet proven himself to the Steel Ministry, the bureaucratic hierarchy that encompassed all the Cantons in the Final Empire. Ravis delighted in the work of Finance; Retner suspected it was because Ravis liked to get his nose into noble secrets.

Retner would be glad to give his seat to Ravis one day, perhaps one day soon, but only if Retner could find a seat that would get him closer to the curious beasts that served the Lord Ruler — beasts like the mad hulks, the koloss, or the mysterious and marvelous kandra that Retner was supposed to pretend he knew little about. Retner had once made the mistake of giving voice to thought at a House Urbain party and now Lord Urbain knew of Retner's interest in the shape-changing kandra that worked for the noble houses of the Final Empire. Thus Retner was invited, time after time, to work at House Urbain parties so that Lord Urbain would have Retner within reach. It was always valuable to know what an Obligator wanted personally, not just professionally, and Lord Urbain was not so subtle a schemer. Sometime soon, Lord Urbain would use what he knew of Retner the man to squeeze Retner the Obligator. Retner counted on it.

For now, though, Obligator Retner turned his attentions back to the evening at hand... in hopes of finding some escape from the party.

"I hear Lord Bylerum is looking to sell metals from their mine in the Southern Dominance," gossiped one young nobleman to another. Each wore twinkling pendants and precisely fitted coats. "If you're quick, you might be able to get in with him. But I think Urbain might beat you to it. He's been buttering up the lord of their house. Bylerum's family should see right through the ruse. Of course, if they could maybe they wouldn't be in the rut they are today," laughed the nobleman.

Obligator Retner passed by, noting the conversation.

*Haven't I already heard enough from Bylerum, Urbain, and Haught for one evening?* Retner asked himself. Just outside the city, exotic beasts for sale and demonstration were being prepared. *That* was where Retner wanted to be. *Every single sale requires a full inspection. I've heard they'll have a matured koloss for auction. I could be there. But instead, I'm listening to these effete fools goad one another's egos with so much perfume in the air that I may choke on it.*

The Obligator sulked but trudged on through the manor, toward where he last saw Lord Bylerum. Urbain had gotten to him already, and they descended from an upper gallery together. "Have you tried the figs?" asked Urbain. "They may be the only worthwhile thing to come out of the Southern Dominance this season." He chuckled with an utter lack of sincerity. Bylerum smiled the forced smile of a destitute lord looking to raise himself up with a conversation.

The two went on for some time. Every time, after Urbain spoke, Bylerum stroked Urbain's ego like a professional. Obligator Retner watched carefully from



a distance, listening, and picking at the extravagant and decadent *hors d'oeuvres* of cactus fruit, cinnamon tarts, and goat skewers.

"I know you're new to the Luthadel market," Urbain began. "Let's be honest: It's better to have a recognized family behind yours, so as to draw attention away. I'd hate to see your house fall before it even gets established locally, so I'm going to do you a favor," Urbain said around a mouthful of fig.

"You're most gracious, Lord Urbain." Bylerum's condescension was well hidden, but Obligator Retner was experienced enough that he heard right through Bylerum's tone.

"We were discussing the going rate for the metals you offered. I'm providing shelf space in Luthadel shops, and protection for storage and transport? We're agreed on the cost in boxings per pound for the bulk lot, if I recall correctly?" Urbain said.

"That's right."

"Let's reduce that price by twenty percent and you'll remember me when you return to prominence."

*Impossible, Retner thought. A twenty-percent discount, even for bulk-grade minerals, is simply insane. Even if Urbain hired a crew to steal the sale minerals and paid an insurance fee for the loss, he'll be losing on every load. Urbain's interest in losing money for Bylerum is bordering on political suicide. He must know something he's not saying.*

Bylerum's eyes went wide. "And what, precisely, is the catch, then, Lord Urbain? I've paid twice as much for the same services in other Dominances. Luthadel tends to be more costly, not less."

"Catch? There's no catch. I know you're working to establish yourself in Luthadel. I want to be the first person you think of when you're in need of accessibility options, protection contracts, or anything of the sort. As your needs increase, hopefully we'll be able to deal in more profitable work. And our houses will grow closer in so many ways."

"I understand," Bylerum said. "If you're willing to make the deal, I believe we have an Obligator at hand." He cast a glance to Retner, who nodded in acknowledgment.

"Then let's. We'll keep everything honest. Obligator... Retner, was it? If you could, please?" Urbain beckoned. Retner slid through a cluster of partygoers to stand before the two.

"Will you be settling on the discussed terms for transport, protection, and shop presence?" The Obligator took a seat at a small nearby table, pulled a sheet of paper from his case, and primed a quill.

"Yes," Urbain replied.

"Indeed," Bylerum added.

"Just one moment." The Obligator commenced to lay down the contractual terms in clear terminology. "Do note, by the Lord Ruler, there's a two percent initiation fee, paid within two weeks of certification. This amount is calculated by the projected contract value, as you the seller will attest on line three. Primary responsibility for payment of the fee falls on the seller. If the seller reneges,

responsibility falls to the buyer. I have the responsibility to inform you that clemency is never granted for nonpayment of initiation fees.”

The two men nodded, and the Obligator added the relevant data to his sheet.

“Understand that any capital gains are taxed a flat eighteen percent. Capital losses can be deducted from all other outstanding tax responsibilities.”

Bylerum looked to Urbain. “Ah. I’m a write-off loss. Very clever.”

Urbain smiled, and Retner nodded.

“We’ll write the terms for six weeks?” Retner said. He looked to the two for approval and they both nodded. “Then sign here, and here.” He handed the document to each, and each signed in kind. “By the Lord Ruler, I do decree that this night, you two lords have entered into a binding agreement.” Both lords looked to each other and nodded. Retner shrugged, took the document, and backed up. “You’ll each be delivered a certified and rebated edition of this document within the week.”

Lord Bylerum sighed audibly. “You’re getting a very good deal, Lord Urbain.”

“Circumstance has arranged for us to each be what the other requires of us, I think,” offered Lord Urbain. “You sought a foothold in this city and I obliged, is all.”

“Do you require anything else this evening?” *For example, could I help you to stop trying to one-up each other or searching for loopholes in our tax policy?* He looked to them each in turn, first Lord Urbain, then Lord Bylerum, as was proper.

Lord Urbain looked to Lord Bylerum. Lord Bylerum opened his mouth and began a very slight shake of his head, as if to say they were done. Lord Urbain spoke up, his voice clear, saying, “We have an honor-guest exchange to document as well.”

Lord Bylerum closed his mouth, looked away, and nodded.

Retner squinted. “An honor-guest. Are your two houses intent on—?”

“No marriage is planned as yet,” Lord Urbain said, “but the Lady Amyse Bylerum is new to Luthadel and we intend to host her at the Urbain keep for a time.”

“Lord Bylerum?” asked Retner.

Lord Bylerum looked away at nothing for a long while. Then he nodded and turned his head back to the Obligator. “What are the terms for a customary honor hostage?” he asked.

Retner opened a scroll case dangling from his belt and withdrew a sheaf of paper. “Terms are often malleable,” he said. “Honor hostages have not, in truth, been in fashion of late and I don’t carry any common examples of the form.”

“Then if we must forego—” Lord Bylerum began.

“Surely we can agree on simple enough terms here and now,” interrupted Lord Urbain. “And have the documents drawn up alongside our business terms. No?”

Retner looked from lord to lord. “I can do that.”

Lord Bylerum exhaled slowly. “Is that how—”

“This is how things are done in the capital, Lord Bylerum. We must move quickly,” Lord Urbain said.

Lord Bylerum nodded again. “What are these standard terms?”

Retner looked up, summoning his memory. “An honor hostage — or, rather, honor guest, forgive me — typically remains for a period of weeks, until some other business is successfully completed. Two months was customary,” Retner nodded to himself. “The family of the honor guest typically assigns a servant to accompany the guest. Often, but not always, the guest is presumed to be entertained and accommodated according to his or her typical means. This includes—”

“I think we’ll have no trouble,” smiled Lord Urbain, “accommodating Lady Amyse in a manner more posh than she was accustomed to. We have chefs, tutors, servants—”

“All the same,” interrupted Lord Bylerum, provoking a look of irritation from Lord Urbain that Retner had seldom seen before, “I believe I’ll send along a companion to keep her company.”

Lord Urbain’s mouth smiled but not his eyes. “Of course. Shall we say two months?”

“Or until our first delivery is made?”

“We’ll expect deliveries considerably sooner than that, I think,” Lord Urbain insisted. “Two months.”

Lord Bylerum looked to Retner.

Retner looked back. If the Obligator wanted to, he could side with Lord Bylerum and perhaps make a new ally. If the Obligator wanted to, he could simply look away, leaving the two lords to resolve this on their own. Retner instead stared back at Lord Bylerum.

Lord Bylerum’s eyes finally dipped. “Two months.”

Lord Urbain smiled again with his whole face. “Splendid.”

Lord Bylerum looked back to Lord Urbain and locked eyes with him. “If anything happens to her—”

“Come now,” Lord Urbain began dismissively.

“If *anything* happens to her...,” Lord Bylerum raised a finger.

Retner put a hand out. “My lord, we have clauses in the agreement for that. If anything sordid or unforeseen should happen to her, Lord Urbain shall be held accountable.”

Lord Urbain turned his hard gaze on Retner then. Retner put his hand down... then regretted it. But it was too late. Retner had involved himself in a way an Obligator of his station should be too coldly removed to do so. Retner had let himself feel a bit of Lord Bylerum’s worry and Lord Urbain had noticed.

“Likewise,” Lord Urbain said, “should you renege on our deal, fail to fulfill your end of the bargain, or otherwise violate our terms, your daughter shall be disgraced by your failure and her dowry paid in full as if she were married to one of my boys.”

Lord Bylerum’s widened. His mouth slipped open. “As if she...?”

“No marriage will take place,” Lord Urbain said. “But you’ll pay as if one had.”

Lord Bylerum nodded slowly. “I understand,” he said distantly.

“Very good,” Lord Urbain sounded happy again. “Obligator, prepare those documents as soon as you can. You already have our signatures on the business agreement, yes?”

Retner saw a shadow of intent cross Lord Urbain’s face. Something was about to happen. “Yes,” Retner said, his voice pushing the word to the edge of being a question. “I do.”

“Fine, then, you can make the honor-guest agreement an addendum to that?” Lord Urbain looked casually at both Lord Bylerum and Obligator Retner, as if this were no great detail.

Lord Bylerum didn’t see it. Retner looked at him, but Lord Bylerum was looking far away. “I can,” Retner said, giving Lord Bylerum one more chance to consider what was being said. If the honor-guest agreement was an addendum, there’d be nothing else to sign — Lord Bylerum’s signature would apply even though Lord Bylerum wouldn’t see the actual document until it was delivered.

Retner thought about speaking up, about stating the facts to Lord Bylerum. He caught Lord Urbain looking hard at him again.

“Then *do* that,” Lord Urbain said.

Retner nodded. “Very well,” he said. “Is there anything else you need of me?”

“Not just yet,” said Lord Urbain, looking at Lord Bylerum, whose thoughts were someplace far away. “But soon, I think.”

\* \* \*

The party ebbed. Nobles, their clothes just a bit imperfect from dancing, put delicate desserts in their mouths and gulped down the last of the wine in their glasses. The younger nobles returned to their cliques to report on their evening’s explorations and dance partners. The elder nobles began the long process of saying polite goodbyes.

Obligator Retner stood in the midst of it all, a healthy gap between him and the guests, like an empty aura. He watched Ravis seek out guests and offer services. “Has your business tonight been witnessed?” Ravis asked, his hand on a young lord’s elbow.

The young man shook his head. “None, tonight, Obligator,” the young man said.

Retner turned around in a slow, full circle, taking in the room. He saw lords and ladies from House Buvidas chatting with their cousins in House Bylerum. He noted a cluster of young ladies giggling around a platter of tiny caramels. He noticed elderly nobles from House Erikeller separating themselves from the party as their Terrisman steward brought up their coats. He watched the skaa servants gather along the walls of the ball room as a gesture that they were ready to be summoned for cleaning duties anywhere in the chamber. And he saw Lord Turner Urbain weaving through the crowd, coming closer.

Retner clamped his teeth tight together and raised his head once in acknowledgement. It had hardly been an hour since Retner had concluded the business between Urbain and Bylerum.

Lord Urbain thanked a departing guest. Retner brushed a crumb from his own lapel.

Lord Urbain waved goodbye to the Erikeller couple across the room. Retner adjusted the straps on his belt of scrolls.

Lord Urbain, with a gesture, dismissed an approaching servant. Retner waited for Lord Urbain's quiet wrath.

"I need to talk with you," Lord Urbain said happily, taking Retner by the elbow and walking him toward a nearby pillar.

"I need to be ready should end-of-evening business be—"

"This is that business."

Retner looked across the room to Ravis, but the younger Obligator was engrossed in business, too. He held out a contract to younger House Erikeller nobles and indicated key clauses. Retner couldn't make him look his way. "Very well, Lord Urbain. How can the Ministry be of use to you?"

*Let's see how he treats me when he remembers that I have the Lord Ruler at my back,* Retner thought.

"Not the Ministry," said Lord Urbain. "You. In particular."

"I am an Obligator. I am an eye of the Lord Ruler." It was a common-enough statement. Retner immediately wished he'd been more forceful.

"Quite. You are also a student of the Final Empire's peculiar creatures and a man unhappy with his station," whispered Lord Urbain. "We both know this."

Retner, his head dipped, turned his eyes to Lord Urbain and said nothing.

"All I am asking you to do is your duty," Lord Urbain whispered.

"In whispers?"

"In exchange for a premium benefit."

"That we must whisper about?"

"Yes."

"Lord Urbain," Retner whispered, "this is not befitting your station or mine. We would do better to speak plainly and—"

"I'll get you a kandra."

Retner raised his head, his eyes locked on Lord Urbain's. "What do you mean?"

"You will update my contracts with Lord Bylerum with addendums according to my specifications and I will get you a Contract with a kandra through my house's usual channels." Lord Urbain's gaze didn't waver.

"How does... Why?"

"Gratitude."

"Gratitude."

"You fulfill your task as Obligator and I'll get you a meeting with a kandra, on your terms, so you can write your piece on them, conduct an interview, whatever you want. Whatever it is that will get you to a Canton where you can be happy."

"I serve at the pleasure of the Lord Ruler."

"Of course. You could serve him so much better if you were following your passion, though. Isn't that so?" Lord Urbain's sincerity was gentle and practiced — Retner felt sure that was a sign of skullduggery.

“How would it work?”

“I’m sorry?”

“How would you make this happen?”

Lord Urbain smiled. “It would be a simple gesture of thanks on behalf of a grateful house. I place a letter and a Contract at an agreed-on site—”

“A dead drop.”

“—and, yes, exactly, and a kandra shuttles it back to the kandra homeland. A kandra willing to take up the Contract introduces itself to us. I send him your way.”

“And it will serve me?”

“To a point. It will answer your questions, at least. You can write your essays.”

“Lord Urbain...”

“You can prove your cunning and perhaps *earn* your improved place in a happier Canton for you.”

“Provided that—”

“This is no scheme. Bylerum has already agreed to my terms. This is simply in thanks for your impartiality.”

Retner searched Lord Urbain’s face for any sign of a lie. He was unable to find one, but felt no surer for it.

“My impartiality,” Retner said. He wanted to fetch Lord Bylerum and ask him about the terms he’d agreed to. He wanted to show Lord Urbain that he wasn’t afraid to push back. He wanted to demonstrate that he was not as petty and easily manipulated as some novice noble. Instead, he merely repeated himself: “My impartiality.”

“Yes,” whispered Lord Urbain, leaning in closer. “Let Lord Bylerum make his own mistakes. Let him learn as he must. He cannot serve or benefit the Lord Ruler as a fool. He’ll learn little if you try to teach him. He must feel the sting of the lesson and be strengthened by it. I’m not asking you to act against him, you understand — only to avoid aiding him with your own experience and wisdom. Let him learn. Maintain your impartiality.”

“I can’t help but note, Lord Urbain,” Retner said, then paused. His instinct was to speak up. His instinct had him stranded in the Canton of Finance.

“Yes?”

“I can’t help but note that Lord Bylerum’s lesson benefits you more than him.”

“It benefits us both unless he makes some mistake. And, yes, I stand to benefit from his mistakes. I won’t take a chance on an inexperienced house without something to gain. This isn’t charity,” Lord Urbain said, looking across the room at the party. “We should all be out to benefit ourselves and the Lord Ruler. Lord Bylerum needs to protect his own interests better if he wants to be of value in Luthadel. I’m not *only* teaching him... but I *am* teaching him.”

“Very well,” Retner said.

“If you won’t do your duty, I’m sure that Obligator Ravis—”

“I said ‘very well.’ I’ll do it.”

Lord Urbain returned his gaze and moved his mouth toward the barest edge of a smile. “Very well.”

"Let us talk terms between *us* first."

"All right."

Retner straightened up. "I'll want this kandra to adopt a form for me. As I watch."

"I'll put that in the request."

"How long will it take? Getting the kandra to me."

"It could take a few weeks."

"That's fine. It'll give me time to prepare."

"Prepare?"

"I'll need a safe place to work, here in the city, where I can meet the kandra and supply it with a form to adopt," Retner said, mostly to himself. "No matter. That's my business."

"Quite."

"So tell me," Retner said. "What of your business?"

"It's quite simple, really. The honor-guest addendum?"

"Yes."

"I have some changes to make to it."







## 5

# THE NOBLEST WAYS



Lady Amyse Bylerum leaned on the stone railing of a balcony in the new Bylerum keep in Luthadel. The balcony hung above the keep's great hall, where a pattern of light sprawled across the floor, cast by sunlight against the stained-glass window in one wall. The balcony overlooked the great hall but Amyse did not — her eyes were on colors reflected up onto the hall's modestly vaulted ceiling above her. Her imagination transformed them into fanciful visions of a dark Luthadel with colorful skies of yellow or green or blue. She rested her chin on one palm and thought of the Luthadel she'd imagined before they'd come here, a capital of poise and beauty and well-meaning adventures in courtship. Instead she'd found a city of scheming lords, petty bureaucrats, and selfish, pompous boys who played at being men.

So Amyse took in the beauty she could find where she could find it, as Lady Chanim Haught had told her. And Amyse prepared herself to play the game the nobles chose to play in the noblest way she knew — with dignity and strength she'd learned from her mother and from the tales told to her when she was young.

Young. Amyse thought of herself as a young lady, thought she knew what youth was, but now she felt that she knew better. *It isn't marriage that turns a young woman into a lady*, she thought as she watched the lights on the ceiling flicker as banners outside the window blocked out light then and again. *It is control of one's own fate, maybe. It's the willingness to play the noble game and the ability to win victories at it.* She smiled behind her fingers. *A lady is one who makes strong plays in the noble game.*

"Young lady," came a familiar voice from below, "you'll wrinkle your gown if you lean like that." It was cousin Tieran, doing his best impression of their

fathers. He smiled up at her from the great hall below. He was all multi-colored in the light of the window.

Amyse smiled back. She said nothing. She didn't straighten up.

Tieran climbed the stone staircase that lead up to the balcony. He was dressed in a fine green coat and simple slacks. He looked like half a noble. He leaned on the balcony next to Amyse. "All's well?"

Amyse nodded. "I'm just thinking."

"Hard to believe that all this is ours, isn't it?"

She nodded, her chin still in her palm.

"I'm sure it's not so great as the halls and ballrooms you saw at the party."

Amyse smiled again. "It's lovely here. The keep of House Urbain is so dark and... hulking. This is cozier."

Tieran smiled. "You mean 'smaller.'"

"I said what I meant."

Tieran nodded. "You didn't like the Urbain keep much?"

Amyse considered. Tieran was a trustworthy-enough soul, and she'd never had any trouble talking to him, but they seldom shared much of substance with each other. *How does it help me to let Tieran know what I know?*, Amyse thought. She decided it didn't help her. "Perhaps I'll grow to like it," she said.

Just then, the main foyer rattled as the front doors of the keep swung open and banged against the walls. Cordal and Carrow strode into the great hall with squads of men in bright Bylerum colors with sturdy helmets and long pikes, short swords, or bows. At least two-dozen men followed the Mistborn brothers into the room.

"Behold!" said Cordal with mock formality. "The guards of House Bylerum, fresh from the field!"

"Found dreaded foes down at the Tailor Market, did you?" asked Tieran.

"Don't let the doors bang open like that," said Amyse. "It's crass."

Carrow clapped his hands for attention and turned to the mustered men. Until a few days ago, they were mostly low-ranking sons of House Buvidas — the lowest ranked of the Great Houses of Luthadel and distant cousins of the Bylerums — but now they were on the Bylerum payroll. A keep needs guards. "Men, fall out. Go and relieve the others. Let them know that we have their new uniforms, as well."

The guards turns on their heels and, with practiced movements, scattered out the front doors, down side corridors, and deeper into the house to seek out their counterparts.

"They're not toy soldiers to play with," Tieran said more to himself than to Amyse, but loud enough for both to hear.

"Tell *them*," she said.

Cordal and Carrow gave each other satisfied looks. Carrow called over a skaa servant and dispatched him to fetch the bundled uniforms from the cart outside.

"Here's a few clips to give the cartman," Carrow said, handing a few coins from his purse to the skaa. "Make sure he gets all of those."

"Yes, milord." The servant hurried off.

"Enjoying your day, then, are we?" Amyse said down into the chamber.

“Quite!” said Cordal.

“The House is starting to look almost in order, don’t you think?” asked Carrow.

Tieran shook his head, smiling. He opened his mouth to say something when a figure stepped up behind him. Tieran turned and came eyes-to-chin with Silas, the towering Terrisman steward of the house. In the few days since Silas had been procured from House Buvidas, Amyse noticed that Tieran had yet to exchange actual words with the man. Silas was almost a head taller than Tieran, and Tieran was no slouch. Silas, in his fine valet’s coat and trousers, was better dressed than Tieran was.

“Yes, Silas?” Amyse acknowledged the Terrisman first. She was almost certain she knew what this was. She’d been expecting this summons since the evening of the party at the Urbain keep.

“My lady, your father wishes to see you.” Silas had a peculiar accent. All Terrismen did, to Amyse’s ear. She still wasn’t accustomed to it, though she enjoyed it on some level. Terrismen stewards were a staple of noble houses in the fables she was raised on.

“Is he all right?” she asked.

“He seems fine, my lady.”

“But he can’t come and see me himself?”

Silas paused. “He sent me to bring you to his study.”

Amyse waited. She was still. She wanted to test the silence, to see how long Silas would sit and wait on her. She wanted to leave her father waiting. She wanted—

“Amyse?” asked Tieran.

She looked at him.

“Is everything all right?”

“We’ll see, I suppose,” Amyse said. “Let’s go, Silas.”

Amyse and Silas headed toward Bycroft’s den. Tieran followed after them, saying, “Amyse, I... I know you came back from the Urbain party distraught. In distress. That you, I mean—”

“Everything is fine,” she said over her shoulder. “Don’t worry yourself so.”

Tieran crinkled his face. “I just meant that if I can be of help—”

“Father and I are just *chatting*, Tieran.”

Silas lead them through the upstairs hall, past the portrait of Grandfather Bylerum. Tieran stared at it as he passed by. “All right, then,” Tieran said. “Let your father know that I’m happy to be of help if I can be. My father wanted me to—”

Amyse spun around on Tieran and grabbed him by the shoulders. “Thank you, cousin,” she said, looking him straight in the eyes. “I’ll be fine. Really.” She let Tieran go and turned back toward Bycroft’s den. “Carry on, Silas.”

Tieran watched them go a few paces, then continued on after them in silence. Amyse knew he was there, watching as Silas knocked on the door to her father’s den.

“Send her in, man,” Bycroft said. Amyse suspected he still hadn’t learned Silas’s name.

She slipped through the door and curtsied for her father. “Father,” she said. Silas shut the heavy wooden door to the den behind her. She glanced back and saw Tieran still in the hall outside, behind Silas.

Lord Bycroft Bylerum’s den was still in the midst of being decorated. A Bylerum banner hung from one wall. A tapestry depicting the Luthadel skyline and an ashmount beyond hung from another. Hung above the warm fireplace was the head of some fearsome great cat, purchased at a taxidermy market stall in Austrex some years ago for this very room; though Lord Bycroft Bylerum was no hunter, it was typical of rural nobles to decorate rooms in such a fashion, as if they were. It used to strike Amyse as a kind of silly affectation for the sake of urban nobles, whose fashion demanded a distance from their smaller-city cousins. Now it struck her as just one more pose, one more lie between nobles. The cat-head’s fine fur was matted and worn away in places, revealing a dull, wrinkled hide.

Lord Bycroft stood between his small wooden desk and a narrow open window, looking out at the capital. He brushed ash from the sill. Late afternoon light made him seem bright and happy in a room otherwise dimly lit by the fireplace. “Amyse,” he began and then stalled.

She waited.

“Amyse, I’m sending you to live with House Urbain for a few weeks.”

Amyse remained still. She’d thought seriously about this moment and now that it was here she wasn’t sure how to play her part. Did she pout or protest? Should she seem shocked? She looked at the Bylerum banner and waited him out. She knew her father. He couldn’t bear much silence.

“Two months, in fact,” he finally said.

Amyse nodded, trying to seem distant. “When?”

“Immediately.”

Amyse nodded again. Lady Chanim had told her to tap into the strengths she had. Amyse breathed deep and asked, “Father, have I displeased you?”

Lord Bylerum tipped his head to one side. “No, child. This is business. This is custom. This is the way things are sometimes done in Luthadel. You’re to be a guest of the Urbain household.”

“I see,” she said. “Am I being married off? So soon?”

Lord Bylerum looked back out the window. “The Urbain boys are both spoken for, as I understand it. This is no arrangement for marriage. Rather, they — the Urbains and their staff — will tutor you in the ways of a proper young society lady.” Lord Bylerum brightened. “It’s like a finishing school! You’ll be ready for so many more parties and festivities when this is all over.”

“Festivities.”

“Yes, child.”

Amyse considered him anew. She feared that Lady Chanim might have been right about him, that he really was a fool. She feared that Lady Chanim might have been wrong about how best to wiggle free from this ugly deal. In her distress, Amyse had made a plan against her own father, out of spite — a plan with a woman she didn’t really know. Is this how the game was played? Secrets kept from family? Schemes hatched in moments of ire? Amyse asked, “Why, father?”

Lord Bylerum's shoulders fell. "Oh, child, you've done nothing wrong."

*I know that*, thought Amyse.

"It's sometimes customary to exchange guests in matters like these," Bycroft continued. "It keeps everyone honest and symbolizes our union in business."

"So Urbain is sending a son here to be taught by you in exchange?"

"Ah. Uh, no. His sons are well versed in the ways of Luthadel politics. We have little to teach them. It wouldn't... they don't... no. They are not coming here."

"Why not send Cordal or Carrow or Tieran in my stead? They have plenty to learn, as well."

"Lord Urbain picked you especially! Isn't that nice?"

*Oh, yes, I'm quite flattered*, Amyse thought. She wanted to refuse, right then and there. She wanted to make her father force men-at-arms to drag her from the house, if that's what he wanted. She wanted him to see her anger. Then she looked at him again, there in the sunlight, and the concern on his face.

"Amyse, what are you thinking?"

She offered a modest shrug. She thought about honesty, about telling him that Lady Haught had promised to find a way to get her out of Turner Urbain's "clutches." She thought about trusting in her father, one more time, and seeing if he would understand. Then she pictured him being asked to send Cordal or Carrow off to the house of a lascivious noble where their honor would be in doubt... and she couldn't fathom it. Her father would never impugn his sons this way. He simply loved them too much for that.

"Why are you letting this happen to me?" she asked. She let her voice crack. She wanted to seem overwhelmed, as she was when she had first learned her fate, lest her father suspect that she was planning something.

"Amyse, you don't understand why this is so important to our family. It's difficult to explain without... but you understand that this deal changes everything for our house, don't you?" Lord Bylerum tilted his head to one side again.

"Of *course* I understand," Amyse said. She felt her grip on her anger slipping. "You're sending me away to help fatten the family, because the welfare of the house is more important than *my* life!" She stamped her foot on the floor.

"Decorum, young lady!" Lord Bylerum snapped. "Yes, you must make sacrifices. We all must make sacrifices for the betterment of this house. We all must—"

"Even Cordal and Carrow? What do *they* sacrifice?"

"Young lady, I am your father! I will not be spoken to in this way. I am sorry that you're unhappy, but I have made my decision and you will—"

Amyse lost her grip. She let her anger loose, trusting that her father wouldn't know what to do with it. "I'm smarter than you! I'm not meat! You can't use me as such!"

*Here's your chance to be honest with me.*

"Amyse! Keep your voice down! You are still my daughter and you will respect me!" Lord Bylerum swung the leaded-glass window shut and stomped over to her.

“What else am I to do, father? Am I to be beaten like a skaa in the house of Urbain? Am I to be chased for sport by the Urbain boys? Am I to—”

“You will be well cared for! It is in our contract with House Urbain. You are not to be mistreated. You will be safe and you will be tutored and you will be taken to all the formal parties.” He put out a hand to comfort her.

She withdrew; then regretted it. If she showed off her strength now, he might suspect something later. She had to seem weak and frail and hopeless, like Lady Chanim Haught had said, lest anyone suspect she knew as much as she did about Lady Haught’s plans. So Amyse let herself cry again. Her eyes welled up and gave her tears.

Her father hugged her. “There, there, child,” he said, patting her hair.

She let herself cry there for a long time, for a longer time than she meant to, and gradually realized why: she was saying goodbye. If not for good, then at least to the father she had thought she had when she was young. The man who would defend her against all harm, all trouble, all dishonor — against the Turner Urbains of the Final Empire — was either gone... or had never really existed. Her actual father was just a man, just another noble, as fallible and foolish, at least at times, as any other.

Amyse wondered if he would ever truly understand that she was more cunning than he knew.

“It’s just for two months, after all,” he said.

Amyse nodded and wiped her eyes. She’d left wet blots on his green jacket and sash. “I know,” she said. “I’ll be all right.”

“Shall I have the man fetch you some water or wine?”

Amyse shook her head. “No, it’s all right,” she said. “I’ll be all right.” She leaned up and kissed her father on the cheek. “I should pack.”

“Yes, quite right. That’s a good girl,” he said.

She stepped to the den door and gripped the handle. The fates of noble houses were in her hands and none of the nobles above her in station had any idea that she knew it. Some part of her hardened inside as she considered it, and something else seemed to spark to life. She wondered if this was what Allomancy felt like. She was sure it was what power felt like.

Finally, she pulled the door open. Tieran stood up from a bench in the hall, where he’d been waiting. Amyse strode right past him, down the hall, dabbing her red eyes as she walked. Tieran moved as if to help her but she waved him off with one hand and wiped a tear with her other.

Just as she was past him, she smiled to herself.



## 6

# A SAVANT IN THE HOUSE OF MEASURE



One measure Tin. Three measures Copper. The formula for *Allomancer's Bronze* had been one of the first Kephros learned. Simple. Elegant. It made for a good place to start, needed only a small amount of metal to mix properly, and gave a metallurgist apprentice success and encouragement early on. All three of Kephros's apprentices had created usable Bronze in the first week of training.

Of course, Kephros's Bronze was better. He used the standard scale, mandated by the Canton of Orthodoxy, to measure the Copper. The standard scale was only a couple of decades old, though, and Kephros was well acquainted with the old Danthram's scale, which he still used for the Tin. His Bronze burned ever so slightly longer, and the Mistings burning it claimed the drum-like pulsings they heard took on a distinctive, clearer sound that made them easier to decipher.

Kephros took great pride in his Bronze, but felt some disappointment that it would never, under normal circumstances, be used outside his house. No matter his renown, no matter how many Bylerums he was ostensibly supposed to humor, this would always be House Urbain's shop. Sure, he'd put his stamp on it, seen his apprentices sent away from Luthadel to run shops in smaller cities despite their parents' influence within the house. But a mistake or a moment of disobedience could see him stripped of his Head Metallurgist title.

That's why this batch of *Allomancer's Bronze* didn't use his normal percentages. That's why Kephros added a pinch of nickel to his otherwise perfect formula. It always turned his stomach to taint Allomantic metals, made him feel like he was betraying his art. But it was a reality of house warfare. The choice was made for him.

Nickel was very subtle. In Bronze specifically, it could make the Allomancer burning it suffer from nagging headaches that could throw off the rhythm of Allomantic pulses he sensed. It worked slowly, so the user might not connect it directly to the vial he had ingested. Other metals gave more dramatic effects, like massive stomach pains, nausea, or worse. Those were useful later, if armed conflict was imminent and the house needed to undermine their enemies' Steel and Pewter reserves to handicap their Coinshots and Thugs. For now, House Urbain's agent would plant vials of the tainted bronze in the stores of enemy houses — and, if caught, claim the metals were the result of a poor supply by the meddlesome and minor House Bylerum. The covert activities of Urbain's Mistings and Mistborn always went more smoothly when the Seekers assigned to keep watch were reduced in strength.

Kephrus pulled out the molds he would need to cast the bronze into short thin bars, and prepared a jar to hold them. The Canton of Orthodoxy mandated a standard symbology for metals — and they *would* enforce it — so he couldn't use his own system. Instead, as he marked a jar with a grease pencil, he made the symbol's two prongs the same length instead of leaving the center one shorter. There were several jars like this, labeled with simple variations only he would recognize. They rested right next to the canisters of untainted metals, all lining the massive shelves that stretched to the rafters on the western wall of his shop.

The supplies were all ready, but they would have to wait until the morning. Kephrus's skaa laborers had already left in order to get home before the mists filled Luthadel's streets and alleys. They would start work early the next day. Though illiterate, they recognized the symbols for the Allomantic metals, and would know what temperature to bring the different furnaces to before Kephrus came in two hours later.

The metallurgist donned his thin autumn coat. As he turned toward the door, he saw it slam shut. He noticed, for the first time, a thin young man standing just inside the doorway, stooped and sweating — an intruder in his shop.

Kephrus bristled at this affront. "This is a House Urbain establishment, boy. We don't do business with outsiders. Leave if you know your place and hope to have a future."

"I heard you help my kind."

"You heard wrong."

The youth stumbled, leaning on a desk filled with coded orders from the house. He was probably eighteen or nineteen years old, with a complexion and grooming that suggested he'd lived a sheltered life within one of the Great Houses. His face was sallow, glistening with sweat, and when he spoke his voice quavered. "Those who burn. You help those who burn."

From the moment Kephrus found out about Allomantic Savants, they fascinated him. They were useful to his art, too. Continuously burning — even flaring — their metals, they transcended the abilities of most Allomancers. They understood their metals better than other Allomancers could imagine. But having a sideline to his house's business was dangerous, and Kephrus hadn't sought out Allomantic Savants for years.

*It seems no matter how I try to keep them away, somehow they always find out. They always come here, bringing trouble with them. And what if he's a plant? The house testing me to see if I give aid to outsiders? To see if I'll be a liability in the ongoing "whispered war" between houses?*

"You're lying. Too young. Your house would never allow you so much metal."

"They needed me, forced me to work constantly. To protect many Mistings. Our house doesn't have many Smokers."

"*Smokers?* You burn *Copper*? Why are you wasting my time?" Kephros turned rapidly away and stomped toward the back of the shop, high ceilinged and occupied by the various furnaces he needed. "Are you so pampered you can't shave a coin? You come to the shop of the best metallurgist in Luthadel to get the easiest metal to find?"

Kephros heard the boy behind him move a couple steps closer, then crash into a heavy wooden stand, spilling bars onto the floor and ruining the prepared order the house's courier needed to pick up in the morning. Grasping a leather-wrapped handle, the metallurgist pulled a sturdy shovel out from a bin of coal. Turning back toward the boy, he brandished it as an impromptu weapon.

"Please! They thought they could cure me. They kept me away from all copper, even clips. I have no money. All I could find was copper fittings from my desk. I... I don't think it was pure."

*The boy's face attests to that, Kephros thought. He's in bad shape, but it won't be fatal. If he goes long enough without copper, though...*

Kephros shot a quick glance at the tumbled mess of metal bars on the floor. There had only been four bars of copper in the order, and they were all still there. *At least the boy hasn't pocketed any of the house's metals. Noble or not, I would break his hand for that.* Kephros relaxed a bit, and let the blade of the shovel rest on the brick floor.

"You're not the first, you know. I've had enough trouble with you people barging in here, sick and desperate. Begging for a scrap of metal because you've gone beyond the means of your station or your house. A Tin Savant screaming in the winter wind because his sense of touch was too sensitive. A Pewterarm who had been awake and active for weeks, bleeding from a dozen cuts he was unable to feel. He died in this very shop, so desperate to become a Savant that he taxed his body too far... then ran out of Pewter to fend off the pain. Then there was the Brass Savant, who was unable to get ahead in her house since she just bored everybody around her. She was looking for a substitute, some substance to replace her body's need to burn Brass without the Allomantic effect. A stupid notion born of desperation, of course. I even had a Mistborn who *claimed* he needed vials prepared with a higher percentage of the two metals he had become a Savant with — as if such a thing were possible."

*And another, he thought. The one I can truly never speak of. I created Electrum only once, and only for him. He could see so far into his own future, as though he could ask his future self about events yet to come. No one should have to know that much about his course in life. And I shouldn't know of Electrum. I shouldn't meddle with knowledge that could get me killed by the Ministry.*

“And do you know the difference between all of them and you? They mattered! Their houses could use them. The Tin Savant was sent to help fight an uprising in an outer Dominance, keeping watch at night when others couldn’t see. The Pewter Savant could have been almost unkillable had he survived. The Soother had gained her powers far from Luthadel, keeping koloss bored instead of angry. That was, until her family lost the mandate to command those koloss. And the Mistborn was truly unique. He constantly burned Steel and Iron, Pushing and Pulling all metals around him in equal measure. When he dampened his Steel and only the Push was left, the effect was incredible. No Savant was he, but incredible all the same.

“I’ve seen all this, but never a Copper Savant. Never one who would intrude here.”

“I was told you would help,” the young man coughed.

“Years ago, yes, I could. I gave refuge to Savants before I knew better. But I have no desire to help you.”

“I don’t need much. If I can just get out of Luthadel, to somewhere my family can’t reach...”

“Fine. If your house won’t help, tell me about them. Tell me which house, and how many Smokers you have. I can make a deal if you give me something my house can use.”

The boy fell silent, as though trying to consider the offer over the pain of withdrawal. “Fine. You’re right. I owe them nothing. I’m Geldron Tekiel. We have only four Smokers in Luthadel, other than me, and they say I’m too unreliable. They’ve sent for more from our other holdings. They expect two more in three weeks or so.”

*Most likely false, Kephrus thought. But if he is a plant from my house, they’ll see that I’m working in our favor. If what the boy said was true, Urbain might have to re-evaluate our trading arrangements with Tekiel.*

Kephrus pulled a vial of alcohol filled with tiny copper shavings from a wooden rack. The house prepared some Allomantic vials of metal elsewhere, but he always kept a few on hand in case of emergency. He tossed it toward the boy, who clumsily grasped for it, fumbling it between his hands. By the time he secured it in his weak grip, the boy had almost fallen to the ground.

The Savant pulled the stopper, tilted his head back, and poured the solution into his mouth. His eyes closed as an expression of peace washed across his face. Then, his eyes snapped back open and he stood, looking strong again. He shot one last wordless glance at Kephrus, then wheeled and bolted back through the still-open door, disappearing into the streets dyed crimson in the light of the setting sun.

As Kephrus slammed his storefront door shut, he relaxed immediately. His tensed muscles fell slack, and he dropped the coal shovel, and only then realized he had still been holding it.

Kephrus walked back farther into the shop, and knelt down to pick up the bars of Allomantic metals the boy had knocked off their stand. He would have to stay a bit longer to double-check this order and make sure it was ready

by morning. *I don't think I've ever been so angry*, he thought. *Why that boy got to me, I have no idea. I've certainly put up with worse. Maybe it's just stress. So many orders coming in.*

He sighed as he lifted a dozen small bars of pewter onto the table, stacking them into orderly units. *I have to count this again, and I'll be here late. I can feel that a moment ago I would have raged at that thought... Why do I feel so different now?*

The last bar of pewter fell into place in its stack, and Kephros turned to look at the rest of the metals on the floor. *No Zinc. There were six bars here. He wasn't a Smoker at all!*

Kephros rushed back to the door, throwing it open and looking frantically up and down the street. There was no sign of the Allomancer, just the eerie silence of the empty lane and the mist reaching in to hide the city until daybreak.

*That was my only chance. The only Rioter Savant I've ever met and perhaps ever will.*

\* \* \*

Rolliard hurried through the darkening streets, parting the first delicate tendrils of mists as he moved. With a handkerchief, he wiped the sweat and pale yellow makeup from his face. Before returning it to his coat pocket, he wiped a bit of alcohol from his chin, left there when he had spat out the contents of the copper vial the metallurgist had given him.

It was hard to believe Kephros had been such a pushover. Maybe it was the details. Geldron Tekiel really was a Copper Savant, they said, and Rolliard had heard that the house was low on copperclouds. The part about Geldron being imprisoned was probably untrue, but not outside of the realm of possibility.

Easy to fool or not, this metallurgist was a legend, and having a stash of Zinc he had made was exciting. Plenty of Allomancers, trainers, and scholars figured there was no difference between the pure metals. Pure is pure. That's how the metallurgists of Rolliard's house thought. That's why he had begun looking for Zinc outside House Haught shortly after he Snapped. Metallurgists — the smart ones — did *something* different. Maybe even other Rioters couldn't sense it the way he could.

Realizing that he could easily buy as much Zinc as he needed had set him on his way to becoming a Savant. That and his bottomless resentment and anger. His mother, father, and three older siblings showed no compassion for the thin runt of a boy. He hadn't taken to his studies, and grew slowly. Even now, in his early twenties, he looked like a teenager. When his father ordered him to be beaten almost to death, it was like having him Snap and become a Misting was the last hope for him to be a worthy member of the family line.

But he never forgot his early years, and the ability to Push on their emotions made him insufferable. Once he could get Zinc on his own, he never stopped burning it. His unhappy family grew frustrated and irate around him. It was perfect. They were as unhappy as they had made him.

Three years ago, Rolliard could tell things were coming to a head, and disappeared with his personal savings before his father could disown him. Living on his own for the last three years, he had fine-tuned his abilities. If someone felt respect, awe, or lust for someone, Rolliard could cleverly redirect those emotions toward himself. He was popular when he needed to be, hated when it suited him, and an island of calm amid a roil of emotions when he just wanted to cause chaos.

But a house war was coming, and it looked like House Haught wasn't going to come out too clean. Rolliard was still using the family name, and it might not be worth as much in a year. He had to be prepared.

Rolliard unlocked the door to his safe house, a modest first-floor room within a skaa tenement. The mists that had clung so closely to him outside evaporated as he ducked into the small, stuffy space. He lit a lamp, spreading warm light across the metal files, jars of alcohol, and empty vials that cluttered his workbench. He lined up five of the new bars of zinc on a small shelf instead of putting them with the dozens of bars he had stacked to the side of the workbench.

From the sixth bar, Rolliard filed a small mound of zinc shavings into a vial and poured in a measure of alcohol. He held up the vial, looking at the lustrous blue-gray flecks as they danced in the liquid.

He downed the mixture and flared his Zinc.

From the room to the west, the sound of sobbing filtered through the wall. To the east, a cheer erupted as the stakes rose in a game of dice. Above, voices raised as a disagreement became a screaming match.

Rolliard closed his eyes and grinned as Zinc blazed through his chest and sent sparks through his blood.



# 7

## OPPORTUNE



Hutch heard him coming.

One of his legs was a wooden peg, strapped onto a mangled knee. The other was a frail old bit of sinew and bone, supported by a slender crutch. He made a familiar racket as he came up the narrowing streets between the Pewter Gate and the Tin Gate, headed in the direction of the Sootwarrens. He rattled and tapped his way across the cobblestones as night threatened and shutters were pulled tight against the coming mists.

A pair of nearby skaa, sweeping ash into the gutter, stopped their chatter as he approached. He nodded out from under the brim of his stove-pipe hat and smiled a few lingering teeth at them. One skaa sweeper raised his head in a tentative acknowledgement, the other stayed still.

His tapping approach was like a warning. The nod was part of a solemn and unspoken contract. His passage was a neighborhood ritual.

Everyone in eastern Luthadel, it seemed, knew of Hosen and the deal he had with the street. You didn't ask him questions, not for free, and you didn't tell him anything you didn't want sold. In exchange for information, Hosen didn't sneak around, didn't lie, and didn't say anything for free. If he didn't have anything of value to tell you he wouldn't take your money.

The Honorable Snitch, the skaa called him. King of Luthadel's gutter informants — "regal among the rats," a noble once describe him — he was precious to nobles and skaa alike.

He kept on, moving from crutch to peg to leg, toward the Sootwarrens. The skaa sweepers watched him go, moving through the darkening shadows beneath the thickening slums, one bare foot all but black with ash.



Hosen's was a racket that others aspired to, but he achieved and maintained it through a degree of suffering and torment that few could endure. One sleeve pinned shut from elbow to shoulder, one leg lopped off at the knee, teeth lost to angry punches or pulled by rough interrogators, Hosen was no happy sight. He demonstrated the price of lying to lofty ears, the cost of angering brutish schemers, and the wherewithal needed to know things and live in Luthadel. He'd traded limbs and blood for secrets and some day, for sure, he'd trade his life for one. Until then, he lived the life he'd carved out for himself, dangling between the nobility and the skaa like a mouse by the tail.

Before reaching the Sootwarrens proper, before the streets were so crowded that the top floors of buildings leaned into each other, Hosen stopped and looked behind him; he was out of sight of the sweepers now. He looked ahead of him; no one coming. He looked up at the third-floor window of a sagging rowhouse nearby and winked at the shadow there, watching him. Then he lifted his crutch and walked easily, even on his false leg, up to the door of the house and banged on it with the crutch — one, twice, thrice.

The shadow at the window disappeared. Hosen could hear someone descending a flight of creaking stairs on the other side of the door.

A little slot in the door swung open and a pair of brown eyes in reddened sockets looked out. The little slot swung shut. The whole door swung open. A short, round man with shorn hair and a scruffy beard raised his eyebrows. He held a churchwarden pipe in one hand and an oil lamp in the other. A staircase rose up in the narrow space behind him.

Hosen flicked the brim of his stovepipe hat.

"Good," said the man. "Come in."

Hosen stepped inside and paused while the man shut the door. Hosen adjusted the patterned cummerbund over his threadbare shirt and then stuck out his hand.

"Yes, of course," said the man. He put his pipe in his mouth and fished a flat felt purse out of his trouser pocket. "There you are," he said around his long pipe. "Should be enough in there to get us through the evening, not counting any finder's fees."

Hosen pried open the purse with his thumb and forefinger and peered at the boxings inside — each coin embossed with an image of Kredik Shaw, the towering and palatial cathedral-like home of the Lord Ruler himself. Hosen slipped the purse into an inside pocket and looked the other man in the eye. "Hutch," he said.

"Hosen," Hutch replied.

"Where are we?"

"Upstairs is a flat lent to us by a couple that I've put up at the Golden Cauldron for the night," Hutch said. "They don't know anyone involved but me and they don't know why we're here. They'll have plenty of witnesses to their alibi when they claim they weren't here tonight, should it come to that."

"This a safe house of yours, then?" Hosen's voice was leathery and creaky, like his body.

"Just for tonight. Haven't used it before, will try not to use it again. No secret you have to keep, here. I wouldn't do that to you."

“Many thanks. Especially tonight.”

Hutch pointed upstairs with his pipe and Hosen started the laborious process of climbing the steps with his peg leg and crutch. “Does this mean you’ve got something good for us?”

“Oh yes.”

“A lead?”

“Two leads, from two separate houses.”

Hutch raised an eyebrow at that. “On the same night?”

Hosen hacked and coughed and nodded as he neared the top of the stairs. There he paused and turned back toward Hutch, who held one hand out to brace the old man. “Are you burning?”

Hutch nodded. In his gut he was slowly burning copper shavings, creating an aura in which Allomantic powers could not be detected by Bronze-burning Mistings or Mistborn — an aura called a coppercloud. “The Rioter is here,” Hutch said. A coppercloud not only blocked evidence of Allomantic power, it disrupted the efforts of emotional Allomancers to dampen or rile emotions.

“Is he now?” asked Hosen.

Hutch nodded.

“Then don’t you let up for a minute,” Hosen said as he climbed the last few steps. “I’m in no mood to be made mad tonight. You want to get me surly, you get me drinking.” Hosen looked in through the open door at the top of the stairs.

A dark-haired, dark-eyed young man looked back at him across the flat’s cramped living room. He stood at a gable near an open window and looked back at Hosen as if he’d been caught doing something. They held each others’ gaze for a long moment.

“That goes for you, too,” Hosen said to the young man as he crossed the threshold.

Hutch came in behind him saying, “Rolliard, this is the great king of street lore, knower of all things worth paying for, and informer to skaa and lord alike — Hosen.”

Rolliard nodded and closed the shutters on his window.

“Hosen,” Hutch began, “this is Rolliard, Rioter of—”

“He doesn’t need to know where—” Rolliard interrupted.

“—I was going to say, ‘some repute,’” Hutch finished.

Hosen didn’t seem to be paying attention. He propped his crutch up against the door frame and hobbled over to the far side of the living room, using the angled-ceiling beams for support. The room was yellow in the lamplight, its faded paper walls peeling where water leaked in through the patched roof. Hosen paused to look at a simple hand-sized portrait of a young woman that hung near the kitchen doorway.

Hutch watched him inspect it.

Hosen made a quiet sound, as if he’d made up his mind about something, and then turned back to face the rest of the room. “Think this young lady will mind,” he asked, “if I sample some of the house wine?” He craned his neck to peer into the kitchen.

Hutch pulled out one of the benches in the dining nook, which was little more than a closet with a dinner table in it. “I brought you some brandy, actually,” he said, scooping up the bottle.

“Ah!” Hosen hobbled over. “Let’s get to souring my mood, then. You, there,” he said, pointing at Rolliard, “get all the shutters?”

Rolliard closed the last of the shutters, then slid the window shut inside it. Rolliard then indicated his finished work with both hands.

Hosen snorted up a nostril’s worth of dry, sooty snot. “Sit down, then. I don’t want you hovering.”

Rolliard walked over and sat in an under-stuffed chair in the living area.

“Drinking?” Hosen asked him.

Rolliard shrugged.

“Then come here. Where we can pour.” Hosen slid himself into the dining nook. “And where I can see you,” he mumbled. “Unless you want me talking so loud that every Tineye from here to the river can hear us.” He said that louder.

Rolliard got up and, glaring at Hutch, came over. Hutch waved him into the dining nook’s inside corner and then went to dim the lamps throughout the room. He brought his pipe, a lamp, three small glass goblets, and the bottle of brandy back to the table. There he sat himself down on the bench next to Rolliard.

They sat quietly while Hutch laid out the misshapen glasses — fine examples of noble castoffs, no doubt cherished in this skaa household — and poured a round of brandies. Hosen licked his lips and ignored Rolliard, who looked at Hosen, looked away, and looked at him again. Hosen finally made eye contact with the young man for a moment; then looked back at his brandy and downed it in a gulp.

Hutch smiled and took a sip.

Rolliard shifted, turning sideways on the bench, putting his back against the nook’s deepest wall, and leaning on one elbow. His brandy sat untouched in front of him.

“Gentlemen,” Hutch said. “Let’s get to it.”

“Why is this one here?” Hosen asked, pointing at Rolliard. “What was your name again?”

“Rolliard, old man,” Rolliard said.

Hosen frowned and nodded.

“He’s helping me,” Hutch said. He craned his neck to make eye contact with Hosen. “Hosen? He’s helping me.”

“Yes?”

“Yes,” said Hutch.

“Got a few irons? In a few fires?” asked Hosen.

Hutch nodded. “That’s right. And Rolliard is looking for work and I’m going to put him to work and I need you to lay off him for a little bit while we get squared away.”

Hosen nodded again. “Need a Rioter, do you?”

Hutch smiled. “Never know.”

Hosen smiled. “Sometimes I do.”

Hutch chuckled genuinely. "Fair enough."

Rolliard sat still.

"Lighten up, son," Hosen said to Rolliard, pouring himself another brandy and drinking it quick.

"You have a job for us, old man?" Rolliard asked.

Hosen coughed a bit. "Not for you, no. I have information and you decide if it's worth pursuing. I give Hutch here first bite, tonight, because he's paid for the privilege. Take the job, though, and there's money in it."

"Really?" Hutch leaned forward. "Actual pay or opportunities for loot?"

Hosen looked Hutch in the eye. "Actual pay," he said, wagging his empty glass. "At least, according to one of the fine souls I met tonight."

Hutch poured Hosen a brandy. "Really?" He sounded fascinated.

Rolliard furrowed his brow. "Is it that unusual?"

Hutch and Hosen each drank a dram.

"I mean," said Rolliard, "don't you usually get paid?"

"Not that simple," Hutch said. "Usually we get paid in opportune information that leads to money. But in this case..."

"In this case," Hosen said, "I've been told that actual money awaits."

"That's big," Hutch said to Rolliard. "And risky."

Rolliard looked at each of them.

"The nobility need deniability," Hutch said. "They know they have thieves and liars in their midst. They know that Luthadel is the capital of skullduggery in the Final Empire just as it is the capital of legitimate business. They can't ordinarily just go hiring thieves and cutthroats to go on misadventures for them."

"The moment when money changes hands is perilous for everyone," Hosen said into his empty goblet.

"Either side can trap the other when money is meant to change hands. Tip off an Obligator or an Inquisitor and the moment you go to collect your pay becomes the moment they collect *you*."

"Your head," Hosen said.

"Or your head," Hutch went on. "We ordinarily don't deal in direct coinage. We almost certainly won't in this case, either."

"Almost certainly," Hosen said.

"But the fact that a noble has offered it tells us something very interesting about the job," Hutch said.

Rolliard raised one eyebrow.

Hutch scratched at his beard, then said: "It means something serious is about to happen. It means they really want to motivate someone to take action."

Hosen picked at the table with his only hand. "Ordinarily the opportunity is the prize. But when a noble is willing to pay—"

"It's either a trap," Hutch said.

"Or it's a treat," Hosen smiled at Rolliard.

Rolliard looked at them each. "Or a trap."

Hutch smiled.

Hosen looked at Hutch. "He'll do."

Rolliard let out half a chuckle. “So this is what you bring to the table, old man? Obvious traps?”

Hutch raised his eyebrows at that.

Hosen pointed a finger at Rolliard. “I bring things that a *wise man*,” he nodded toward Hutch, “can use.”

“Or a lunatic,” said Hutch, smiling.

Hosen turned his attention to Hutch. “Don’t you start now, too. I—”

“I mean it, don’t I?” Hutch raised his hands against Hosen’s pointed finger. “I think I know who’d be up for a job that might be an obvious trap.”

“*Might* be?” said Rolliard.

Hutch waved him off. “Tell us more about what you’ve learned tonight.”

Hosen nodded toward Rolliard. “He’s all right to hear all this?”

Hutch nodded.

“But he’s a noble, isn’t he?”

Rolliard tilted his head. “How did you know that?”

Hosen looked serious. “I know a lot of things. It’s my business.”

“He’s not so much a noble anymore,” Hutch offered. Rolliard looked at him darkly. “House Haught has turned him loose.”

“House Haught?” Hosen raised his eyebrows. “Well, now.”

“That’s interesting to you?” Rolliard asked.

Hosen nodded. “The two houses that sent people to me tonight were House Urbain and, I’m almost certain, House Haught.”

“Really?” asked Hutch.

“Really?” asked Rolliard.

“Oh yes,” said Hosen.

“Let’s hear it, then,” said Hutch.

Hosen wagged his empty cup and as Hutch started to pour, Hosen cleared his throat and started into it: “First, I was approached by a lord of House Urbain. It may have been one of Turner Urbain’s sons—”

“May have?” asked Rolliard.

“Shadows. Hoods. People are cautious when they talk to me and I don’t pry. Got to be cautious, too.”

“Lest you get killed.”

“Bah!” Hosen took a drink. “That’s inevitable. Farmers get muddy, informants get killed. Until then, I drink better than you do, boy.”

Hutch coaxed him on with a wave of his hand. “House Urbain.”

“They want someone to work House Bylerum.”

Hutch nodded. Rolliard looked confused. “Who’s that?”

“Small house, come to town from the Southern Dominance. Just trying to get started. They’re in business with Urbain, aren’t they? They sell—”

“Metals,” said Hosen. “And Urbain is out to ruin their reputation, apparently. They want a deal with House Bylerum to go sideways — want Bylerum’s reputation stained or worse.” Hosen drank. “That’s what they’re willing to pay for. Cash at a dead drop the day after some party at the Bylerum keep.”

“Why sully the reputation of a new partner?” Rolliard asked. “I mean, I can

think of plenty of reasons, but why this time?"

Hutch shrugged. "Maybe they just want to put the newcomers in their place."

"Short leash," Hosen said, swallowing. "Keep them from dealing with other houses for a while."

Hutch nodded. "Or maybe there's something in their contract that benefits Urbain if Bylerum is seen to fail. For sure, if Urbain is buying metals, they'll get them cheaper from a house that can't hardly bargain with anyone else."

"I don't understand, though," Rolliard admitted. "Won't Bylerum be able to find out that Urbain was behind this? How could we know and they won't?"

"The nobility is vast and convoluted," said Hutch. "It's the way they like it."

"Gives them room to maneuver against each other," added Hosen. "No one can prove much, even if Bylerum gets to me. *I* know that fellow tonight was from House Urbain, but I don't have evidence. Even if I say it was Urbain, Bylerum would be acting on the word of a dirty skaa. They'll move against Urbain based on their position and their gut."

"If they can," said Hutch.

"If they can," Hosen nodded.

"The nobility needs informants and go-betweens," Hutch said, picking at the tabletop, "so they can deny things and avoid beatings. Remember, the houses are all scheming against each other and they all know it. It's only when they make big mistakes or earn big victories that they get into trouble."

"Bylerum, if its sturdy, will play back against Urbain," Hosen said, "and the dance continues."

"Assuming Bylerum can withstand the blow dealt to them by Urbain," Rolliard said. "Don't we get to decide how big a blow that is? I mean, we decide who to give this information to, right?"

Hosen's eyes and smile went wide. "Yes. We do."

Hutch smiled, too. "We give it someone who knows what they're doing, someone who doesn't know all the sordid background on it, and let her decide how hard to hit."

"I know who you're thinking of," Hosen said. "It's a bad idea."

"No, it's not."

"Yes, it is."

Hutch shrugged. "She's quite capable."

"She's mad. She'll ruin people to get it done."

Hutch crinkled his face. "No. Do you think?"

"I do."

Rolliard spoke up. "Who are you talking about?"

Hosen shook his head.

"A thief who poses as a noblewoman, now and again," said Hutch.

"Lady Pendrel," said Hosen.

"Not her real name," said Hutch.

Rolliard nodded. "She'll take this kind of job?"

"For the chance to sully even a minor house?" asked Hutch. "Yes. I think she will. She's that proud. She might even go after the coinage the next day."

“And that will be the end of her,” Hosen said.

“Maybe not,” Hutch said. “After the way the Erikeller job went last winter, she’d have either the coinage or the comeuppance coming to her, anyway.”

“Fair enough,” said Hosen, finishing his drink. “Want to hear what I got from the Haught household?”

Rolliard leaned forward.

“I do,” said Hutch.

“This is a curious one — not quite thievery, not quite kidnapping. Sort of a rescue. And it plays right against the Urbain job.”

Hutch raised his eyebrows again. “I’m listening.”

“You listening, boy?” Hosen asked Rolliard.

“Who did you talk to?” Rolliard asked.

“A woman of House Haught. Mistborn, I’d think, judging by the way she arrived. Lady Chanim, perhaps?”

Rolliard’s expression didn’t change.

“Do you know her?” Hutch asked.

Rolliard wagged his head from side to side. “We’re cousins. Removed. We’ve met.”

“She’s Mistborn, yeah?” asked Hosen.

Rolliard smiled. “I’m sure I don’t know.”

Hutch laughed a bit and patted Rolliard on the back. “Good man.”

Hosen pointed his finger at Rolliard again, then let it drop. “Whoever this Mistborn may or may not have been, she gave clear instructions. A young woman, called Amyse, is to be liberated. They’ll have her at an Urbain keep out near Chethram, in the Eastern Dominance. Make it look like a kidnapping, then set her free in Chethram somewhere and apparently the Haughts will do the rest.”

Rolliard looked confused.

“Well,” said Hutch, “that’s a new one. Perhaps House Haught intends to ransom her off. Or ‘rescue’ her and return her?”

“No doubt embarrassing House Urbain in the process,” Rolliard said.

“Your houses do so hate each other, don’t they?” Hosen smiled.

“It’s difficult being among the lowest ranked of the Great Houses isn’t it?” Hutch elbowed Rolliard.

“I would hardly know,” Rolliard said. “So is that job a trap, too?”

“I don’t think so,” Hosen said. “It pays only in opportunity and information, plus whatever our ‘kidnappers’ decide to take from the Great House of Urbain.”

“Who is this woman that Haught wants rescued?” Hutch asked no one in particular.

Hosen held up a finger. “I know of *one* person with that name, only. And, get this, it’s a Bylerum.”

“Amyse Bylerum?” Rolliard asked.

“Quite,” said Hosen. “Daughter of the Lord Bycroft Bylerum, newly arrived in the capital. She’s an honor hostage of House Urbain.”

Hutch nodded and finished his drink. “Losing her should embarrass the Urbains pretty well.”



Rolliard looked at the tabletop and tapped a finger on it. "So Urbain moves to humiliate House Bylerum," he said, then tapped with another finger, "and House Haught tries to humiliate Urbain by helping Bylerum. Is that right?"

"I don't know what's *right*," Hutch chuckled, "but it's accurate."

"Well," Hosen said, "I don't know about all that. The houses want to hurt each other, sure, but we don't know who wants to help whom or why or why not. We could go mad trying to sort out their motives."

Hosen looked at Hutch. "Am I wrong?" Hutch shook his head. "Anything left in that bottle?"

Hutch passed Hosen the bottle.

"Another question," Rolliard said, poking the table with one finger as if he had pinned his question beneath it. "Why bother with all of this? Why employ us at all? Shouldn't the nobility not even know we exist? Shouldn't they be trying to put us away?"

Hosen let out a chortle as he poured himself the rest of the brandy.

"I know I must seem foolish to you," Rolliard started, "but—"

"Not foolish," interrupted Hosen. "Young. Noble. You come from a much simpler world than ours."

As Hosen drank up, Hutch put a hand on the table in front of Rolliard. "The nobility knows they can't put an end to thieving crews for good. Not all thieving crews. Not all thievery. For two reasons: First, it just isn't possible; thieves will always emerge from the among the skaa, hungry for what the nobles have and willing to risk death to get a bite of it. Right?"

Rolliard nodded.

"All right. Second, they need us lowly ne'er-do-wells to do some of their work for them. They're still noble and we're still skaa, after all." Hutch waved a hand between him and Hosen. "Well, Hosen and I are. But, still, imagine the alternative. If the nobility had everything done by their own people, everything would be traced back to them. By involving us in their business, they muddy the waters. It's not always possible to tell what cons and thieveries are happenstance and what's been instigated. So, once again—"

"Deniability," said Rolliard.

"Exactly."

Rolliard nodded. "Do they ever, you know, pardon you?"

Hosen chortled again.

"Best they ever do, in my experience," explained Hutch, "is disrupt investigations. One house gets in another's way. But once caught, no, you're caught."

"You're guilty of thievery or fraud or of being more hopeful and grabby than a skaa should be, and you're punished for that." Hosen grinned mirthlessly.

"Killed." Rolliard's eyebrows moved as he said the word.

"Or worse," said Hosen. "The Pits of Hathsins."

Hutch spit on the floor at the sound of the name.

"So," said Rolliard. "We'd better not get caught."

"Right."

"Yes."

Hosen slurped at his brandy. “Who, then, do we invite to visit the ninth Great House of the Final Empire?” Hosen put on a mock regal air. “Who dares to tread the soil claimed by House Urbain?”

“It has to be someone good,” said Hutch. “Someone we trust not to rat us out. Someone who can leave Luthadel and do the job on Eastern soil.”

“Someone willing to brave not just the guards of Keep Urbain but, presumably, a koloss or two. The beasts may be loosed like they would against common raiders, out there in Chethram,” Hosen mused.

Hutch scratched at his chin. “The Nine Eyes?”

Hosen nodded absently. “They have Mistings among them. They’re cunning. Could be a good choice.”

“Nine Eyes?” asked Rolliard.

“There’s five of them, but altogether they have only nine eyes. They’re a crew from... well, from all over. I won’t say any more than that for now.”

Hosen knocked on the table. “Blockstreet.”

“The Blockstreet crew?” asked Hutch.

Hosen nodded.

“Locals?” asked Rolliard.

“They’re from Luthadel, yes. They also have Mistings and a good knack for this sort of work. Think we can get them?”

“That’s up to you,” said Hosen.

“I’ll take it to both crews and see who’s interested,” Hutch decided. He put a hand on Rolliard’s shoulder. “You’ll help me spread the word, won’t you?”

Rolliard nodded, but his eyes were staring off at nothing.

“Where is your head, boy?” Hosen asked.

Rolliard looked him in the eye. “How do you... how do you do it? How do you—”

“Live my life balanced on a wooden beam above a pit of fire?” Hosen smiled wide. Rolliard nodded. “My boy, they’ve done the worst to me already. All they can do now is kill me. I’m bound for that one day anyway. What’s the point in fearing it? Every day I steal another day of life out from under the Lord Ruler’s precious nobles. I am,” Hosen scratched the stump where his arm once was, “the greatest thief in all of Luthadel.”

Rolliard stared at him.

“You asked,” said Hutch.

“Anything else?” Hosen asked. “Or can I go to sleep?”

Rolliard nodded. “I’ve got one more for you, old man.”

Hosen reached for his crutch. “Yes?”

“You said you knew I was a noble.”

“Of course I did.”

“But you were surprised I was from House Haught. So how did you—”

“Your hands, boy. You don’t have skaa hands. Your life’s been spent working fine buttons and counting coins, not shoveling ash or scrubbing walls.” Hosen got to standing.

Rolliard leaned back.

“Am I wrong?”

Rolliard tilted his head. “Hutch told you.”

Hosen smiled, tried to hide it.

Hutch laughed once. “I told you,” Hutch said to Hosen. “What did I tell you?”

“Yes, you’re a sharp one, son,” Hosen said, wagging a finger at Rolliard.

“You still have noble hands, though.”

“And you’re not afraid,” said Rolliard, “that I’ll go back to my noble house and report on you?”

Hutch shook his head, still smiling.

Hosen lost his smile all at once. “You’re not the first noble to threaten it, son. But, no, I’m not afraid. I’m not afraid of anything but the metal-eyed Inquisitors and the Lord Ruler himself. The worst you can do,” Hosen said, “is get me killed.”

Rolliard looked away.

“Now I’m going to lay in that fine bed in the other room and sleep until the mists are gone.” Hosen hobbled toward the bedroom. At the door he stopped, raised his head, and without looking back said: “Remember, son, that the worst I can do is tell them who you are and where you are.”

Rolliard held still. “My family doesn’t care if I—”

“Not your family,” Hosen said. “House Urbain. You’re an exposed bit of skin, now — a piece of their enemy.” Hosen paused. “You’re an opportunity now, too.”





## 8

# THE BYLERUM JOB



My heartbeat quickened. From this point forward everyone would operate according to the plan. My plan. No more revisions could be made, no more reactions could be second-guessed, no more contingencies could be accounted for. It had to live on its own now. It would work or it wouldn't.

I gave my dance partner a demure curtsy. He smiled back from behind his neatly trimmed beard and adjusted the jacket, buttoned tight over a white shirt as was the style of the season.

"Good evening, Lady Pendrel," he said, kissing my hand.

"Good evening," I replied.

I slightly elevated the front of my gown to cross the ballroom floor, leaving him to go his own direction. He would soon find his way to the gallery. He was my spy. A man named Kyse. And, like me, he was an imposter. A skaa dressed up in noble's clothing. Taught to speak like them, walk like them, and hold one's nose up like them.

I had found Kyse in a brothel. One of those in an alley near the Pewter Gate in the shadow of the Old Wall that could be identified by smell rather than any shop sign — an array of pungent perfumes wafting from its windows. Kyse was keeping up his noble identity even there, blending in among the nervous clerks and sniveling sons of minor houses who waited for their turns in the cramped, dark hallways of the row house. Ready to spend their discretionary allowances on skaa flesh.

He was good. He wasn't a Soother or an Allomancer of any sort; I would have known if he was. He was just a natural actor. He fit in well. It took me a long time to realize he was a dupe. As for why I was at the brothel, I won't get into that.

My own destination now was the bank of archways along one side of the ballroom. The archways opened to a balcony that overlooked the courtyard. Other nobles were there looking down at the arriving coaches to see their friends just now showing up to the ball; I was looking up at the towers.

I burned Bronze and reached out with my senses, opening myself to the subtle signs of Allomancy around me. No Iron was being burned... yet. That was a good sign. What I could sense was several points above me where Tin was being burned — by Tineyes. They were lookouts posted on the walls and towers to keep an eye out for any trouble. There would be one or two posted at a keep like this on any night. But on the night of a ball, nobles were even more paranoid. I wondered how many were tasked with watching for dangers coming from outside and how many were ordered to listen to conversations taking place inside the keep itself. Burning Tin enhanced all their senses. Made them see farther, hear soft whispers, feel the slightest vibrations, not to mention the subtle things they could taste and smell. I could feel a few of them on the north tower and two more on the ramparts to the south.

And one right above me. This was Relb. He was mine.

The first time I had sensed Relb burning his Tin was many years ago. It stopped the conversation I was having with a potential fence dead in its tracks when I felt it. The burning was very subtle, but I was paranoid so I began tracing the Allomantic pulse to its source. It led me through the rowdy common room of the inn where the fence and I were speaking and back into its kitchens. There I found a young boy with his hands clasped about his ears, trying to hold out the amplified sounds of the clanking dishes and the myriad of shouts and singing voices coming from the Inn and surrounding buildings in the Hotel District. One of the kitchen girls explained how he always gets these headaches and not to bother him. But I knew the truth: he was burning trace amounts of Tin in his body without even realizing it. A Tineye is always useful so I brought him to associates of mine who knew the craft and had the boy trained.

I tapped a fingernail on the railing of the balcony in a short pattern. Three short taps, a pause, and a fourth tap. This was the signal. Relb could feel that from ten feet above me. He responded by flaring his Tin. He did so seven times in quick succession. This was a code we had worked out ahead of time. Each flare counted two archers posted somewhere on the walls or towers of the keep. Seven flares meant fourteen or fifteen archers in total. I tapped on the railing to acknowledge the message.

Fourteen or fifteen archers was too many. Something had to be done about that. But that was all part of the plan. With no way to sense it, I had to trust that the next step was happening at this very moment.

Gasps came from inside the ballroom as a Terrisman steward emerged from the gallery and approached his master, Lord Bylerum, with as much urgency as decorum would allow. I didn't have to be a Tineye to know what the Terrisman was saying.

There was a fire in the gallery. How embarrassing this must be for House Bylerum. A fire on the night of their first ball in Luthadel. I'm sure that Lord

Bylerum would prefer to ignore it. He would drink his wine, smile, and pretend like nothing was happening. But fires burn. Fires destroy tapestries and treasures like those displayed in the gallery. Fires spread. They demand action. Lord Bylerum would be forced to act.

The bells rang out, echoing through the stone corridors of the keep. The kitchen staff hurried to action under orders of the steward, buckets shoved into the skaa's overworked hands. They formed the first of the line, drawing water from the pond at the foot of the keep and passing it up the drive, into the courtyard. The servants were called to duty next. They continued the line, passing the buckets into the main entrance and up the stairs of the great room. But more were needed. Keeps are, by design, enormous. There is much ground to cover from the pond to the gallery. And of course the guests could not be expected to join the line. Lord Bylerum's steward began to call the guards to action. He left one or two at every post, but wherever there were excess guards, they were summoned to join the line.

I counted nine archers marching across the ballroom floor to join the bucket brigade. The next phase of the plan was about to begin.

There were still five or six archers stationed in the north tower and the south ramparts. Maybe as many Tineyes. But the fire was more than just a way to keep guards and archers busy. The ringing bells, the activity in the courtyard, the commotion in the ballroom, the heat emanating from the gallery. This all served to overwhelm the senses of anyone burning Tin nearby. I could sense, as the bronze simmered in my stomach, the Tin extinguishing at several points around me. One or two attempted to keep their power active, but I doubted they could concentrate on anything with the ringing in their ears and the pounding all around them.

This was Gitsko's opportunity to act. He only had a short window to do his part.

I found Gitsko when I was looking for a Thug. A Misting who could burn Pewter was an asset to any crew. They are stronger, more agile, and physically faster than anyone without Allomantic powers. The problem was, despite my abilities as a Seeker, I couldn't find any. All the ones I had worked with before — even the ones I only knew of — had already been recruited by Dockson or Breeze. How many Thugs did they need?

Gitsko wasn't a Misting but he was still talented. He could climb. He had developed the upper body strength, the sense of balance, and dexterous grip to squirrel his way up any surface.

He had worked for years scraping and washing ash off the outer walls of noble keeps and other structures in Luthadel. That was until a noble girl had accused him of being a spy and her father's men took him prisoner and sentenced him to death. But on the night before his execution, Gitsko escaped by climbing up to the high window in his cell, squeezing through its bars, and clambering down the tall tower where they kept him.

He had been hiding among the thieving crews ever since. Hastel, another crew leader, had recommended him to me. He said Gitsko was fiercely loyal. I believed him.

It still would have been nice to have a Thug.



Gitsko, according to the plan, was climbing now. With the archer number reduced and the Tineyes distracted, there was a blind spot: the very north tower where half of them were posted. From its base he would be making his ascent up the façade of the north wall and continue up the sheer face of the tower. A length of rope, which he wasn't using to climb with, would be coiled across his torso.

A Thug could have taken the four or so guards — archers and Tineyes — in the tower with ease. Gitsko would require the element of surprise. As a hapless archer bellied up to the tower window, Gitsko would bury a knife into his chin. When the others came to investigate, Gitsko would already be circling to the other side of the tower, along the wall. He would use the opening to throw a knife into an exposed back. He could perhaps take out two before the remaining archer turned to face him, arrow drawn. Gitsko claimed he could deal with the rest. I hoped he wasn't exaggerating.

When Gitsko claimed the tower, pulling open the hatch would lead him to the inner stairwell. One floor down, in the belly of that tower, was our prize.

Miden and I confirmed its presence the previous night when she and I found our way into a seasonally neglected tower for storing grain, across the alley. Miden being, besides Relb and myself, the other Misting on the crew. She's a Lurcher. When she burns Iron, she says she can see blue lines that no one else can see. They emanate from her chest and stretch towards nearby metals: door handles and hinges, candle holders, belt buckles, whatever is around.

"Thissing in the site," Miden said in her street slang. She gestured, along what I assumed was the thickest blue line she could see, towards the largest tower of the keep.

"The north tower?" I asked.

"Wasing to know to be sure."

"How far up?"

"Almost the whering the top. Atting the loop," she said. She was referring to the top row of arrow slits near the top of the tower, just below the lookout nest.

"And you can Pull it?" was my next question. Everything hinged on that.

Miden closed her eyes. In her mind she was able to select that thick blue line. In her mind she Pulled on it. Her shoes began to skid across the stone floor towards the tower window. Then she let go.

"A littling of the bit."

"Good," I said. "We better stop now. We don't want to attract attention."

Miden nodded. Of my crew, she was the one I knew the least. I had only met her two days prior at the safe-house of her former crew. But the way her body tensed when I said those words, I could tell she knew what I was alluding to. She had seen an Inquisitor before, I was sure of it.

Tonight Miden was in that same tower across the alley, braced well against its reinforced wall. I could sense her Iron starting to burn now, only slightly. She was feeling out her blue lines, picking the right one.

In the north tower, if things were continuing as planned, Gitsko was poking one end of his rope out one of the tower's arrow slits. That end would have a small iron weight attached to it.

I felt Iron being flared. I looked up into the sky of towers above the courtyard. I could see a line — the rope — being drawn from one tower to the other. Miden now would catch her end of the rope and secure it to some part of that tower.

There was little time now. If I could see that rope suspended across the sky, so could the archers and Tineyes on the ramparts. Miden had to act now.

I could feel the heat of the iron now blazing in Miden's stomach. This could be the strongest Ironpull she had ever attempted. She was going for the prize. Of course the force of her Pull was acting on her as well, pressing her against the inside of the wall. Miden wasn't the type to give up. Either she or the object was going to come free from their respective tower.

The stone of the tower wall swelled outwards, the blocks moaning free from their tight pattern. With a second Pull, some of the stones wrenched free and rained down into the alley below. Out from the hole left in the tower, emerged a chest — a lead strongbox — suspended by iron rings from the rope that stretched across the sky. Inside that chest, if my informant could be trusted, were fifty thousand boxings... and a little something extra.

This was the prize our crew had been assembled for.

Inside the tower, Gitsko would have the other end of the rope wrapped around the central pillar of the tower to keep it taught. Miden continued to Pull on the chest, guiding it along the rope towards her.

A Tineye rushed into the ballroom from the ramparts.

"Master! Lord Bylerum!" he yelled, "we're being robbed!"

The Tineye led his lord to the balcony — only a few feet from where I was standing — and pointed up at the towers and at the chest now halfway between them.

"By the Lord Ruler!" Lord Bylerum cursed. He was paralyzed for a moment. He could feel the eyes of his guests on his back, I'm sure. "Send out the archers, then," he said finally. "And send guards to the silo tower! Cut them off!"

The archers were called back from the fire. They hefted their bows and ran up to the walls. I could see them loose their arrows, aiming for the hole in the north tower where Gitsko was exposed. The curse of anguish I heard called out into the night must have come from him.

Other guards scurried through the courtyard, pushing past the departing guests, to make for the other Keep. If she was smart, Miden would already be gone. Her part was done. She could have fled to avoid being trapped.

The archers had repositioned themselves on the roof opposite the courtyard from the north tower where they would have a better angle at the hole in stone and Gitsko inside. They set loose another volley of arrows. Surprisingly, the missiles bent off course, as if taken by a sudden wind in the direction of the silo tower. Then, just as surprisingly, they lost their flight and fell out of the sky.

"A Lurcher," Lord Bylerum breathed next to me. The other guests who had decided to stay, the curious ones, were all gathered at the balcony as well. They saw it too. Miden had stuck around to help her crew mate and had revealed her hand in the process. The guards would be prepared for her abilities when they came at her. Foolish girl.

Another of the Tineyes approached Lord Bylerum. “My lord, I believe I found the arsonist.”

“Well, snatch him,” Lord Bylerum ordered, turning momentarily from the balcony.

“He could be dangerous,” the Tineye said. “He could be a Misting.”

“Take three guards with you, then. No more.”

I rapped on the railing four times as the Tineye ran off.

Lord Bylerum turned to his steward. “And send anyone else you have to the north tower!”

As the steward moved to do as he was told, I looked back up at the north tower. Gitsko was still there holding his end of the rope. Guards were already making their way up the tower. Miden wouldn’t have much time either, though the guards coming after her would have stripped themselves of their armor and metal weapons. Both were desperately outnumbered. The chest — our prize — was hanging on a rope in the sky between them.

This is when Gitsko loosened his grip on the rope. Wound around the pillar, Gitsko could let it go at a controlled pace. The line across the sky stretching between the two towers slackened. That slack let the chest descend straight down from its position.

“No!” Lord Bylerum shouted. “No, no, no!”

The lord of the keep looked desperately for someone under his command to shout orders to. He scrambled off of the balcony, back into his home, practically pushing me over on his way out.

“The alley!” he cried into the ballroom and then into the great room as he ran through the keep. “Send men to the alley!”

The alley. Where the last member of my crew, Sumdel, waited with his cart. Sumdel wasn’t even a thief. He was a carter I found in the din of the market place. As merchants called their wares and shouted prices, this man had simply stared at me with his hungry, desperate eyes. And now a chest full of boxings was being lowered into his cart. I couldn’t see what was happening there. I just had to trust this would all work.

I turned and looked back into the ballroom. Fairly empty now except for the handful of servants still working to contain the fire to the gallery. The guests were all leaving or watching the action from the balcony. The guards and archers were dispatched in a multitude of directions. The inner corridors of the keep were, for the moment, all mine.

As I started down the main corridor, footsteps came marching my way. They soon revealed themselves to be the Tineye — wearing a particularly prideful look upon his face — followed by four guards. Held between the guards was Kyse. His face, I saw in a brief glance, was purple with bruises. The look he shot back to me, I dare not think about. I let them walk past and didn’t say a word.

Poor Kyse. It was his maps, accrued from months of spying, that I had memorized to navigate these convoluted corridors. It was his instructions that informed me as to what pocket Lord Bylerum kept his keys — keys that were now in my possession after the lord brushed past me on the balcony. It was Kyse’s diligence

that let me know that Lord Bylerum had taken to sleeping in the west chambers now that the master bedroom was under renovations.

I turned one key in the door's lock and swung it open. I stepped into the chamber. Another key opened the cabinet on the south wall.

Inside the cabinet was a case. I pulled it from the cabinet, set it on the bed, and opened it. There, held in black velvet, were dozens of small glass vials. Each vial was neatly labeled as to the metals it contained.

My heart leapt. There was this slight shock that everything my informant had told me was true. These were the goods House Bylerum intended to sell for the money in the chest. Bylerum had received their payment but had not yet delivered the product — though they were likely contracted to do so as arranged by an Obligator. Everything was here this one night, the night of Bylerum's ball. This was quite the opportunity.

If only I had learned about it sooner. Three days ago I was told. If I had more time I could have left here with the vials and the boxings. I could have put together a plan that would keep all of my crew and their identities safe. Instead Miden and Gitsko would be caught in their towers. When they fought back, which they were exactly the types to do so, they would be killed. Kyse would be turned over to the Inquisitors. He would tell them about me of course, but nothing Kyse knew about me was true. And it wouldn't take long for Lord Bylerum and his guards to catch up with Sumdel's rickety cart and claim back the chest full of boxings.

I looked at the vials in front of me. These were the real prizes. These were the objects of the short-notice plan. The last-minute plan. I pulled up my gown and removed two rolled up cloths attached to the inside of my skirts. One by one, I took the vials out of the case and wrapped them safe in the first cloth. I opened the second cloth and took the counterfeit vials inside them and replaced those I took from the case. The cloths were re-attached under my gown. The case went back into the cabinet. I locked the cabinet and then the chamber door behind me. On my way out I passed Lord Bylerum. He was smiling as his guards hauled the heavy chest back into the keep. I thanked him for a lovely evening and dropped the keys beautifully back into his pocket.

By tomorrow, every noble in Luthadel would hear of the job that failed. Of the complicated plot to steal a chest full of boxings that went horribly wrong. How long will it take them to discover that the real plan — my plan — worked?





# 9

## THE FALL OF HOUSE BYLERUM



I was kicked awake. I let out a gasp before I came to my senses enough to cut off a shout of pain. The boot heel pressed into my ribs once more for measure. I hadn't had my lofty position for long — a personal skaa servant to a noble — but already my ribs were getting numb from the repeated bruising. I couldn't have slept long; the windows were still dark with night and mist. I looked up at my master.

"We're going," he said. "Get my things."

He was only a boy. In his eleven years of life he already learned to speak with as much fire as any of his elders when ordering skaa about. I pulled myself off the cold floor and followed him from the tiny servants quarters, through the halls of the manor house, and into his chamber.

"How long will the journey be?" I asked. "How much should I bring?"

He looked at me with disdain. "Bring everything." He turned to leave the chamber, but then he was stopped by a voice.

"Pack only enough clothing for a week, Ostice. Bring a few toys and some books to keep you occupied. Don't worry, we'll send for everything else later. Hurry now!"

The more reasonable voice came from his mother in the hallway. He didn't acknowledge it, just stormed off down the hall. Though she addressed him, the order was not meant for him. It was for me. I went to work removing his coats, shirts, and breaches from the wardrobe. Gathering his toys and books. Doing as she bid.

A week? I cursed my rotten luck. In three days time I was to be married. Secretly, of course. The nobles here did not acknowledge or allow skaa marriage. It was as ridiculous as celebrating a dog's birthday, they said. And after all the time it had taken me to convince Goodman Vellis — not to mention his daughter — I would now be absent for my own wedding night. Ordered away to serve at the feet of a noble child as he traveled to visit cousins or to see the spires of Luthadel. I set my chin and bit back the tears; they would gain me no sympathy here.

I packed the traveling chest tight and closed the lid. I looked around the room. My master's mother had said everything else would be sent for later. Damn my dull brain. Everything? Were we ever coming back?

I lifted the chest and began to lug it out to the carriage. It was not as heavy as my heart.

\* \* \*

I was not the only skaa hard at work. The house was in a frenzy of household servants clattering across the stone floors. Valuable items and furniture were being sorted and arranged. Chests and other luggage were being hauled out to the front gates. Once I emerged outside, I found many carriages preparing for departure. It took me some time to deduce which one belonged to my master and his mother. They were all, it appeared, headed for different destinations.

Were all the family nobles leaving? Ostice's older sisters were traveling separately and the Lady Bylerum had her own carriage and escorts as well. Ufrim, Ostice's brother, was busy seeing everyone into carriages and seemed to be the only member of the extended family not climbing into one himself.

\* \* \*

The carriage ride was not smooth. It bumped and jostled and jolted. And if you were to believe the look on my master's face, this was all my doing. He glared at me over his mother's shoulder to the rear of the cab where I sat along with Wenna, his mother's servant. She was mending clothing with a needle and thread as best she could as the carriage rolled about. Did Wenna have a lover she was being pulled away from, too? It didn't register on her face if she did. My master continued to look at me when he spoke to his mother.

"Why aren't we bringing more skaa with us?" he asked.

"There will be plenty of skaa where we are going, my dear," she said.

"I still don't understand why we have to go."

"Because your uncle is prideful and foolish. He made a mistake. And we are left to pay for it."

"I thought we were going to be rich. I thought we were going to move to his keep in Luthadel. Uncle said House Bylerum was going to be counted among the Great Houses."

"Understand this, Ostice: Our House Bylerum is no more. Your uncle squandered our name."



My master's eyes left me and turned to his mother.

"As much as he protests his innocence in the matter," she continued, "the Obligators may have their hands on him for a while. And if they ever let him go, no member of any house would ever take up another contract with him. The keep will be reclaimed as will any treasures he had in his possession that weren't already lost to that damned fire. We will do well to separate ourselves from him and put as much distance between Luthadel and ourselves over the coming months as we can. We will live with your cousins in Austrex, Lord Ruler willing."

For a moment my master actually seemed like a child. Lost and bewildered. The world had been wrenched out of his grasp.

"But what of the house?" he asked. "It's not going to his wife is it? What about the plantation and our guards and—?"

"The guards are of noble blood," his mother explained. "They are not slaves. Most of them have been given leave to seek new employment. I have managed to convince some of them to stay a few days to watch over the skaa until House Elariel can come to claim them."

House Elariel? I looked up at Wenna. She was still working her needle and thread. Had she heard that? Or was she too long her mistress's servant to even listen anymore? House Bylerum had been cruel to its skaa, this much was true of any house. But House Elariel had a reputation far beyond whippings and withholding meals. Stories of the Elariel plantations were what mothers used to scare their children into obedience.

"We are selling the skaa?" my master asked, dumbfounded.

"And the house and the plantation, though those are going to Lekal. I have left Ufrim to oversee the transaction. We will need capital more than anything else if we are to start over."

In a matter of days, Gella, my betrothed, the only woman I have ever loved, would be sold to House Elariel. My body shook with fear.

\* \* \*

I leapt over the twisted roots and spiny twigs, dodging past the gnarled trees of this sickly forest. I ran as hard and fast and far as I could. The wind bit at my face. My chest burned and my ankles ached but I would let none of it stop me. I couldn't.

It is a myth that plantation skaa are kept under lock and key. There are few such mechanisms on a plantation. Perhaps on the pantries or the master's coffers and chests. There are only a few taskmasters and guards for every hundred skaa. There are no fences or gates or great walls to keep us in. There is no need for that. We are kept slave by our fear. We are kept penned in by the mists.

So when I decided to escape the carriage, all I had to do was to open the door and jump. The mounted guard escorting my master and his mother gave chase for a while. But when I dove... no, when I slipped and fell down the slope and into the brush where his horse could not easily follow, he quit the chase. I picked my scraped and bloody self up and kept running.

How foolish was I? Would the mists come through tonight? Could I get caught out here, exposed? These thoughts drove me forward faster and faster. My feet were blistering and bleeding, but I ignored them.

I could warn my people. I could tell Gella and Goodman Vellis. Even we, we broken and beaten skaa, could overwhelm the small contingency of guards left for us. We could escape the fate that House Elariel held for us. We could have freedom.

\* \* \*

It wasn't difficult to sneak back into the plantation. I found my way to the hovel where I knew Goodman Vellis and his family dwelled, crammed in with several other families and huddled around the hearth. The night's allotment of soup had already been served.

"Ceril? What are you doing here, boy?" Vellis asked me. I could barely hear him over the din of dozens of conversations going on at once and he spoke to me from across the fire. I caught Gella's eyes over his shoulder. I had been so afraid I would never see her again.

"We are to be sold to House Elariel," I said, louder than I had expected to. The room grew quiet.

"To whom?" Vellis asked.

I repeated myself. I told him, and everyone else who now listened, of what my master's mother had said in the carriage. I told of their plans for us.

"The guard has been reduced," I said. "Many of them have left to seek work elsewhere. There are only a small number left. We could overcome—"

"Be very careful what you say," Vellis said, putting his hand up. "Do not incite everyone's hopes."

"But there is hope," I tried to explain. "There is at least something better than our new taskmasters. We can't just stay here and wait for that fate to befall us."

"We can, boy, and we will," Vellis said. "You will get us all killed, otherwise. We are not travelers. We cannot hope to outrun the guards. They will hunt us down. And we do not know how to survive in the wilderness. And what would you have us do when the mists come?"

"How do we know the mists aren't another lie they've fed us to keep us here?" I asked. I'm not sure what made me say such things. Perhaps the exhaustion from running. But I said it.

"The nobles did not tell us those things," Vellis said. "Our elders gave us these warnings. And their elders told them."

"But who told them?" I shook my head. "Either way, I would rather face the dangers unknown than the wrath we know Elariel will bring to our backs. At least out there we have a chance."

"Our chance is to stay together. To stay strong. To endure."

I looked past Goodman Vellis at Gella. Her eyes were veiled. She didn't return my gaze.

"I can't stay. The others must also be warned."

I left the hovel. I took the steps to the next hovel entrance, but then I just stood there shaking. When footsteps approached from behind me, I turned.

It was a boy. Maybe sixteen years old. Scrawny from surviving off the sludge we were fed. Just a whelp. He probably didn't look much different than I did.

"I will come with you," he said.

I nodded and the two of us went into the next hovel. I explained what was happening and made my case all over again. I was met with the same resistance that Goodman Vellis had shown me. But when I left that hovel, two more skaa followed me out.

\* \* \*

By the time morning came, I had visited each of the hovels. One hovel of skaa let us stay the night if we swore to leave them forever come dawn. Of the many of skaa that worked the plantation, there were just less than two dozen who agreed to come with me. But there was one I wouldn't leave without.

I found Gella, without her father present, at last, when she went to fetch water at dawn.

"Please tell me you will come with me," I begged, taking the bucket out of her hands.

She looked up at me. She let go of her bucket and she put a hand on my face. Gella couldn't speak. Her tongue had been cut out by a taskmaster when she was young. She could still make sounds, but she didn't bother to do so much anymore. She communicated what she needed to with a gesture or the look in her eyes.

The look in her eyes told me everything. She wasn't going to come with me. She couldn't leave her father's side. Not now.

My eyes filled with tears. I fell to my knees and she held my head against her body.

\* \* \*

Maybe, I pondered, I was blowing House Elariel's terror out of proportion. Perhaps the stories they told of the house's cruelty to their skaa were just as darkly imagined as I said the stories of the mists were. I was exhausted and hungry and, by the Lord Ruler, I honestly didn't know a thing. I could just stay here. Maybe I would be lucky enough to be sent to the same plantation as Gella. Maybe we could still have our secret marriage together. Maybe I would be lucky enough to only be kicked in the ribs every morning. Maybe that was the best I could hope for.

This is what I was thinking while I was facing twenty or so dusty faces in the mid-morning, standing out in the pale midwinter sun. They had been talking about which direction to head out in. The scrawny sixteen year old — his name I had learned to be Leb — wanted to go north towards Luthadel. He had heard there were skaa there who owned their own shops. More stories. Which stories were true and which were lies?

“I’m sorry,” I told them when I could finally meet their gaze. “I have been foolish. I have no idea what is out there. I can’t lead us. I wouldn’t know where to go or what to do for food. I don’t even know how to build a shelter. We would all die.”

Any smiles they had faded; their excitement eroded. They looked back and forth at each other and at me. Then one of the women stepped forward.

“We are already dead here,” she said. “This is no life. Are you scared of the mists stealing your soul? Isn’t that a better end than letting it be crushed day by day in these fields? The mistwraiths might make some better use of it.”

“Some of us have a life here,” I started to say.

“Not me,” she said. “I can’t stay in this condition. I’m going whether the rest of you go or not. We have this one opportunity. It might be our only chance in our entire lives.”

“She’s right, Ceril,” said Leb, stepping forward. “I’m going with her.”

One by one, the rest of them stepped up and voiced their will. They would all leave together. All but me.

The mists came that night. Everyone stayed huddled in the hovels. No one tried to escape.

\* \* \*

When I saw the would-be escapees all in the same place, the following morning, they each had a small rucksack packed, likely containing everything they owned. None of the elders had predicted heavy mists that night, so they decided it was time to begin their journey. They asked me one last time to come with them. I shook my head and watched them march off into the fields.

I tried to tell myself I was brave for staying — courageous for accepting my fate and facing it. But the words did not sound true in my head. These men and women I watched now, they were the ones overcoming their fear rather than giving in to it. As of this moment, they were free.

I watched long enough to discover that they were not the only ones in the field. Walking in the tall grasses was, it seemed, a lone guard out on patrol. At his current pace, he would be close enough to hear — if not see — the band of skaa in a matter of minutes.

Maybe this was my destiny. I had a part to play in this escape after all. I broke into a run. I pushed into the grasses with a memory of the guard’s position and a guess as to where he would be when I got there. I couldn’t see anything but the tall reeds I wedged my way through. I tried not to think about what I was doing. Then I slammed into something heavy.

It was the guard. Or rather it was who I thought was the guard. He wasn’t in a uniform and was much better dressed. He kept his feet and, in one motion, he flipped me onto my back, drew a sword, and aimed the tip of it at my throat. It was Ufrim, the sole member of the Bylerum family left to oversee the handing over of the skaa and the plantation. He must have been out surveying the grounds.

“What are you doing out here?” he shouted.

"I had to take a piss." It was the first thing I could think of.

"You would piss in your master's fields?"

Everyone pissed in the fields. The guards and taskmasters pissed in the fields. But I knew saying so would not help my case.

"Well?"

I wasn't sure what to say now. He pressed the steel of his sword against my neck.

"Answer me, you worthless thing!"

A shadow rose up behind him. Then a stone fell against the back of his head. Ufrim hit the ground with a thud.

And there, standing above me, was that scrawny sixteen year old, Leb. He held the stone in his hands.

"Ceril!" he said. "It's you."

"What did you do?" I said as I looked over at the guard lying next to me. His eyes were fixed open. Blood was trickling from his head. He wasn't breathing.

Leb just stood there stunned.

And then I heard shouting. Looking up, I could see two guards on the hill by the manor house. They could see us from that vantage point. They were raising up an alarm.

"What did you do?"

Leb dropped the stone. He looked up at the hill and then he looked at me.

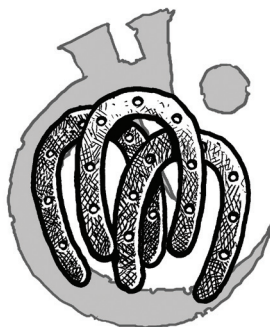
"You have to come with us," he said. "They'll kill you for this just as quick as they'll kill me."

"You're the one who killed him!" I protested.

"They don't care. You've seen it before. They'll hurt or kill whoever is nearest just to make an example."

I couldn't go with him. I had to stay. I had to stay with Gella. With her cool, understanding eyes and her warm lips. Her strong arms and her soft thighs. We could love each other. We could be married. We could have a son or a daughter who, if we protected them, might have a better life than we did. A little face like ours. An offspring who we could teach to be brave where we were weak. That was our future. If I lived to tomorrow, that could be our future.

Leb grabbed me by my arm. And when he started running, so did I. I didn't want to, but I did. I let my feet and instincts take control. We ran. We met up with the rest of the band and we all ran. We ran for days.





# 10

## SHADOWS IN THE MIST



*The air's so thick, I could cut it with this knife,* Cordal Bylerum thought to himself. He made a point of burning Copper hard — surprise was essential. *Tonight, we're cutting more than air.* He checked his knife, pulling the black, glossy blade from the leather sheath beneath his simple tunic. He ran his thumb down the brutal, chipped edge, testing its mettle. The craggy, razor-sharp end slid into his flesh. He found it reassuring. *If it cuts me this easily, jabbing it into her shouldn't be too hard. She's been at this a while and hasn't died yet, but she's not the kind to let herself get attacked. She's not ready to face someone ready — really ready — to kill her.*

"If you would please, a quick lesson?" A woman's voice rolled across the mists from up ahead.

Cordal snapped to attention and clenched his teeth. He saw her silhouette — he had been following her after all — but as she spoke, he relied on Tin reserves to focus and make out the details. She turned on a heel, and the strands of her mistcloak extended, whipping a halo about her waist and then flapping up against her when she caught his eyes.

"The Copper's a smart play. It keeps my Bronze from knowing what you're doing." She offered up a smirk, and her blonde hair fell along her chest after she threw her hood back.

"I *know* there's iron in your blood. Either you're here looking for me, or you're just some random Mistborn that stumbled onto me by chance. I think you're following me, and your sorry skill at sneaking tells me I'd know if you'd tried to do this before. So I'm assuming we haven't met."

Cordal froze. The strands of his mistcloak shifted on the wind.



She twisted into a defensive posture, hands low and eyes not wavering for a second. By the time he'd gathered his senses, she'd swept in, closing half the distance between them.

*If I threw my knife from here, Cordal thought, I could hit her. But if I missed... that'd be bad.*

She audibly sniffed, then snorted. "You're sweating. It's a cool night. That means you're nervous. That makes things even more interesting." Her smirk twisted into something almost predatory. She was a cold-blooded old animal. "Who are you, dear? That you'd follow me so far and still be so nervous? Who sent you?"

*Am I out of my league?*

"Or have I offended you directly? Are you here for... revenge of some sort?" She raised her eyebrows at that, then lowered them and smiled. "Or to start something new?"

Cordal just tensed himself. *Anything I reveal now just helps her later if I... fail.*

She charged forward with a slender, glassy knife of her own.

What Cordal didn't have in proper Allomantic training, though, he had in experience with knives from years of sparring against his brother. He raised his blade in a flash, less to block Lady Chanim's thrust and more to show her that he wasn't as afraid as she calculated. The obsidian made a harsh snap as both weapons chipped. Chanim's assault deflected, for now, Cordal twisted his body as hers glided alongside him. As she passed, her knife glanced across his brow. Bloody sweat dribbled into his eyes.

"I'm not here to kill you!" He stepped back and raised his weapon in front of his chest, to give him some room. *Whatever she's going to do to me, she's got to go through this knife. Which is when it goes through her.* Cordal burned Tin and focused on the sound of her breathing, the sensation of the wind as it battered his clothes and teased the hairs on his arms, and the play of shadows on her face.

"Do you usually bring a knife to *not kill* the people you stalk through the night?" Chanim chided, circling him the way a wolf circles an injured deer.

"By the Lord Ruler, I swear! I'm here with a message." *Not the time to confess this, Cordal...*

He felt cold obsidian at his throat. She was quick. Could have been her Pewter, but he just couldn't respond quickly enough.

"Then talk with words," she hissed, "not with blades." Cordal nodded and dropped his dagger.

"Fine." He put up a hand, to suggest she remove her knife. Thankfully, she did. He wiped his vision clear of sweat and blood and offered up his message: "Lord Urbain said you should watch your game with House Bylerum. You don't want to overextend yourself into being perceived as a charity worker." As intended, that gave her pause. She didn't know what to think, so Cordal let some Pewter and Steel say the next part of his piece.

He put the heel of his sturdy boot up against her chest, leaped backward and up, and Pushed on the Steel in his boot's toe. He kicked her back harder than even he expected and launched him to the top of a peaked window. "And no Urbain likes a charity worker," said Cordal, feeling quite clever and kicking off his boots.

Barefoot, like a proper Mistborn, he felt the cold and rough tiles of the roof under him for the first time.

Maybe she didn't want to waste any Steel or Iron. Maybe she just didn't have any available. Instead of coming straight for him, she grabbed his dagger, and then ran at an opposing wall. She didn't stop running as she got to it, but ran up two steps before leaping backward and twisting in the air. Maybe it was just to show off. When she planted down on the peak near Cordal, she took a low stance, and held the two daggers beneath her forearms menacingly, watching for him to make the next move.

He did.

The roofs beneath them were built by skaa, for skaa. They weren't thinking of protecting their roofs from Mistborn when they put down their shingles. Cordal Pushed and Pulled the metal nails in the clay shingles, moving the ground back and forth beneath and around her. Lady Haught responded by hopping from tile to tile. The way she moved forward was less combative and more of an intricate dance. She focused on every twitch and step.

Her focus was on movement, Cordal figured — at least enough to open her up to a quick shot. He feinted forward with a right hook; she answered with the two knives in a defensive maneuver.

He ducked, and Pushed against the shingle-nails to slide her footing away from her. The moment of confusion was enough to offer him time for an uppercut and a grab for his knife back. With it in hand, he swiped it hard toward her abdomen and jumped back, off the peaked roof, onto the flat stone top of a neighboring building.

She Pushed back against the now-loose shingle nails, sending them hurtling through the air in a stinging arc of rough metal. Cordal was too slow. He covered his face with his elbow too late. Long red welts and cuts crisscrossed his face and neck.

"Shame I had to ruin such a handsome young face." Lady Haught smiled.

"Shame I have to take your last few years of good looks," Cordal said. He didn't want to reveal his next move but she had his nerves spinning and tripping and he was more focused on survival than banter. He Allomantically Pulled on a metal spike, meant to deter climbers, from the edge of the roof behind him. It zipped past his head, toward her, as he ducked.

Lady Haught angled herself and Pushed back with a gentle dose of her own will to send the spike tumbling away into the mists. "I'm fine," she said. "So I look like a charity worker?" She kicked a few loose shingles off the peaked roof. "If I left you in the gutter, would it help curb my charitable reputation? Or would that be seen as some kind of mercy?"

"Come on, Lady Haught. You're not going to do that. You don't want to invite that kind of scrutiny," Cordal said.

Chanim sighed. "Scrutiny, you say?" She pulled her mistcloak in close and pulled up her hood. "Are you here to kill me or to sully my reputation?"

"Neither, depending. I'm looking for answers."

"Answers," she said. "Then let's talk." She dropped a coin to the street below and fell towards it, cutting through the mists, Pushing off the coin to slow her fall.

Cordal dropped down beside her. *She's going to do something. She has a plan. She's going to do something. And if I don't figure it out, I'll be dead.*

"You're working for Lord Urbain?" she asked, walking into the mists with Cordal at her side. They each still had a knife out. "But I've seen you before. You're from House Bylerum, aren't you? Why the shift in loyalties?" Her voice was casual, even curious.

Cordal considered lying, considered trying to Soothe her, then thought better of both. "It's not my loyalties that have shifted, ma'am," he said. "It's my obligations."

"You're obligated to Urbain? You owe them somehow?"

Cordal shrugged. "My house does. I'm trying to do my part."

"By attacking me?"

Cordal looked at her. A grin suggested itself at the edges of her mouth. "I'm meant to deliver my message... in a manner that you will remember."

"I'm familiar with House Urbain's manners, thank you. They sent you to harass me."

"Not in so many—"

She waved her hand. "It's done. What I want to know is, why does Bylerum owe Urbain? I thought you two had a, can I say, equitable arrangement."

"We had a formal agreement that my house failed to uphold as it should have."

"The robbery. And the tainted metals."

"You know about all that?" Cordal's suspicions only grew when he said it out loud.

"A great many people know about that, young man. Urbain let that information into the wind quite quickly."

Cordal looked at the street. "Oh."

"Yes. And, so, because of your cursed luck, you are now indebted to Urbain? Even though they haven't exactly held up their end of the bargain?"

Cordal looked back at her, a question on his face.

"Urbain. They've failed to do what they swore they would in your agreement, too."

"What do you mean?"

Lady Haught chose her expression carefully — not too amused, not to uncertain. "Lady Amyse, from your house... she's meant to be in House Urbain's safe keeping, isn't she?"

"She is."

"Well."

"Lady Haught?"

She looked away.

"What are you saying?" Cordal asked.

She stopped her stroll and turned to face him. "Do you know where Lady Amyse is right now?"

Cordal tread carefully. "She's at an Urbain estate in the Eastern Dominance..."

"Is she now?" Lady Haught tilted her head. "Are you certain?"

Cordal furrowed his brow.

"Neither is House Urbain. I have good reason to suspect that Lady Amyse Bylerum is not where she is supposed to be — and House Urbain has failed to keep her."

"Is she all right? What aren't you telling me?"

"All that you should be worried about is the fact that Urbain is as negligent as your house is unlucky. You don't owe them as much as you think."

Cordal looked back the way they'd come. He didn't know what to think. "Do I go to the Obligators?"

Lady Haught scoffed. "I'd be careful. If Urbain doesn't trust that you're under their control, they may have you killed and just make up the legitimate-sounding reason why they did. Now's the time for a smart play, not necessarily the formal play."

Cordal looked at her sideways. "You're trying to scare me."

"But that doesn't mean I'm lying. You wouldn't be the first young noble to pay a price for getting in Urbain's way."

Cordal smiled. "I'm a Mistborn of House—"

"You wouldn't be the first one of those, either. Urbain didn't get to be a Great House of Luthadel by being afraid of other Mistborn."

"And House Haught? How did it get to be a Great House?"

Lady Haught smiled. "By being smarter than House Urbain."

"So, then," Cordal ventured, "what *do* I do? What happens next?"

"You tell anyone else in your family that you can. The more of you who know that Urbain has failed their end of the bargain, the harder it is for them to pretend everything's all right—"

"Or to hide it."

"Exactly. Rather than going straight to the Obligators, take the threat of that to House Urbain. Let them know that you can make their mistake public, too."

Cordal nodded. Then squinted. "Why are you helping me like this?"

She ignored him. "One more thing: While you were bowing down to apologize to the Great House of Urbain, you didn't happen to give them any more information about your house did you? To calm them down?"

"Information?" Cordal already felt stupid and guilty.

"Secrets. Revelations. You didn't try to appease them with information about..." Lady Haught saw the look on Cordal's face. "You did."

"I—"

"Then hurry home, young man, and tell your family about Amyse straight away. Trust me when I tell you that she'll be fine. But you may not be if the Urbains think they have more to gain from your house's wreckage than they do from its *obligations*."

"Amyse is all right?"

"Trust me," Lady Haught said, casually dropping a coin on the street. "You have other things to worry about." With a wink, she was gone, tearing up into the mists in her fluttering mistcloak leaving Cordal alone on the street, holding his knife.



# 11

## HAZEKILLERS: AGAINST A MISTBORN



*Note-taking while on the job isn't my strong point. That won't stop me; I take pride in my ability to succeed in the things even if I don't excel at them. Everyone can shine in one place or two. I focus on reliability and results. Mercenary Hazekillers don't succeed through modesty. I'm only as strong as my weakest deliverable.*

*Number Four carried the target from the engagement site. I made these notes, while everything was fresh in mind.*

### **THIRTY-FIRST COMPANY, VIPER SIX**

#### *Report and Invoice*

This is a full accounting of our encounter with a Mistborn fugitive of House Bylerum, including the termination and retrieval of one Cordal Bylerum. Names are omitted for clarity and for anonymity. Unit numbers One through Six are used instead. Hazekiller One, the unit leader, penned this report, which will be copied both for our honorable lord and for unit reference and tactical research.

If the mercenary game gets too rough, I could always compile all my notes and sell them. Most of the noble houses would even pay me to keep them to myself. I could blackmail them. I'd be the pride of Luthadel's underground. "Memoirs of a Hazekiller." That's what I'd call it.

*"Why yes, it is a lovely retelling of your wife's end, Lord Suchandsuch. I do believe we did it bloody good justice. You know me, always worrying about the exploitation of a perfectly good death. I was thinking, if I sell five thousand copies*

*or more, I could release them at a reduced price. That'd put the story in the hands of some skaa, even! But that's what it's all about, isn't it? Profit. I'd love to find something more profitable than selling five thousand sales of my story..."*

*Sometimes, my own cleverness amuses me.*

We found hint of our mark at three hours after the coming of the mists. We heard him during an altercation with another Mistborn. The two had a common contest of abilities, bantering amidst a measured battle. It was almost like they were playing with each other. They abruptly stopped that game, however, in favor of a brief stroll. They then split up and went their separate ways.

The other Mistborn to flee was female. She utterly vanished. I could not identify her. Our target did not use her name that we could hear. Her voice and demeanor were dignified. If one wished to find her, they should look amongst the upper echelons of the various Houses. She was not a member of House Bylerum or House Urbain, we gathered from the conversation. She could be a member of House Haught.

*Chanim Haught, no doubt. An immense talent. Dangerous for my people. If she gets reported, caught, and killed, it'll be no skin off my back. But I'd like to leave my options open. Maybe after we get a few more kills on the record, she'll be worth making a protection deal with.*

The target moved through Luthadel rapidly, but aimlessly. He wandered in circles for almost a half an hour before we made our move to surround him. He made his way through an alley, Numbers One and Two approached from the front, Three through Six from behind. He heard us coming, as was expected. He fancied us bandits, and tried to posture himself into letting us pass. He first relied on his noble bearing, and informed us of the consequences of mugging or murdering one of his standing. When we were unshaken, he then reminded us that he was Mistborn and attempted to lean on urban legendry to intimidate us. We pulled our weapons. He made the first move.

*Note to self:*

*We've recently developed wrought-iron caps for our wooden blades. The caps look like blades themselves, but easily break away when Pushed or Pulled with Allomancy. Preliminary trials have been difficult, as finding trustworthy Lurchers and Coinshots is difficult at best.*

*Further caps will be made of break-apart, weak materials such as porous woods, with a heavy wire mesh and a thin metal coating. Any amount of metal is dangerous against these Mistborn, but the cheaper and the softer the metal, the better. The diversion has proven more valuable than the risk involved.*

*End note.*

The caps worked well. The target Pulled Number One's and Number Two's weapons and snapped off the caps. In the split second of his surprise, One, Three, and Five stepped in to slice. These were not intended as killing blows; they were simply harrying and hampering attacks. Killing blows against ready Mistborn rarely seem to hit their marks. He recoiled and leaped, Pulling on a building's decorative element. Two and Four grabbed at his ankles as they expected his leap,



and six tossed sand, ash, and soil in the path, aiming for his face. Two missed the mark, Four grabbed with just enough effectiveness to end his jump and send him toppling past us. Six's debris scoured his mouth and eyes.

He scrambled to his feet and brushed at his face vigorously. One, Three, and Five pursued and continued rapid, shallow swipes with our glass daggers. Two and Four grabbed a nearby shipping crate, tossed it over him as a diversion, and added blockage. Six charged in to focus on kicking the Mistborn for more debilitating, immediate injuries.

He did well to deflect many of the dagger swipes, yet he did so with his arms primarily, leaving them shredded. When he came to his senses and faced us, we lost the first of our number. Number Six continued to kick, when the target Pulled one of the wrought-iron caps straight through Six's abdomen. Our caps are built weak, and made to break apart. This could mean less injury in some cases, but it was not enough to prevent number six's rapid and ugly demise.

*Note to self:*

*Our new armor contains four layers. The outermost layer is thick, dyed burlap that blends well into the colors of the ash. We can adapt this for different environments if need be. But camouflage isn't a top priority when facing Mistborn, as most utilize Tin and are almost impossible to hide from. But the ash keeps us from standing out amongst those we're not targeting. We're often mistaken for skaa workers. The next layer is a notched wood, made for catching narrow objects in tiny wedges of the hardwood. It doesn't protect well against honed weapons, but Mistborn are notorious for improvised weaponry, and we've found this prevents many items such as coins and fence-posts from killing the wearers. Underneath that is a dense fabric layer. It's simply a tight canvas weave. Beneath the canvas is a series of small pockets, with chips of fired clay laid overlapping. This deflects many weapons, and will even slow an arrow sometimes. Our unit has been wearing these, and we've cut our casualties dramatically since their introduction.*

*The armor didn't do what it was supposed to for Six. The tiny iron shards pulled straight through him, and he toppled. This Mistborn seemed to be inexperienced, so his skill didn't seem a factor. Later, we'll examine the shards and the armor, to determine why the penetration was so thorough and deadly.*

*End note.*

Six became our next weapon. When fighting Mistborn, any heavy object containing no metal is a potential weapon. Numbers Two and Four changed the course of their attacks, now moving to hook number Six's corpse to the target. We each carried at least a few bone hooks, reinforced with leather handles. The hooks found home in the target's back, and were forced through Six's armor. The Mistborn attempted another leap and was hampered by the weight of the corpse.

Since he couldn't Pull upward, he instead grabbed Three's weapon as Three lunged in a fit of rage. The fit of rage was announced with a nonsensical code word we've developed. Each of our hazekiller units is taught a series of mantras, strings of words we repeat internally as we're on the hunt. They keep us calm, but focused on the kill. If we're soothed, the mantra keeps our mind on the mission. If

we're rioted, it can sometimes help us maintain control. We use the code word to signal our mates that our mantra has been stopped. Sometimes, this means we've simply been confused. Often, it denotes Mistborn interference. This code word is almost always the last word uttered by our cell-mates. Either they've lost discipline, and die at the hands of the target, or worse, they turn on the cell in a fit of Allomantically induced rage, and must be ended as part of the hunt.

Number Three fell in the first method. The target turned Three's weapon on him, and forced our member to fall on the blade.

*To be fair, Number Three didn't have it in him to hold the damned thing. We all practice weapon locking techniques, in case of a disarm. Number Three should have sooner put that knife through his own flesh than offer it up to that Mistborn. But he didn't. That part of the story won't make it into the final cut; let's not give our employer the chance to say our men aren't properly trained.*

He quickly kicked Number Three's corpse back and used the momentum for another jump. This time, we were unable to stop him. He landed far from us, near a fence made up of many iron spears. He ripped a slew of them from the ground and bundled them, facing us as we approached. We should have fled for cover, but I gave the command to stay the course. Our risk-taking paid off. He threw the bundle, and it fell to the ground unremarkably. We were not all killed instantly. The target coughed violently, and bent over in pain. His metals were not as he'd hoped, it seemed.

We did not hesitate; we rushed.

The target recovered quickly. His face showed signs of blood from the nostrils and mouth, but he lifted one of the makeshift spears to defend himself. He surprised number Two by thrusting from his defensive stance, and throwing the spear straight through his armor. Number Two, dying, was still able to land a deep cut. Numbers One, Four, and Five continued harrying and slicing while the target fended off Number Two's dying blows.

The Mistborn offered surrender as Number Two's death did not deter us. We — not believing him at the time — made a point to feign consideration, speaking lies amongst ourselves to confuse him. We demanded his purse. When he made show to draw the money, we dove in for a final assault. I gave the code word; the three remaining unit members lunged at the weakened part of the target. Numbers One and Four missed their mark, as the trained Mistborn spun to deflect the blows. Five forced his dagger in deep, though. It was only a matter of time before our target would die of blood loss. However, kill confirmation and body retrieval duties obliged us to remain.

*Not that this can make it into the final note, but yes, I finished off Two with my own blade during the conflict. The pay rate isn't wonderful, and the proceeds after salaries and expenses are split amongst the survivors. Two's salary was the highest of the bunch; it's just good business this way. He would've understood.*

Five's efforts were met with fury from the Mistborn target. He focused on the bale of spears from before, and Pulled the lot of them toward him and Five. Both the target and Number Five were fatally pierced with a number of these weapons. In the moments afterward, the target forced the spears out, and Pushed them at us

as he seemingly initially intended. The blood loss must have affected his sense of balance and aim though, and he caused no further squad injuries.

It seems clear that this particular Mistborn was not well. He seemed as surprised to be pierced by the spears he pulled as we were. Judging from his demeanor and bloody mouth, I would propose that he was poisoned or otherwise done in by faulty metals.

While One and Four both received superficial injuries, neither were rendered unable to complete the mission. The remaining soldiers proceeded to confirm the kill and render the target incapable of furthered assault.

*Note to self:*

*Number Four shall receive promotion to unit Number Two, after his brave and effective performance in the retrieval. His weekly salary shall be increased two boxings, as he witnessed the loss of four of his compatriots. Heavy investigation into our armor deficiency is due.*

*End note.*

\* \* \*

In summation, one slain Mistborn carries the fee of five hundred boxings. Standard retrieval fee is twenty-five boxings. We broke two swords and one shield in the pursuit of our duties, at a replacement rate of seventy-six boxings combined. Four squad members fell in the battle, at a hiring and training rate of one hundred and fifty boxings each. Expenses, including but not limited to food and housing, come to a rate of thirty-seven boxings. A full detailed invoice can be provided upon request. Total fees incurred, twelve hundred and thirty-eight boxings, due immediately upon receipt of report.

As previously agreed, have your factor pay us through our factor and we will tell anyone who asks that we were in pursuit of a trespassing Mistborn.

Notes: Mistborn identified by reputation as Cordal Bylerum. Body to be delivered upon receipt of payment. Body without much blood, suffering from puncture wounds and heavy bruising throughout the abdomen and torso, but is otherwise intact and identifiable.

*All in a night's work.*





# 12

## AN ARMY OF SKAA



Travel happens as quickly as the slowest traveler moves. Two of House Bylerum's former skaa made way parallel to the roads north from Luthadel. They remained well off the roads though, to avoid the attention of travelers and trade caravans. When she tried, one could see and hear far better than the other, so they could stay further away while still keeping track of the path.

Ryia was the one in charge of keeping the path and listening for possible trails. She was ill, and slowed her traveling partner. But Mack didn't mind, since her sight kept them both safe. They grew up together, but almost never spoke about her condition. She was a Tineye. Most of the Bylerum skaa knew it. It was a Bylerum family secret. So secret, in fact, that most of the family didn't even know. She was daughter to the daughter of a cousin thrice removed from Lord Bylerum. Her lineage was always a favorite of the House. They were almost friends of the family, and were held in the highest esteem amongst the workers. It was no coincidence.

"I think there's an encampment up ahead. But the language is rough. They're probably skaa. Maybe Terrismen. Their slang isn't like ours." Ryia said softly, her eyes closed as they stood momentarily.

"Their slang isn't like ours?" Mack said, scratching his head. "What do you mean?" Ryia was literate, and spent a good deal of time in the Bylerum library. Mack's worldly perspective began and ended in the farms and mines.

"Do you know how we say, 'donya,' when we should be saying, 'don't you?' That's slang. Slang is all the things your mother said not to say around the nobles, because they made you sound less dignified. They're using slang words I haven't heard before." She said, and started walking again.

“But you think they’re safe?” He looked to her, somewhat worried.

“They’re talking out against the nobility. They’re cursing the Lord Ruler. They should be sympathetic.” She shrugged, and continued onward.

\* \* \*

The pair arrived at the camp, with their hands up to show they were unarmed. The camp was thriving; upwards of fifty skaa managed, by someone, for efficiency. The camp itself was less than a mile off the main road, but between the camp and the road was heavy tree cover. As Mack and Ryia approached, four skaa with drawn bows met them and flanked them. “Who are you with, and why are you here?” one snapped at them.

“I’m Ryia, this is Mack. We’re traveling from the south. The house we worked for fell in, uh, prominence, and could no longer support its family. We’re all finding our own ways, outside of Luthadel. We’re either looking for work, or safe passage, or whichever you’d be as kind as to provide.”

As Ryia spoke, a hooded man approached the group. “I am Lane. Leader of this camp. We have need of workers. We can find use for you. What did you do for your former masters?” He dropped his hood, showing a withered face, weathered and scarred, implying an age that few skaa would ever reach. Before they get too old, many skaa were put down as wastes of resources, if they hadn’t already died from illnesses or injuries.

Ryia replied, “I was a house assistant. I cleaned, cooked, cared for children, taught them to read, mended clothing. You name it. Mack was a farm hand. After the harvest, he participated in hunting parties. He can also repair most anything around the camp.” She had practiced this bit.

The man nodded. “Useful experience. Do you know why we’re here?”

She shook her head. “No, sir. I do not.”

He coughed, and one of the soldiers dropped his bow and moved to support him. A few coughs later, he continued. “We’re working against oppression. We’re living free lives, and fighting to weaken those that would have us slaving in their farms. For us, death is preferable to soothing stations. For this camp, each of us is ready to put down our lives. We are an army, small but fierce. We stand in resistance to those things that would keep us from living our lives. *Our* lives.”

“Of course, sir,” she said, and lowered her head. “I...,” she glanced aside to Mack. They shared a nod between each other, then she looked to Lane. “We don’t share the same lofty aspirations that you do. We’re not idealists. We just want out. And if that means risking our lives and fighting for what’s best, we will. We’re not warriors, though. But every good army needs food, clothing, and clean beds. If you’ll have us, we’ll work with vigor and earn our keep.”

The elderly man thought on it, smiled, and said, “good. We need the help. Ryia, you’ll be working with Horna. You can find her in the kitchen tent over there.” He pointed back to one of the larger tents. “Mack, we’re sending scout patrols to watch for investigators from the Steel Ministry. You can speak with Venda in the barracks.” He pointed back to a different tent across the way. “That is all.”

Ryia and Mack nodded to each other as they parted ways, each following a skaa archer in a different direction. Ryia looked back a moment later to reassure Mack but he was distracted, nodding along as the archer spoke to him. She didn't see it when he looked back at her a moment later.

\* \* \*

Jas joined the Steel Ministry out of familial duty. His house wasn't prestigious, but they were noble — of a sort. Jas's father worked for the Ministry. Jas's grandfather worked for the Ministry. In fact, every male in his line that lived to adult age worked for the Ministry. Uncles and cousins, everyone. So while his House didn't have a keep, and was never rich, it prided itself in being utterly essential to the Final Empire. They were not politicians. They were not pretty faces. They were the gears that kept the engine of the Final Empire turning.

The family intended Jas to become another bureaucrat, another Obligator to push the paper that fanned the fires of industry. Soon after Jas's induction into the Canton of Resources, the Canton of Orthodoxy learned of his latent Allomantic abilities with Pewter. They filed a transfer, and took him as an Inquisitor-in-training. He was exceptional amongst the Ministry, but rather average in marks amongst the Steel Inquisitors. He did his job well and without complaint.

When the Canton of Inquisition received word that House Bylerum's skaa spread to the winds, it came with the news that at least one of the rogue skaa had some shred of Allomantic power. A single skaa, fleeing aimlessly, was hardly worthy of much force. The Canton assigned Jas to hunt her, and to eliminate her deviant strain.

*She travels north. She has no home. She has no weapons. She has no training. Why do they waste my skills on this? If she hasn't starved to death already, she'd just as easily meet her end at the hand of a two-bit mercenary.*

The last time Jas was committed to a removal assignment, it was local in Luthadel, and he knew right where the target was. Jas walked into a tavern. The man pretended not to know why Jas was there. When Jas read his judgment, the target *threw* a tankard of ale in Jas's face and *ran*. Jas caught the tankard and threw it back at him with *full strength*. The man tumbled forward and cracked his skull on the stone floor. Jas was back by lunch.

Now Jas stomped through thin woods, senses extended.

*If she's survived so far, she's kept off the main roads. The kinds of bandits out here would sooner eat her alive than let her pass by with a boxing or loaf of bread to her name.*

Jas knelt, and grinned as a faint smell caught his attention. He ran a hand over the leaves, until he found a footprint pressed into the debris. He pinched dirt, sniffed it, then tasted it.

*She came through here recently.*

His hand scanned the area for a while longer, and he repeated his test with another bit of dirt. He put his face down near the soil and inspected an imprint in the dirt.



*One traveling companion. Less graceful than she. Much heavier. Wearing a man's work boots. There's a hole in the right boot; it's been worn for years without proper repair. I hoped she was at least traveling with bodyguards.*

At that moment, his ears perked. In the brush far ahead, four pairs of boots crunched down in time.

*Four? Maybe I'll see a challenge yet.*

He remained crouched and silent. He drew an obsidian axe from beneath his cloak, and prepared to strike.

\* \* \*

Four men laced their boots. Mack sighed in relief; this was the first new pair of boots he'd worn since he reached adulthood a decade ago. He smiled and stood proud. He stretched and arched his back. "What are we looking for, again?"

The other men prepared traveling packs and flasks for the trip. The patrol leader replied, "We're looking for anyone aiming to out us. Luthadel sends mercenaries up as spies, dressed as beggars, merchants, and other travelers. Usually, their disguises don't hold up to more than a few questions."

"When we find one of them, what do we do?" Mack took one of the prepared flasks, and tied it to his hip.

"When we've verified that they're the enemy, we can't let them go. So, we give them a decent burial, and take whatever money or goods they were carrying."

Mack's eyes went wide.

The leader shrugged. "It's life. This camp doesn't fund itself. And being cut off from Luthadel means we're not selling anything we produce. We grow or steal enough food to get by, and we make our own clothes. But we need money for certain goods. Besides, what would you prefer we do? Bury their money, too? Let it go to waste?"

Mack thought on that for a while, and shrugged in imitation of the leader. "I guess you're right. A resistance has to eat." He put his chin up, taking pride in that word, "resistance," even though he barely knew what it meant. He mouthed it to himself once more as the crew walked out toward the woods.

\* \* \*

During the noble's elegant parties, Ryia watched from the servants' quarters as the nobility danced their nights away. She watched as they drank wines from dainty little flutes, as the women laughed coquettishly when the men told tired old jokes. She watched as they adjusted dresses and suits, as they picked off tiny specks of dirt from clothing that ran for more at the markets than a year's worth of food for the skaa camps.

After these parties, she'd go back to her quarters and talk to a broken mirror. The mirror was one that Lady Bylerum shattered in a fit of rage. Ryia scooped up the remains, and meticulously realigned them. She polished the face, and despite the cracks and holes, she could see herself rather well. The mirror had one large

gap under her left breast; she practiced twisting and arching her back enough to fully appear within the mirror's frame. She collected scraps of fabric from Lady Bylerum's ruined dresses. She couldn't be seen in the scraps, lest she suffer beatings from the Lady. But in front of that mirror, those scraps were her escape.

"Oh, m'lord." She laughed and covered her mouth. "You say the most charming things. Why, you know I can't run away with you. I have my duties. Besides, Lord Haught has already proposed. My dowry isn't worth it to you. You could do so much better than me." She giggled to herself.

"Oh, could I?" She jerked to cover herself, to futilely cover the forbidden scraps as she spun to see Lord Bylerum. Her face burned, and she stammered out a non-reply. Lord Bylerum stepped in, and touched her face to reassure her — to quiet her.

That night started the liaison that kept Ryia forever dreaming. Even when House Bylerum fell, she insisted she'd keep working for them. She swore she'd keep their home — whatever home that might be — clean and comfortable. Lady Bylerum scoffed, and told Ryia that there'd be no home to clean, and no space to keep her. "Go," the Lady said. "Why would you wish to stay?" Ryia didn't dare speak the truth.

The night before she left with Mack, Lord Bylerum came to her quarters with a simple message. He left the note on her chest while she slept, because he knew she was one of the only skaa on the estate that could read. "I will come for you, my love. Go. Be safe. Know that when the time comes, we'll be together again."

\* \* \*

It wasn't long before the hunting party found a mark. Near the road, a merchant called out in pain, begging for help. The merchant sat on a rock near his cart, holding his knee to his chest. "Oh, by the Lord Ruler. I need help!"

The leader of the party moved forward, making a hand gesture back to the other three. The other two veterans drew their bows. Once Mack realized what was happening, he did as well. His hands shook. If he released the string while shaking, he'd hit the dirt, or possibly the sky.

Gen, one of the two experienced bowmen, gave an accusatory glance over at Mack. "Sorry," Mack mouthed.

The leader pulled a knife and leveled it at the merchant's neck.

"Please, don't hurt me!" the merchant pleaded. "You can have anything in the cart. I just need help!"

"Quiet. You'll speak when I tell you. Now, why are you here, and who sent you?" The leader pressed the knife hard against the merchant's chin.

"I'm just passing through to Luthadel from the Terris Dominance. I have a shipment of root vegetables and my cart broke. I fell off and I think I broke my leg." He moved one arm aside to show a clearly broken limb, bone jutting out through ragged flesh.

"He has to get that looked at, right away. We should take him to the camp!" Mack interjected, worried.

The leader looked back with malice at Mack, and then glared to the merchant. “You’ll tell us who sent you.”

“I swear. Please, just help me. I mean you no harm. I just don’t want to die,” the merchant said.

“Nonsense. You only wish to be brought back to the camp so you can report our location to your masters. Men, kill the wretch.” The leader stepped aside. The merchant put up a hand to the archers, and cried out. Gen and his cohort fired. Their arrows landed. The leader looked to Mack and spoke loud, over the dying merchant’s cries: “If that body doesn’t have a third arrow in it when we take it back to the camp, Lane is going to have a lot of questions.”

With a tear in his eye, Mack nodded, raised his bow and released the string. Mack’s arrow wobbled through the air and stuck into the merchant’s chest. The man gurgled, then fell quiet.

Unceremoniously, the other members searched the merchant’s body — prying off buttons, yanking off his belt — and prepared to carry it back to the camp.

“I’m sorry,” Mack said. Gen shook his head but the others seemed not to listen. “I’m just distracted. Worried about Ryia.”

\* \* \*

Jas heard the bubbling screams of a man dying with blood in his lungs. He waited. He listened. He heard the girl’s name, and he pounced. His leap carried him right into the center of the hunting party, and a single swing separated Gen’s head from his shoulders. The body fell to the ground, and Jas turned his head to face Mack.

Mack shook in fear. “Those eyes! You’re an Inquisitor?” Ryia often told Mack that he didn’t know when to keep quiet. Jas nodded slowly, Mack’s eyes were trained on the metal spikes protruding from his face.

“Where is the girl?” Jas’s voice rolled over the forest, echoing back. He pulled back with the axe, so as to strike again.

“I, I, I can’t tell you. I mean, I don’t know what girl you’re talking about. I don’t know a girl.” Ryia also told Mack never to lie. He was a terrible liar.

“I’m going to put this very simply.” The remaining archer drew his bow and aimed at the Inquisitor. The Inquisitor stood, uncaring. “You’re going to tell me where she is, or I’m going to kill every last one of you. If you tell me where she is, you can walk away to hunt another day.”

Mack shook his head. The party leader scrambled to run. Jas lifted a hand, and Pulled the leader’s metal dagger from its sheath and to him. He caught the flying blade, then flicked it back outward to the leader, burying it in his back.

The other archer fired an arrow. Jas spun to deflect it, but wasn’t quite quick enough. The arrow sunk into Jas’s chest. The enormous man glanced down to the shaft with near disbelief, and smiled at his would-be assassin. The archer readied another arrow. Jas waved a hand at him, and sent him flying into a tree. Mack heard his compatriot’s back crack loudly against the sickly oak.

"I'll repeat. Tell me where the girl is, and I'll let you live. Otherwise, I'll force it out of you, then pin you to the top of that tree." He pointed off in the distance, at no tree in particular.

Mack lowered his head. He knew he couldn't hold up to torture. "The camp is three miles west of here." Jas moved in quicker than Mack could again meet his questioner's face. The Inquisitor grabbed Mack by the hair, flared Pewter, then threw him straight into the air as high as he could. By the time Mack ended his fatal fall, Jas was almost at the camp.

\* \* \*

The camp's matron, Horna, tended a crying Ryia. "I don't care. I don't care about a resistance. I don't care about ideals. I just want the pain to stop."

Horna patted her back softly. "I know. But, things are different now. You can either stay miserable and waste away, or you can make the best of what you have, and do something good for the world around you."

Ryia looked to the old woman. "My world is nothing now. My entire life was in that house; in that kitchen. Everything I did was meaningless, until I found love. You don't understand what it's like."

"You think I've never loved? I bore three children with the man I love. The Lord of our House killed him during the rebellion. Had he not died for us, we'd have never escaped. I owe my freedom to him. Don't think there isn't a day that goes by where I don't wonder if it was worth freedom to lose love." Horna chided.

"Was it?" Ryia said, slowing her sobbing.

Horna paused, and looked to the girl. "Neither love in bondage nor loneliness in freedom are good. But love can give you freedom. He gave that to me. I miss him greatly but what he gave me, that freedom, is the most valuable gift, ever."

Ryia blinked, stricken by Horna's sincerity. "But my Lord is still alive. He told me he'd come for me."

"Love." Horna sighed. "You're going to have to realize that maybe, just maybe, he's not. Perhaps something happened to him. Perhaps he realized how unrealistic continuing that dalliance was."

"Hmph." Ryia crossed her arms and looked away. "He'll come for me. He loves me, and he promised."

"Fine. He'll come for you. But in the mean time, wouldn't it be wise to chipper up and stay healthy? That way when he comes for you, you're in good spirits and can best show him your love?"

Ryia looked to her, then raised an eyebrow. "Fine. I'll eat."

Horna Pushed the plate forward and stood. "That's all I ask, dear. I'll see you in the morning." She exited and Ryia enjoyed her first real dinner in days.

From off in the distance, Ryia heard Mack screaming. She perked up, worried, then the flap of her tent opened.

\* \* \*

Ryia looked to the tent flap, and saw the blood-stained robe of Inquisitor Jas. He made his way into the tent without hesitation, and scanned the small space quickly.

“Are you the one called Ryia?” He said.

Ryia looked up to the enormous man, and her chin quivered. “I, I am.”

“You are found in contempt of orthodoxy, for your seduction of Lord Bylerum of House Bylerum.” He looked down to her, and drew a short, glass blade. “You are hereby sentenced to execution for heresy against the Lord Ruler.”

Her eyes went wide and she put up her hands. “Please, don’t kill me! Lord Bylerum wishes to find me and marry me, he swore!”

Jas chuckled softly. He had hoped for more resistance than this. “Girl. Lord Bylerum’s choices are immaterial in this sentencing. Skaa are not to have intimate dealings with nobility. The very act is heresy.”



# 13

## AN OBLIGATOR'S CURIOSITY



My name is HanKorl.

My new master had given specific instructions upon the formation of our Contract. I was, the next time I consumed a creature, to take careful note of everything that happened during the experience and report everything I did, felt, or observed about myself. He wanted me to share all I knew about my people. He wanted for me to convey, and for him to write, a new guide to our kind.

I had to insist to him, as part of the terms of our Contract, that I could not reveal all of the kandra secrets. He claimed to understand. I don't feel the same way now that I did then.

My belief at the time was that I was to tell him verbally, in person, of everything that I experienced, expecting that he would write down what I said into his notes. But things have transpired such that I must find another way to fulfill my Contract. I write this, perhaps too late, in good faith. I am taking it upon myself to create this record as I have recently devoured a new subject and my master is not here to do his own work.

I am confident, but not certain, that this would fulfill his wishes and the intent of the Contract, given the current set of circumstances.

Though, I must admit, I have hopes that no eyes ever look upon this document. It does not, I am afraid, paint me in a positive light. Kandra are already feared and I have no wish to further damage our reputation. But I will tell the truths I have promised to tell.

Where to begin?

I am writing this in the cottage where I met him, the Obligator for whom my service was a gift. It is cold here, outside the city, where the winds come quick across the land. This is a ramshackle place, a secret place, I imagine, where the Obligator felt we would not be disturbed. Where, perhaps, he thought screams would go unheard.

We were not alone, the Obligator and I. When I came here, to our rendezvous, I wore a simple cloak and no form besides my own. I could smell them both, though smell is not the right word. Mine is the Blessing of Awareness, but my senses were not yet human.

The Obligator had air of perfumed soap about him. The other man, a skaa — I don't know what to call him — was sweating despite the chill.

I heard the chain rattling before I came inside. The Obligator welcomed me in. The place is stone and plaster and wood, with a drafty roof and exposed rafters. A fire in the hearth lit the room along with a simple oil lamp.

The Obligator looked much as they do. He grinned when he saw me. He was the most polite I think I have ever seen an Obligator but with an attitude that suggested he was stooping to speak plainly to me.

The skaa wore loose rags, stained with grime and sweat. He crouched in a shallow alcove behind a crude metal gate, chained shut with a stout black padlock. His beard was days old. His eyes searched as I came in. He seemed free of dread or spite. He seemed used to being caged. I think he took me for a cloaked human.

The Obligator and I sat around the cottage's small table and spoke at some length about the terms of the Contract and the experiences of the kandra. He asked me to adopt a human form. "This one," he said, indicating the caged skaa.

I told him I could not. Not yet. Kandra do not kill humans.

The Obligator drew his dirk — a clean, slender blade, bright in the lamp light. "So I've heard," he said. "I want you to kill this skaa anyway, as part of your Contract."

I refused.

The Obligator seemed... charmed. He smirked. "It's vital that you adopt a human form for me," he said. "And this is the form I wish you to take."

I looked to the skaa. I couldn't tell if he understood what we were talking about. A look of fear crossed his face, but it was replaced with something sterner. He lowered his head and looked at us each in turn.

I explained myself to the Obligator as I explain myself to you now. I require the body to be adopted but I cannot kill.

The Obligator smirked again. He set his dirk down and took several moments to write in the book that was open before him on the table. He thought I might be compelled to put our Contract above what he called "kandra custom" in his notes. Then he picked up the dirk. "Very well, then," he said. "If I must do everything myself. You need a body and I promised to provide one."

The skaa and I both watched him go to the gate and slip a key into the padlock. The skaa and I both watched him unwrap the chain from the gate. I watched the skaa as the skaa watched the Obligator. His body grew taut. His face shifted as he clenched his jaw. His eyes stopped searching and held fast on the Obligator.



When the gate was open, the skaa sprang into action.

The Obligator was not ready. I have seen men fight. This was hardly a fight. The skaa and the Obligator struggled for a few fleeting moments, colliding with the table, knocking the lamp to the stone floor. Its reservoir shattered and the oil within flared up hot and bright. The humans hardly noticed. They were focused on the dirk between them. Each kept one hand clasped on the weapon. Each kept the other hand on his foe.

The Obligator tried to push the skaa away, his hand on the slave's chest. The skaa tried to pull the Obligator close, his hand cupping his enemy's skull. They shuffled this way and back again, turning almost in a full circle.

All at once, the Obligator's foot slipped out from beneath him and slid through the spilled oil. He lost his purchase and grabbed the skaa tight, to stay upright. The skaa pulled hard, his face red, veins bulging, and the Obligator came forward onto the blade.

He was pierced for just a moment, then recoiled. The skaa tried to hold him in place, to keep him on the dirk. The Obligator gasped and let go of the weapon. Blood poured out of a gash in his throat.

The skaa retreated, bloodied dirk in hand. The Obligator scrambled about as if searching for something. He reached for me. He touched his book. He clutched at his throat. He made almost no noise. I expected him to scream and so, I think, did the skaa. But he couldn't.

As the Obligator stumbled against the wall and slid to the floor, the skaa watched. So did I, as I think of it now. The Obligator's eyes were as wide as any I've ever seen. They searched the room as the skaa's eyes had, but were round with dread and panic.

Blood covered his hands and clothes. He slumped back against the wall. He looked from me to the skaa and back to me. I wondered then, as I wonder now, just what he wanted to say. I couldn't read his gaze. All I saw in him was a diminishing panic and hope, leaving only fear behind. He looked terrified, then tired. Then he sunk into death and was gone.

The skaa looked to me.

I looked back.

He came toward me with the dirk. He tossed the table aside and grabbed for my cloak. My hood fell away and he froze. I only shook my head. The skaa fled through the cottage door, dirk in hand, and ran off into the dark.

I was alone with the Obligator's body. And so I suppose I should explain.

The first step is ordinarily the extrusion of old bones. Space must be made for the new form. Like our less developed cousins, commonly called mistwraiths, we could contain a multitude of skeletons, but then we could not adopt the shape of one specific body with grace or precision. Having only one set of bones allows us to take on that one form.

The subject whose body we are to adopt must have an intact skeleton. If the creature is too badly maimed, its bone structure cannot support our new shape. And, of course, by our binding agreement as kandra, we are not allowed to kill people. We may only consume bodies of those already dead.

Finding dead and intact corpses can sometimes be problematic. Generally we require our master to provide the body for us.

My new master had asked me if we taste what we are eating. I should like to make the effort to answer that question now that I have recently ingested. I wouldn't describe the sensation as taste, exactly, at least not the taste I feel when I eat something as a human or beast, but there is a feeling that comes through my flesh as it wraps around a body and bones. This feeling is important — it serves to analyze and memorize the shape of the muscles, organs, and skin I consume. It contributes to what a human might call “muscle memory.”

I do not have the five senses you have when I am in my natural form. I feel, though the sensation is remarkably different. I sense hot and cold and areas of light and dark, but I do not see, hear, taste, or smell as you might understand them. Not until I form eyes, ears, a tongue, or a nose.

I do not bite or chew the subject as my master had wondered. I have no teeth of my own with which to do so. I secrete fluid that breaks down flesh into digestible particles. The particles are absorbed into my self, becoming part of my own body. Some of it is used to give me energy, while other portions of it are used as the raw material for the form I will become. The bones, hair, nails, and other hard bits of the subject remain unscathed by the process. They are drawn into my viscous form and suspended there until they are to be used.

When I said that I memorize the shape of a body earlier I do not mean so in the same way one memorizes a poem or a name. It is more closely akin to how one learns to walk or ride a horse, I suppose. It is a function of my body and not of my brain. We kandra can just become the shapes of that which we consume, pushing our own flesh into the correct form, wrapped around bones — bones that are reassembled into a skeleton. We become meat and fat and organ and skin until we are that thing — our subject, our new identity.

Yet there is more to it than just the physical frame and features. Something we get, perhaps, from digesting the creature's brain. (Understand, please, that this is an intuitive process for me and putting it into words is difficult — this is a language created for your existence, not ours.) We have the ability to mimic. To act and behave just as that creature did. To replicate its mannerisms and habits, speech patterns and facial expressions. It is as if the muscles themselves remember, and now we are those muscles. Or, perhaps more precisely, those muscles are now us. In some ways we are the corpse resurrected.

Yet, still, we continue to be ourselves. We manage to retain the memories of our lives in our other forms. The skills we learn in one form can be put to use in the next. The muscles we learn to form in strong creatures can be used to strengthen weaker bodies. More mature kandra can improvise even more, giving themselves combinations of abilities that would not exist in nature. Hence the rare talking animal or fabled “humans” who can breath like a fish underwater. Exceptional kandra can even construct an original body out of discarded materials and memories of former shapes if the need arises, though such bodies seldom seem complete or natural. They have their uses but, to use a phrase of my master's, they are not “fooling anyone.”

I will report this: the process is painful. As a kandra form takes the shape of a human body, it begins to feel how humans feel. The experience of being made is just as painful, I think, as the experience of being torn apart and reassembled. The muscles feel raw and exposed until they are sewn over with skin that is hot, red, and searing as it forms. The pain lasts well after the formation is complete.

If you believe in poetic endings, you might find it comforting to learn that it is my master's hand, in a manner of speaking, that writes this now — naked, cold, and alone in this small cottage.

My Contract is all but fulfilled and yet it has only begun. My Contract was to help my master write some kind of definitive work on the experience and nature of the kandra. I have much more to write. I have become my master now and he, in some ways, has become me.

My name was HanKorl.





# 14

## ROMANCE, HIGH & LOW



Alloutte, the eldest, most cunning, and loveliest daughter of Chanim Haught, rose from an afternoon bed, lifting her dressing gown from the floor where it had been thrown in the moment.

Liam Urbain, third oldest son of Turner Urbain and a rumored Mistborn, rose from the same bed and moved up behind Alloutte, tugging the dress from her hand, and held her, pressing her into his chest, his hands settling over her stomach. “If I had my way, you’d have no dresses and you’d spend all your time with me in this light. It suits your hair.”

Alloutte smirked and turned slowly in his arms to look up. Like his father, Liam was very tall. Unlike his father, he was thin and sleek — as beautiful as a man could be. His nose was aquiline and she loved the cut of his jaw.

She loved a lot of things about him, and love was a bothersome thing to suffer in Luthadel, that was for certain.

“You won’t have your way. Besides, how many skaa make their living making dresses for me? You would rob so many of their livelihoods.”

He snorted, and hung on to the first of her thoughts, letting the flippant joke fall unanswered. “Why do you keep saying no to my proposal when you say yes to my kisses? It’s only logical. It would be good for your family and helpful to mine. Everyone would win.”

Alloutte snorted and shook her head. “My mother has decided that I’m a better match for your older brother. We’ve discussed this. She is in debates with your father on the very subject even as we speak.”

“It’s nonsense. Lindon is practically a eunuch. He isn’t enough of a man for a woman of your quality.”

“He also isn’t a Mistborn. I have no such talents. It would be a waste for you and me to have children. It’s no way to keep the bloodlines strong,” she said coolly. She could keep cool about it with him because she raged and tormented herself over it in private plenty enough already. “It isn’t as if feelings have anything to do with it.”

\* \* \*

“How are you feeling, Ryia? Faran helped me out in the field today. He’s a very nice boy, isn’t he?”

Horma, matron of the hidden skaa camp, wiped ash from her face as she came in to the maiden hut, a place the camp had set up for young, unwed women to help them ease into life in the camp safely. Ryia sat up a little straighter. It was staggering enough that she was still alive.

“What? Who? The boy who met us in the woods? Yes, I guess he’s good. I don’t know. What does it matter to me that he’s good?” Ryia, a Tineye, narrowed her eyes and looked for the little clue under the woman’s words. The smells and subtle movement of her eyes when she spoke that would tell Ryia more than words ever could. Ryia could spot a lie at a hundred paces with enough Tin in her belly.

“What do they say? He’s a Smoker. You know? A good boy who is good to his mother and a Misting, like you. Isn’t that nice? What a good match that is.” Horma smiled and tried to sound as if it was a done deal. A simple matter not too much worry about.

Ryia looked around; the other unwed women looked away. This was a thing they’d all talked about together at one time or another. “But I don’t even know him.” Before they fled the plantation, the skaa of House Bylerum had never much been bothered about who and when they wed. The Lord, and his father before him, even allowed time off when one of the women bore a child. He’d been gentle, after a fashion. The other skaa said that’s why his house was falling apart, but it was sad, not smug.

Just before things went to pot, he’d been especially gentle.

Ryia closed her eyes against the memories. Horma prattled on all the while as she started some soup over the fire. “What wouldn’t a good boy like Faran do for a fine woman like you?”

\* \* \*

“Do you know what I’d do to have you, Alloutte?” Liam’s rage stormed and bounced off the walls of her bedroom as he paced, gesturing violently with his arms, though none of it was directed at her. He wasn’t so foolish.

“No, but let me guess. You’ll fight your father to the death? Or maybe throw it all away? You’ll renounce your House so you and I can run away and live by our wits in the wild expanses outside Luthadel? Or maybe you’d wage war on the Lord Ruler, and cut down a thousand soldiers just for another night in my arms?”

He turned to scowl at her. "Don't be cruel. I know you suffer with this as I do, but there's no need to be glib with me." He moved to her, wrapping his hand around her upper arm, and smoothed his free hand along her jaw with the back of his fingers. "We have some capital of our own, you and I. We could force the matter. We could fight."

And there he went, being just so easy to love. He still believed in so much. There was still so much romance in him. Alloutte squeezed her eyes shut and tried to be cold. Cruelty was not a weapon she had inherited from her mother, it was what she'd developed in place of Allomancy. "There's no fight to be had, Liam. My mother and your father aren't wrong. If we tried to waste our influence on this, we could upset the good thing Urbain and Haught have going. That would be bad for Luthadel. That would be bad for us. An amusing dalliance isn't worth war, Liam."

He stepped back, put a hand to his side as if she'd stabbed him, and sucked air through his teeth. "And what would you have us do, then?"

\* \* \*

"I'm not sure what it is you want me to do, Mother Horma." The conversation had sort of gone on without her. A few wives had come in to share dinner with the unwed girls and gossip. None of it meant anything to Ryia, and she sat back in her chair with eyes closed dozing again. She was tired all the time these days. Her brother blamed the change in lifestyle, and the shock of having to flee the house. It was as good an excuse as any.

"Just, share your dinners with him." Horma moved behind the girl and set a bowl of gruel there for her to eat. "Maybe some breakfasts. Don't you think that would be nice?"

There were some chuckles from the wives, and Ryia knew she was missing something. Slowly, she began to understand; she rubbed at her stomach like she felt sick and shook her head. "No, I... I can't. There's someone I'm waiting for. He's special. I told him I would wait. He said he'd come find me."

"What do you think the chances are that some lost skaa separated from his house, fleeing for freedom after losing you, could find you eventually? You're young now, Ryia, with a special gift. A gift you can give to another generation of skaa, if you're just a little more understanding," Horma said gently. She didn't have anything cruel in her. "You have to think about tomorrow, Ryia, not just today."

"I can't abandon him. Why should I?" Guilt drew eyes away from the exchange, and even Horma shook her head, wordless. Ryia quietly rose from her seat and moved to the door. Dusk was settling, she didn't dare leave the maiden hut, not alone anyway, but she leaned on the door as if she wished she could. "I love him."

"No one is asking you to love Faran, just share dinner with him."

\* \* \*

“No one is saying that I should love your brother, Liam. No one is saying I can’t love you. I say things should stay as they are.” She put her hand on his, trying to comfort him.

It had the opposite effect and he yanked his hand away, scowling at her from a few feet away. “Meeting in secret?”

“It’s a very public secret, Liam. One that no one seems to much care about. I haven’t heard one lick of gossip about it. My mother certainly hasn’t said anything, and she hears everything. Somehow.”

He shook his head. “It feels as if I am ashamed of this. Or that you must be. That we have to hide it. I want to announce it to the world! Do you understand? I want to throw open your windows and scream out to the streets of Luthadel that I love Alloutte Haught and no other woman in the world will ever be enough for me since I have had you!”

Alloutte smirked, walked past him, and opened the doors to the balcony. She motioned to him. “By all means. Don’t let me stop you. It wouldn’t change anything. You’ll marry my younger sister when she’s old enough and you’ll have lovely children with a high potential of showing the blessings of the Lord Ruler.”

He did not take up her invitation, and folded his arms across his chest. “She would mean nothing to me. She could not compare to you.”

“For one thing,” she said, smiling now, and moving to push his arms apart and lean into him, “that is potentially one of my beloved sisters you are so certain you won’t even like. And for another, a marriage contract has nothing at all to do with who excites you. Who loves you. It’s simply another business arrangement. No marriage has ever stopped my mother from living her life the way she chooses. Why should you and I be any different?”

“And what of you? My brother is a cold fish.” He relented, putting his arms around her.

“A child by you would look no different than a child by him.”

Liam considered this, and then smiled, nodding. “I’m beginning to understand.”

\* \* \*

“You don’t understand,” Ryia said desperately, turning to face the women, but mostly Horma. “He’s not some runaway skaa, Mother Horma. He’s not even...” She stopped herself and covered her mouth with both hands. That wasn’t enough to stop the tears from rolling down her cheeks.

Only Horma finished the sentence in her head, and she lowered her eyes and groaned to herself. “You’re fortunate to be alive. He will not come for you. Faran is the wise choice. I’ll say no more on the matter. We must all make sacrifices for the good of the camp. What is asked of you is, really, a very small thing. Love the... man who stole perhaps more than your wits. Have dinner with a man who can at least give you a strong Misting child or two before you are too old to be anything more than a fuss and a bother. Like me.”



Ryia, shivering, shook her head and went to her straw mat in the corner, her dinner untouched, and laid down. She put her back to the other women so they would not see her cry, and wept herself to sleep. No one went to comfort her. Tears were a common enough lullaby anywhere there were skaa.

\* \* \*

Lindon Urbain sat looking pale and damp across the table from Alloutte. She did a wonderful job of looking lovingly at him, though his eyes trailed a young skaa serving man as he carried a tray of fruit out of the room. This too, she could deal with.

Her mother sat off to the side with the Lord Urbain playing a quiet game of verbal chess. They were witnesses, of course, but that didn't mean they had to lend their whole attention to the event. Urbain's wife had taken ill and her mother's current husband stood looking handsome but stupid off by the doorway because no one had told him to sit down.

An Obligator of great rank droned on. He called it a "momentous contract" of "significant importance to the Final Empire." He said that "the Lord Ruler himself acknowledges the union being forged here." Alloutte doubted the Lord Ruler had even heard about it. It wasn't like when her mother married. Or when Liam would, eventually. She looked to Lindon, who had similar and obvious doubts, but enough breeding to say nothing, as she did.

At least, she thought, there was some mutual ground to stand on. For a moment, they met eyes. It was no spark of passion or romance. However, there was, for a moment, understanding. Blessed indeed.

As the Obligator went on and on with the formal legal statements customarily made during the signing of an important marriage contract, she caught sight of her mother looking through a distant doorway.

For a moment, the cunning Lady Haught looked pained. That pain remained when she met her daughter's eyes for a time.

Alloutte slid her eyes in the direction her mother had been looking and saw, through the door, Liam's unmistakable outline.

"Young Lady Alloutte? Your signature please?"

"What?" She turned back sharply to the contract table and the Obligator. He looked sour, but he was the sort who always did.

"Would you please sign the contract?"

She sat upright and nodded. "Of course. Forgive me; I thought the groom signed first."

"I already have." Lindon said with all the warmth of a dead squid.

"And the wish for your bride?" Lady Haught broke in, giving her daughter an out. "I'm sure my Alloutte was simply waiting on formality."

Lindon shrugged. "Yes of course. I hope my bride bears a great number of healthy children to grow in glory in the Final Empire." He waved a hand limply.

"Don't we all." Lord Urbain muttered under his breath, and his son shot him a look.

The Obligator cleared his throat and offered the quill to Alloutte again. She closed her eyes, took it, breathed out, and put her name on the contract. “And as for me, I hope that as husband and wife, we always stand beside one another. That we foster the growth of joy and satisfaction in one another, rather than stand in the way of the things we each need and want.” Technically, these were the first words she’d ever said directly to Lindon. He blinked twice.

“Yes,” he said slowly. “A lovely wish indeed. Well said, my wife.” Slowly again, as if the other shoe would drop if he spoke too quickly.

Somewhere — not so far off that it wasn’t heard, but a safe distance away — a door slammed shut, shaking a vase off a shelf. It crashed to the floor in some nearby chamber.

Liam, Alloutte thought, would get over his pain one day.

\* \* \*

When dawn broke through the mists and the skaa of the camp could go about their daily routine, Ryia rushed to her feet and barely got out of the maiden hut before she threw up, leaning on the wall. She wretched a while, until she had nothing else to cough up.

“Ryia?” a soft voice asked her. Faran stood a few steps away, his dusty hat in his hand, afraid to get closer, more afraid to leave. “Are you all right?”

She felt the baby in her stomach move for the first time, and she couldn’t stop herself from crying out. “No!” She turned and looked at the young Smoker with his dark eyes and his dirty face and his scruffy hair. “I can’t do what they want. What you want. I can’t just give up on what I had. What if he comes for me?” She groaned out and slid to her knees, holding her stomach.

Gossip traveled fast and, of course, by now most of the camp had put together the truth. Faran straightened himself up. “It isn’t about what I want either. You’re a nice girl, I’m sure. I don’t want nothing from you that you don’t want to give.” He struggled to sound soft, and knelt in front of her. She wouldn’t look up when he tried to catch her eyes. He took his hat and dabbed at her mouth where it was still wet.

“What if they’re wrong?” she asked, looking up, wishing she had Tin to burn to study his reaction as closely as possible. “What if he does come for me? To take me away from all this?”

Faran looked her in the eyes and said, “Then, square honest truth, I’ll step aside. I mean it. If this... man comes for you... I won’t stand in your way.”

He was, so far as she could tell, genuine. It made her chest feel tight and uncomfortable.

“All that talk about you sharing dinner with me,” he said. “Why don’t we start with lunch, this day, and see what it leads to?” He smiled weakly and stood up, offering her his hands.

“All... all right,” she said meekly, standing with his help. “We can at least, maybe for a little while, try it this way.”

As they walked in the early light, Faran took Ryia’s hand.

\* \* \*

“It will get easier, in time,” Chanim Haught told her daughter at the party to celebrate her marriage contract.

Lindon Urbain was already gone. He’d left early to talk to his “hunting chums” about their weekend trip out of the city. Liam hadn’t showed up, and so most of the bride’s time was taken up by her mother and sisters. They spoke and gossiped quietly in code about what the contract really meant.

“I’m not worried,” daughter assured mother. The role reversal told Chanim she’d done everything right so far.

“You promise me you’ll be all right with all of this? That you’ll thrive no matter what the obstacles before you? That you will be the most wonderful woman in Luthadel? That isn’t so very much for a mother to ask of her eldest daughter, is it?”

Alloutte smiled. “Of course, mother. You’ve always found a way to do something magical with what you were handed. That’s all I’ll do. Like you, I’ll find my own way.”





# 15

## THE JOURNEYS OF THE KEEPER OF DOMINANCES



Liquid, rusty-hued and thick, flowed from the spigot of a modest cask into a ceramic mug. Froth spilled over the side as the tavern's owner, a burly skaa sporting an unfashionable beard, plunked the tankard onto the counter in front of Fisal. The Terrisman eyed the brew, ruminating on its peculiar color and even stranger scent. The bartender beamed and leaned forward, his thick hands resting on the bar. "Lammsa root gives it a special kick. I have it shipped in. Can only grow in the shadow of an Ashmount."

Fisal took a sip and sloshed it about his mouth — a not particularly pleasant experience. "Lammsa root ale," he slowly spoke, seemingly to no one. "Reddish, foamy. Tastes vaguely like soap."

The bartender stared for a second, his expression blank. Then, picking up the few clips the Terrisman had immaculately stacked on the bar, he mumbled, "Keep your reviews to yourself."

Fisal's attention broke away from his drink. "Apologies," he said, unable to make eye contact with the hardworking brewer he had just offended. *Difficult for others, I must remember that, he reflected. Acting like this, I must just look like an old fool too long kept apart from people.*

*Accurate enough, I suppose.*

Slowly lifting the mug again, he started filling his Tinmind, dulling his senses just enough to douse the waxy bitterness of the Lammsa ale. The tin band on his upper arm would hold his very senses until he needed them at a later time. He did this sort of thing frequently, using his gifts as a Keeper to endure the loudness

of city streets, sleep on rocky ground without discomfort, or just shut out the presence of other people when — as they so often did — they became too much for his nerves. The oppressive crowds of Luthadel, even at the quietest times of day, were nearly unbearable. He much preferred places like this. Ocarth, like the other towns on this edge of the Central Dominance, could thank its low population for its smaller number of Obligators and less strict enforcement of tax laws. Even more importantly, given the state of his coin purse, everything was cheaper out here. Still, even at small-town prices, this odd ale was not an insignificant purchase, and he would consume it all, even if he had to draw on Feruchemy just to keep it down.

“Fisal. Fisal!”

The shouting startled the Terrisman. Unfortunately, filling a Tinmind meant dimming all his senses, and he hadn’t heard the newcomer approach. Sound returned to full volume, vision became sharp and crisp, and Fisal readily identified the squat man with the wispy hair and green cloak.

“Temmir. Been years, hasn’t it?”

Settling into a chair at a table far from the bar, and from the few other patrons, Temmir motioned for the Terrisman to join him and smirked. “Three. Frankly, I’m surprised you make it through this little burg even that often.”

“I like its peace. Its size.” Fisal rose to his full, towering height and walked toward Temmir’s table, mug in hand.

“Hmm. Far from a center of culture, though. Still, I was glad to hear you were passing through.” Temmir subtly lowered his voice and gestured for Fisal to sit. “I think perhaps you could use some company when you leave. I know someone — a skaa — who needs to not stay in this Dominance much longer.”

“Not like you, this type of arrangement. Too...”

“Involved?” Temmir hunched over the table. “It’s true, I prefer to simply pass the information back and forth, keep my hands clean. I’m making an exception. A noble from House Bylerum, about a year ago, wronged some relations of mine. What this skaa did, I consider the fulfillment of a blood debt on my behalf. I know it’s a weakness in my line of work, but I suspect you can relate to trying to protect the legacy of your people.”

“Loss of a whole culture. That’s a different scale than one skaa running away from his master.”

“Death is death. And he’s not running from his master. The house fell, people died. It’s the Obligators.”

“One skaa? Why would they care?”

“Nobles are dead. That sort of thing draws their attention. His journey here was slow, cautious. Not as fast as the Obligators can spread word about a wanted skaa. I just need you to direct him somewhere safe, and I’ll pay. You don’t even have to make the whole trip, just tell him where to go. I know everything that happens here, even some of what goes on in Luthadel, but I don’t know the Outer Dominances.” He whispered, “Boxings up front.”

Fisal sat up straight, reaching out a long arm to slide the mug away from him. “I’ll take your job.”

\* \* \*

The appearance of a Terrisman could be intimidating. Early in his training as a steward, he learned to compensate for his great height and long, thin limbs. The side effects of his castration were common to all stewards, and he had put much effort into developing non-threatening speech patterns and mannerisms. Fisal's time spent traveling on his own and his distaste for other people often overcame this training, but he could be a proper steward when he needed to.

And now was such a time. He prepared himself as he came within sight of the meeting place Temmir had arranged: an abandoned storage house beside a dry well on the city's outskirts, tinted a purple-tinged brown in the light of the setting red sun. *He'll be terrified*, Fisal thought. *Been through horrible things, from what Temmin said of his travels. Killing is hard to deal with, too, at least for most skaa.*

Fisal pulled in his arms, which had been swaying at his sides as he walked, to gently fold his hands in front of his heart. His long, thudding steps became shorter, softer. As he straightened his slouched back, the Terrisman completed the transformation from a looming giant to a serene and resilient pillar of strength.

The old door to the storage house creaked open, revealing rotted barrels, empty shelves, a thick layer of ash that had seeped through the cracks in the ceiling... and nothing else. *He should be here already*, Fisal thought. He tapped his Tinmind to look for signs of the skaa's presence. His senses growing sharper, he noticed small footprints, hastily concealed. *Already gone? But where...*

A faint creak and rustle, the sound of a person shifting weight on an old beam, came from behind and above him. Reflexively, he tapped his steelmind to give himself speed, and crossed the room in an instant. A cloud of ash kicked up by his superhumanly fast sprint filled the air. Fisal wheeled to look above the door, to find the source of the sound. Perched on a wide beam, a boy in skaa work clothes hid in the shadows, clutching a thick wooden barrel stave. To Fisal's surprise, his shadowed face showed no fear, only standoffish skepticism.

"Temmir sent me. I'm to be your guide."

The boy tightened his lips for a second, then replied. "I didn't think you looked very dangerous."

\* \* \*

Fisal and the boy, called Kem, waited to set out until the mist cleared in the morning, rather than traveling through the night. His status as a steward would provide a cover story, albeit a weak one, and Kem was afraid to travel through the mists, just like the vast majority of skaa.

The night before, while they prepared for bed, Fisal explained a bit about Feruchemy. He had already tapped his steelmind in front of the boy, so there was little use keeping that secret. Kem couldn't betray him, anyway. Going to an Obligator was simply too risky for a fugitive. Though Fisal had to admit that, if he hadn't known already, he wouldn't have guessed from the boy's demeanor that he was a killer.

During their conversation that night, Fisal learned the boy was quick to smile and prone to making jokes. Despite the long hours of travel, Kem was often too excited to fall asleep and stayed awake for hours. Perhaps it was because he had company to talk with. Fisal had believed that skaa had to grow up more quickly than nobles, but this one still brimmed with childlike enthusiasm. By that age, Fisal had been training to become a steward for five years. Even a noble child of thirteen years would be beaten to see if he would Snap and become an Allomancer.

“So all those bracelets and rings hold things?” Kem had asked, holding an ironmind Fisal allowed him to inspect.

“Yes. That one holds weight.”

“Weight? Why would you want to store that?”

“Not a choice, really. Things work that way whether we like them to or not. But getting heavier or lighter does have its uses on occasion.”

“If you take weight out of it, how can you get *lighter*?”

“Well, Pulling weight out does make me heavier. Putting it in makes me lighter. The ironmind doesn’t come with any weight stored inside. Feruchemy has consequences. I can only take out as much as I’ve already put in.”

“How do you get it out?”

“Touch the metalmind and think it. But only I can do it. You can’t tap or fill a metalmind, and I can’t do anything with another Keeper’s metalmind.”

“That’s weird.”

“Hmm. Yes, the whole system is quite ‘weird.’”

It had taken two hours of talking, mostly about Feruchemy, before the boy nodded off to sleep. Getting him up in the morning was difficult, but the promise of a decent breakfast got him moving.

They walked through the morning hours. They had no particular agenda, since Fisal needed to advise the boy on the best place to find refuge. All they needed to do today was get away from Ocarth and make the boy harder for the Obligators to find.

Like most skaa from the plantations, hard labor and little food had made Kem wiry and tanned. He was small, but didn’t truly look like a child. That, combined with the way his high voice cracked when he got excited, told Fisal that he was just reaching puberty. His light brown hair had been sun-bleached to a hue so close to blond that he could pass for a native of the Western Dominance. He was hardy, and Fisal could tell he’d have no trouble keeping up over long days of walking. In fact, the Keeper had to tap his goldmind from time to time, pulling from the thin gold band around his right bicep so he could continue until Kem was ready to stop.

The two stopped to rest by a creek. Fisal sat down in the shade under an old, wide-limbed tree with wide brown roots that trailed over the edge of the creek. Despite the years he had spent traveling, mostly on foot, Fisal had grown tired throughout the morning. *Must be my age. Normal people talk of growing old and getting weaker. Much harder to tell for a Feruchemist, I think. Using a goldmind distorts my perception.*



Kem had gone to the creek and skimmed off the layer of ash to collect some water. The boy was sweating in the sun, but Fisal's Feruchemy sheltered him from the heat. He stored his warmth in a brassmind on his left arm to cool his body. Feruchemy allowed subtle variations, so he had no trouble keeping himself comfortable but not cold. Without his brassmind, the heat would have been stifling. Fisal still wore the robes of a Terris steward, covered in embroidered V shapes. The fabric alternated between crimson, gold, and violet, the three colors of House Graem, the minor house that taught him stewardship.

The boy came back and handed the water to Fisal. Then he dropped to the ground, sprawled out on the grass, and groaned.

"That, my young charge," Fisal said, affecting his steward's voice, "is the kind of visible laziness and dissatisfaction that gets a skaa whipped."

"Ungh," Kem replied, hoisting himself up on his elbows. "I thought I was supposed to pretend I'm a noble."

"True enough, that is our cover. Perhaps you should complain more loudly."

"Is that what noble kids are really like? You serve them, right?"

"As a steward, yes. I was assigned to raise Percellus Graem. He was quite an expert at whining. Moping as well."

"I can do that, if you want to feel more at home."

Fisal chuckled despite himself. "Not my home. I mean, I hardly consider it that. Percellus is grown now, but it hasn't stopped him from whining. I convinced him to send me out to seek alliances from other houses. To build a power base so the house can one day become one of the Great Houses in Luthadel."

"Will that work?"

"If you mean, 'Will tricking a fatuous noble heir into letting me pursue knowledge as a Keeper on my own work?,' then yes. If you mean, 'Will Percellus Graem one day lead a Great House,' I think you or I have just as good a chance."

"What does fatuous mean?"

"Stupid. Useless." As he insulted the man he had raised from childhood, Fisal thought, *Amazing that I've spend so much time with one person and still feel no affection for him. I don't worry about him or miss his presence. His "command" of me is just a ruse to conceal my true work.*

Fisal smiled at Kem. "In fact, I like you much better. If you were my charge, I might shirk my duties as a Keeper to look after you."

"You would not! Didn't you say they're more important than anything?"

"Well, I would at least take you with me as I traveled."

"Isn't that what we're doing right now?"

Fisal's face became stern. "No. We need to talk about places you might be able to hide. Come, stand up. You look rested enough. We'll discuss this as we walk."

The creek was small enough for Kem to leap over, and for Fisal to cross in one long stride. They were following a footpath Fisal had taken before. It was seldom used, and he thought it would cover their tracks better than walking across the untrammelled grass. Ash blew off the flattened path in even light breezes, but piled high in the taller grass and showed footsteps clearly.

“We’re in the Central Dominance now. On the edge. You came from the Southern Dominance. I think these are the worst places for you to settle. Perhaps given a few more years, you could move to Luthadel and disappear into the crowd with a new name. Right now, though, I would be sending you into either of the Dominances where the most Obligators roam. In the Southern Dominance, they inspect the plantations and the trade routes that lead back to Luthadel. And in the capital itself, they’re unavoidable. Besides, what work did you do on the plantation?”

“Working the fields, mostly.”

“As I thought. Thieves and industrial workers flock to Luthadel, but you don’t have the skills to take such work and avoid notice. The plantations would be suspicious of someone arriving from outside. With your house gone, you wouldn’t have to worry about running into their allies. But if any noble found out what you did...”

Kem glanced at the ground and grimaced, looking like he was about to cry. A lump rose in Fisal’s throat.

“I’m sorry. I was saying I think we can rule out the Southern Dominance. The more urban farming communities could work. Homber springs to mind. Vetitan even has mines nearby, always a good place to find work with no strings attached. But still too risky, I think. They’re all run by lesser members of the Great Houses. Hasting, Elariel, and Lekal all control large plantations and towns.”

Kem looked up, still frowning but more in control. “You know so much about these places. Most of them I’ve hardly even heard of.”

“Years and miles. I’m so much older than you, and a Keeper must travel to fill his copperminds.”

“Those are the ones for memories, right? Temmir said every Keeper knows a bit of everything and a lot about one thing.”

*Not many people know that. No surprise Temmir does. And I wasn’t even the one who told him.*

“So is that why you know all about the Dominances?”

“Oh. No. I mean, I do catalogue what I learn about cultures and politics. I only know what I’ve picked up from traveling. I think that will be enough for you, though I could pull more information from my copperminds — descriptions passed on to me from other Keepers and stored for later use.”

“You don’t have a thing you know all about?”

“I do. It’s just... mine is architecture, actually.”

“What’s that?”

“Buildings.”

“People care about buildings?”

The words stung, regardless of the intent. Fisal cleared his throat.

“Some do. One day, perhaps, more will. It is my duty to preserve the knowledge until they do.”

\* \* \*

Fisal and Kem also ruled out the Northern Dominance as they wandered on. The region was dominated by House Venture. Certainly Kem could disappear in the capital, Urteau, and find work. Criminals operated out of a section of dry canals called the Harrows, and they would take in almost anyone to work as smugglers or handle guard duty. Regardless, it was a dangerous place. Lord Straff Venture gave harsh orders to the nobles under him, especially for dealing with the skaa. Kem probably wouldn't be found out there, but he was far more likely to be worked to death or indiscriminately executed by Venture masters.

They reached a bend in the path, where it twisted north to follow the edge of a small canal. Fisal pointed along the waterway. "This canal connects to the southern branch of the River Channerel."

Kem picked up a few large stones to toss in the water as they walked. Each one pierced through the ash atop the water, sending up pulpy black droplets. "And that goes to Luthadel, you said."

*Learns quickly, Fisal thought. Puts together all these bits of information, makes connections. Considering how hard plantation owners try to keep their skaa complacent and ignorant, he's very sharp.*

"Correct. We can cross at a ferry about two miles ahead. Unattended."

"First you need to do something. We might run into people here, and we need to disguise you." Fisal dug through his pack and found a paper-wrapped parcel Temmir had bought at his insistence. He handed it to Kem. "Put these on."

The skaa undid the string and undid the wrapping. He pulled out a white shirt, black trousers, thin black jacket with crimson trim, and pair of black shoes.

"Noble clothes! They're incredible." He felt the sleeve of the jacket. The fabric was fine, and much softer than his rough skaa work clothes.

Fisal poured a bit of water from his canteen onto a gray rag. He moved over to the boy and, with the care and attention of a trained Terris steward, wiped the ash from his face and hands. "We must make you look the part, or as close as we can manage. While you're wearing these, try not to touch the ash any more than you absolutely must."

As the boy changed, Fisal turned his back. Skaa weren't accustomed to the same amount of privacy nobles expected, but if he was to play the part of a noble's steward, he would treat this boy like a noble. *Strange that I've spent most of the day with Kem, but haven't tired of his company. He is curious. Maybe that makes the difference. I could share stories with Temmir for hours on end, after all. Sharing knowledge makes speaking to people more bearable.*

"Give me whatever I want!"

Fisal turned to see where the voice had come from. Kem stood, back straight, nose upturned. The boy aped the posture of a noble, but didn't wear his clothes quite right. *This isn't just his act, is it? The boy always stands like a noble. Or rather, he doesn't stand like a skaa! He's not beaten down, not weak-willed. He could be more than a laborer.*

Kem slumped. "These are really warm."

"I'm sure you will be able to endure, young Master." Fisal straightened the boy's garments, then began walking north. "Your name?" Fisal asked.

“Lord Kemaris Graem, son of Tal and Josedra Graem.”

“Most well said, Master Kemaris. If we must interact with anyone, shall I do the speaking for you?”

“Yes, servant.”

Fisal looked down at Kem, who winced. *Not comfortable with talking to me like an inferior. To be expected. I would be afraid if he took to that behavior too quickly.*

“Fisal’ will do, Master Kemaris. Now, let’s see what Dominance shall we discuss next?”

The Terrisman considered the topic, but Kem interrupted his train of thought. “What’s past the Dominances? I mean, if you just keep going through the Southern Dominance?”

“Depends. An ocean, if you go past the Southern Dominance.”

“What’s there?”

“The Southern Islands. My people know they were once places of high culture. Now there’s nothing but dismal pirate outposts and a few plantations that grow exotic delicacies for nobles. A few spice traders, too.”

“You went there?”

“Yes. Seeking the remnants of a culture lost to the ages. Long, low buildings of cut marble, adorned with Bronze and Brass. Temples to a way of life long dead. They bake in the hot sun, surrounded by the strange half-dead plants that grow on those humid islands.”

“Who lives there?”

“Most were abandoned. The ancient Bennet people built them as ports, but they traveled to different places than today’s nobles do. The new port cities are dull, utilitarian affairs. They send ships back and forth to trade with Luthadel’s outposts, not to explore. Cargo comes to port, then makes its way up along the canals, to Luthadel and beyond. The plantations farther inland on the islands are much like those of the Southern Dominance, but more open to the air. The Southern Islands are far from the Ashmounts, and stay much warmer than the Inner Dominances.”

Kem blinked. “I think I understood *some* of that.”

“Ah, forgive me. To ask a Keeper to speak on his specialty is to invite rambling.”

“So is there an ocean past the other Dominances, too?”

“No. Here, let me show you.” Fisal pulled a long pen out from under one of the overlapping V shapes of his robe, and found a scrap of paper in his pack. He scrawled a rough map. “These are the Inner Dominances. The Central Dominance...” He made a dot, “... with Luthadel. We’re near this edge, by the Southern Dominance. Here are the Western, Northern, and Eastern Dominances.”

“So the ocean is here?”

“Yes, and the Southern Islands. Up here is the Farmost Dominance, bordering the Western Dominance, for the most part. The Western and Northern Dominances touch the Terris Dominance.”

“The land you’re from.”

"I return there far less often than I'd like, but I do still consider it home. The land is mountainous, with great clear waterfalls. We build our structures wide and low to the ground. Aesthetically, this is to emphasize the great height of the waterfalls, but it's also practical. There aren't many of us, yet still we—"

"Doing it again."

"Right." Fisal pointed to the edge of the map. "Over here, the Crescent Dominance makes up the eastern edge of the Northern and Eastern Dominances. Not much there to speak of. It's a desert, with just a few families of wandering herdsmen. The Obligators don't bother them much, but an outsider won't have much of a chance at survival. They raid the Eastern Dominance for food and supplies and carry off skaa and noble alike. You'd need to know how to—"

"And down here?" Kem asked, jabbing at the landmass that wrapped around the bottom of the ocean, and smudging the wet ink.

"The Remote Dominance. Mountainous, dry, and dangerous. Rebels, bandits. House Tekiel has a strong presence along the northern and eastern border, but even they have a large number of the Lord Ruler's koloss stationed near their lands. Those beasts are never safe to have around."

"So where could I go? What's left?"

"Well, we have the Eastern Dominance, which isn't far, the Western Dominance, and the Farmost Dominance."

"And the Southern Islands and Terris Dominance."

"Well, the Southern Islands are hard to reach. Traveling alone in a small boat means you're certain to get taken by pirates, even if you could sail and navigate. The ferry from Cape Solom is a short route, but very busy. And it means going through a House Hasting stronghold. The Terris Dominance..."

*...is a majestic land, the most beautiful place anyone could call home...*

"...is under the complete control of the Obligators. They monitor the skaa carefully. The Terris people are forced into the Lord Ruler's breeding programs."

*And most males are eunuchs, like me. Only the Synod has any autonomy, and only by claiming it in secret.*

"Only three places, then? Two of them are all the way on the other side of the Empire."

"To be truthful, Kem, I think travel that way will be fairly safe. We need you to find a place to settle and not be noticed. I doubt you will run into trouble if you travel off well-used roads."

The skaa boy's eyes were wide. He stared down the path, back the way they had come. Fisal followed his gaze. A man strode slowly along the path, his gray robes swaying above the ground. Fisal tapped his tinmind, and his vision improved by an order of magnitude. As he had feared, the man was bald, with ornate tattoos encircling his eyes.

"An Obligator," he murmured. He handed the map to Kem, and rose to his full height. "I believe it is time to put on a show, Master Kemaris. Our geography lesson is at an end."

Fisal waved, using a small motion. The Obligator gave no response, so Fisal tried again, raising his hand in a wide arc above his head. This time, the Obligator

returned the gesture. *Normal vision? I believe that is safe to assume. He's not a Tineye. I should be on guard for other signs of Allomancy, though.*

Fisal tapped his zincmind slightly, making his mind process information faster. It made it easier to lie. A boy of this age, a minor member of a minor house, would more likely be entrusted to a younger steward. To make his disguise a bit more plausible, Fisal also tapped his goldmind to make himself look healthier and more youthful. The effect was minor, but Fisal was sure it had made a difference in the past.

As the Obligator drew near, Fisal folded his hands over his heart and bowed his head slightly in deference. "It is a pleasure to greet an honorable representative of the Steel Ministry. It is comforting to see a mark of civilization amid this wilderness."

The Obligator smirked, and clasped his hands behind his back. Under the thick robes, he was clearly a large man. His face was puffy, but his muscular neck suggested that his mass wasn't all from fat. He squinted at Fisal's robes, creasing the tattoos around his eyes. "Crimson, gold, and violet. I'm afraid I can't quite place your house, Terrisman."

"Our honorable Lord Kemaris Graem travels this path today. Speaking as his steward, Fisal is my name." His training dictated that Fisal remain polite, regardless of the tone another adopted. Most stewards only strictly followed this rule around nobles of other houses, Obligators, and people they didn't like. Fisal always spoke politely to Percellus Graem.

"Ah, yes. House Graem," the Obligator continued. "Is this one the child of Tal and Jillian?"

Kem spoke up. "Tal and Josedra."

"My mistake. You look old for your years. Please tell your father how sad I was to hear of Jillian's passing. But congratulations on a strong lad, I suppose."

"How can I pass a message if I don't know your name?"

The Obligator glanced at Fisal, still squinting with his self-satisfied smirk. "A plain speaker, I see. Lord Dallart is my name, Master Kemaris."

*He's being coy, Fisal thought. Using his noble title instead of his rank in the Steel Ministry. Judging by his tattoos, he's almost of the rank Prelan. And judging by their signature six-pointed formation...*

"A member of the Canton of Orthodoxy, if I am not mistaken."

"No, not mistaken at all, my good Terrisman. I'm just transferring between barges. I have a message to deliver and witness. One house dropped me off an hour ago, and the next will pick me up before long."

He smiled. "I don't believe I'll be telling you which houses. Even they won't know whom they're making deals with unless the offer is accepted. You might find the story dull, anyway. I doubt this young man finds politics as thrilling as I do. He looks more the 'outdoors' type."

"Master Kemaris was dismissed while his house's barge made a delivery. He elected to stay overnight in the wild. To camp. We await the barge's return."

"Well, you won't stray too far from the safety of the canal, I hope. Why did his father not make him witness the exchange of goods?"

“The suggestion was offered by this humble servant, but the Lord deemed it unnecessary.”

“I think it’s never too early, but the father’s word is supreme.” Dallart peered past Fisal and Kem, looking down the road to the north. “Well, I’ll leave you to your expedition.”

He walked directly between the skaa and the Terrisman, making one last show of bravado. As the Obligator moved toward him, Fisal felt a gentle nudge against the bracers on his arms. *A Steelpush! So you are an Allomancer, Dallart. And an arrogant one.*

After the Obligator was far out of earshot, Fisal turned to Kem. He placed a long, bony hand on the boy’s shoulder, and guided him to walk slowly on.

Kem spoke shakily, “I didn’t know what to say. About my parents and everything.”

“You did well, Kem. Can’t learn to act like a noble with just a few minutes of instruction. You said all you needed to say. Even many noble children would have been far more intimidated by an Obligator.”

“Do parents really take their children on trips like that? Do nobles do things like this for fun?”

“Some of them. Rarely for more than a night or two, though. Not unless they’re trying to toughen them up.”

“Do skaa parents toughen up their kids?”

“I don’t think skaa need quite so much help. But yes.”

“My parents died when I was little. All the adult skaa had to look after their own, so I don’t really know what parents do.”

“In Terris, we don’t have parents, really. You know how some skaa have their children taken away and sold or sent to another plantation? All Terris infants are taken from the breeders and — if they’re male — put into the Lord Ruler’s stewardship programs.”

*We don’t know what it’s like to have parents, and we can’t become fathers, either. This boy doesn’t need to know stewards are eunuchs, but I’m not sure a steward can ever know what it’s like for parents or their children.*

“What happens to the girls?”

“They become servants. Or join the next generation of breeders.”

“It sounds... strict.”

“It is, but so is the life of the skaa. Even the nobles and Obligators have their rules to follow, passed down from the Lord Ruler.”

*This conversation, Fisal thought, is growing too fatalistic for my tastes.*

“Now, let’s discuss our last three Dominances.”

“Farmost, Eastern, and Western.”

“Yes. The Western Dominance has a different culture. A frontier culture, still, in many places. Rougher, more blunt. Certainly one of your strong suits, though your sense of humor might not be welcome. The smaller settlements tend to be close-knit, and would be hard to join. You might find a place in Tremredare, the ‘capital of the West.’ It’s a long trip, but probably safe. If anyone does come after you there, you can take refuge in the mountains. They’re dotted with so many



caves you'd never be found. I'd avoid the other cities, though. Fadrex City is the other large one, known for its rock formations and thus highly defensible locale, but House Cett has a reputation for cruelty against their skaa."

"I think that's the first time you made a place sound good."

"It could work. The Westerners have a particular style, though. They wear thick beards. Think you can grow one?"

"Yeah, I'll make one out of ash."

"They're blond up there. I'm not sure Kem Ashbeard would fit in. We'll put it on the list anyway. Now, beyond the Western Dominance is the Farmost Dominance. You can survive there if you aren't picky, but you're a little inexperienced to live off the land. There are a few plantations, some owned by House Renoux. It's a small house, and more likely to take any worker it can find..."

Kem seemed distracted by something up ahead. A small barge was floating down the canal. It appeared to be unmanned, but Fisal tapped Tin and saw that the Obligator, Lord Dallart, was aboard, sitting on the far side of the deck.

Fisal's blood ran cold. *Only one person on a barge. One Obligator.* Fisal hadn't been sure whether Dallart's earlier behavior had been a typical Obligator game or a set-up, but this was unmistakable. The Obligator was sending a message that he had them at his mercy. *Running from a Steel-burning Misting is useless. He'll just fire coins to kill us from a distance. All we can do is wait. See what his trap is... and stop him if I can.*

"Behind me, Kem. Don't do anything unless I tell you to."

As the barge pulled slowly toward them, Fisal filled as many of his metal-minds as he considered prudent. Measured amounts of speed and strength flowed out of him, but he kept his senses and mind sharp and clear. Using his Feruchemy like this, he became even more determined to survive. Not just for himself and the boy, but for the future. He had to add the information stored in his metalminds to the shared knowledge of the Keepers.

Lord Dallart stood up when the barge was within five yards of the travelers. He grabbed a long pole and jabbed it down into the canal, bringing the barge to a stop. His face was distorted again into a smirk. He called out, "Master Kemaris! Terrisman! Wait, I've forgotten your name." The fat Obligator bounded, almost skipped, to the cabin of the barge. He swung open the door and yelled inside. "What's the steward's name?"

A muffled, strained voice answered back.

"Fisal! Yes, that was it." He turned back to look at the two people on the road. "You've been a joy to track. Very clever. I enjoyed our talk, too. I might not have seen through your disguise if I hadn't already known. You know, when we found out you two were traveling together, we all thought you'd come this way. And I pulled rank so I could be the one to follow you. The others are headed west and north. I hope you appreciate my personal attention."

The Keeper's mind raced as he tapped his zincmind to keep himself ready. The only question on his mind was whether the Obligator intended to use Temmir as bait or just kill him for sport. Dallart's attitude suggested the latter. Behind him, Kem was shivering in fright, a "killer" reduced to what he really was — a boy.



“Let’s greet the Obligator’s best friend,” Dallart said. He reached into the cabin, and dragged Temmir out, forcing him to kneel on the deck of the barge. The informant’s face was covered in hideous bruises and long, thin knife cuts. His wispy hair clung to the seeping wounds. The Obligators had left the area around his eyes unharmed; they wanted him to have clear vision. “We owe you, friend. We were only looking for the noble killer, but you gave us a Terrisman *traitor*, as well.”

At this, Temmir looked directly at Fisal and winked. He might have even tried to smile, but lacked the strength. Fisal’s mind quickly made the connection. *He said “Terrisman traitor.” Not “Keeper.” Temmir held one thing back during his torture.*

Fisal tapped his steelmind, drawing physical speed. Unlike an Allomancer, a Feruchemist could pull any amount of a stored trait at a time. He rushed toward the Obligator.

Before Fisal began to move, Dallart started to draw the knife from his belt. He looked at Temmir and said, “Claim your reward.” The knife moved down in a flash toward Temmir’s chest. In the moment the knife’s tip broke the skin, a hand gripped the Obligator’s wrist. The Terrisman had been on the shore a second before, but now he was clinging to the side of the barge, holding back the blade.

Fisal tapped his pewtermind and shattered the Obligator’s wrist with crushing Feruchemical strength.

Lord Dallart screamed. He tore loose the brass buttons on Temmir’s vest with his good hand, then desperately flared Steel, Pushing the buttons at the Terrisman.

Fisal dodged, tapping his steelmind, but one button shredded across his abdomen. Jumping backward from the barge, he landed on the shore. He tapped his goldmind for health so he could overcome his wound, but it wouldn’t last long. The Obligator was trying to shake off the pain of his broken wrist so he could concentrate, and Fisal used this time to get into position. He tapped his steelmind again to rapidly stand up, then dashed to the right.

Dallart regained his focus. The Terrisman was on the ground, with a tree directly behind him. One of its low branches had fallen, leaving a jagged point protruding from the trunk. The Obligator grinned as he flared his Steel.

The zincmind and steelmind drained rapidly. Fisal’s plan required precise reflexes and concentration. The force of a massive Steelpush hit Fisal’s bracers. *He took the bait!*

Fisal slid backward a couple inches, then tapped his ironmind. The soft soil under him compressed under his massively increased weight. In any Steelpush or Ironpull, the lighter object moves. Lord Dalheart had put on muscle and fat to make him more effective in an Allomantic fight, but Fisal now weighed more than any man could. The Obligator flew backward, colliding with the barge’s tiny cabin. Dallart’s neck bent over the top of the cabin and snapped with a sickening crack. With his Tin-enhanced vision, Fisal saw the Obligator’s eyes roll back as he fell. The eyes went white and hollow inside the intricate patterns of tattoos. The body slumped down and tumbled over the barge’s edge, splashing into the canal.

The gray robes turned black and sodden in the ash-choked waters.

*Temmir might live*, Fisal thought as he pushed the pole against the bottom of the canal, supplementing the stroke with a bit of strength from his pewtermind. *Going to be close, and he'll never be fully healthy*. The informant was resting on the floor of the cabin, sleeping on top of Fisal's embroidered robe.

Kem sat on the back deck of the barge, the same place he'd been since Fisal carried him on board after the fight. He hadn't said much, and barely responded to the Keeper's questions. Fisal wished he hadn't had to kill the Obligator, but every Keeper had to be willing to. It meant the survival of the Keepers — the survival of knowledge, of history. The sun glinted off the bracers on Fisal's bare arms, shining in Kem's eyes. He moved his hand to cover his face, and spoke.

"What about the Eastern Dominance?"

Fisal pushed the barge again, and adopted his steward voice. "The laws of the Empire are not enforced as strongly in the Eastern Dominance. There aren't many settlements. Just a few small and not very dense cities. There's work for herdsmen, if you can do that. Especially on the eastern border near the Burnlands. Those are sandy and hot — not very pleasant."

Kem pulled out a piece of paper and held it in his hands. "It sounds pretty good."

*He sounds tired. How could he not be?*

"You might have to learn some Eastern slang, though. Otherwise, you'll really stand out as an outsider. Try this: 'Wasing the not of the dirt of the places.'"

"'Wanting to not the dirt off places?' Was that right?"

"I have no idea. I think you might be a natural."

"Good," Kem replied, his eyelids drooping. "I like the Eastern Dominance." He lay down next to the cabin and dropped into an exhausted sleep. Fisal set the pole aside so he could pick the boy up and move him out of the direct sunlight. The map of the Dominances was still clutched in Kem's hand.

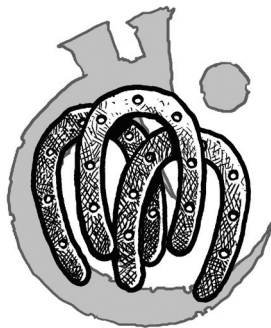
*We won't be going to the Eastern Dominance, Kem. We're both wanted by the Obligators, and Temmir certainly can't go back to Ocarth. Our trip will be long, far to the north. Back to my lands of my people: the homeland in Terris. I'll have a difficult debate with the Synod. I think I can convince them to take you on — as servants or laborers at the very least.*

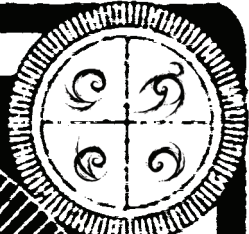
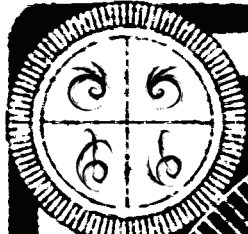
*Temmir; if you survive, you can show us so many new ways to find knowledge. We are so cautious. Hidebound. Tied to our traditions.*

*Kem, perhaps under the Synod's guidance you can grow up the way a man should. The way the stewards are unable. We can hide you, I'm certain. If the Synod refuses... I will reject my home. We proclaim the greatness of people long dead, but the people of today hold far more promise than the Synod admit. If we want to preserve the wonder of the past, how can we neglect the people of the present?*

*The Terris people grow weaker; our numbers small. We need others. We need people like these to share our knowledge. We need to trust.*

As Fisal pushed the barge forward through the ash-capped water, he tapped what was left in his Tinmind. He closed his eyes and listened to the barge's creaking timbers, the water lapping against the shore, the rustling of the trees, and the deep, slow breathing of his resting companions. *The Terris people will not survive if we remain alone.*





- 16. LAKE TYRIAN
- 17. LAKE LUTHADEL
- 18. THE BLACK LAKE
- 19. RIVER SERAN

- 20. NORTH SERAN
- 21. SOUTH SERAN
- 22. THE RIVER CHANNEREL

# THE FINAL EMPIRE

- 1. LUTHADEL
- 2. PITS OF HATHSIN
- 3. URTEAU      4. FADREX CITY
- 5. TREMREDARE      6. TATHINGDWEN
- 7. CONVENTICAL OF SERAN
- 8. MOUNT DERYTATITH, HISTORIC LOCATION OF THE WELL OF ASCENSION

## THE ASHMOUNTS:

- 9. TYRIAN
- 10. ZERINAH    11. FALEAST    12. DORIEL
- 13. MORAG    14. KALLING    15. TORINOST



# 16

## THE DREAD LAKE



Roan stumbled. Far from the roads, with no one to clear the ash away, the black flakes piled up several inches deep, hiding rocks and fallen limbs. He caught his footing and paused, inhaling cool air that burned his chapped lips and parched his throat. Ash drifted down around him, still blasting out from Faleast. The only Ashmount in the Eastern Dominance stood behind him, but he had lost sight of it days before. Roan had been wandering eastward ever since his master's plantation fell. Where could a skaa go on his own?

Where could anyone go after losing a great love?

The Steel Ministry had come for her. They had discovered that she was a Misting, or that she carried a noble's child, or both. Either one alone would have meant her death, and Roan had run before he had to witness her fate.

He wandered then as he did now, until he found work in a mine in the shadow of another Ashmount, Doriel. Gerlain Venture, the noble who oversaw the mines, cared little where the workers came from. Few lived long enough for their pasts to matter. Roan worked hard and slept little, still consumed with thoughts of her.

Over the months, almost a year it seemed, the pain faded some. Roan took comfort under the familiar dominion of a noble master, and survived beyond expectations. Rumors filtered down from skaa to skaa, talking about major changes in Luthadel — changes to the very substance of the Final Empire. The guards saw the rumormongers talking to Roan, and he knew none of them had long to live. Even as he was escaping in the night, he heard the other skaa being dragged out of their beds. Their other rumors had been even more dangerous, speaking of a new god called the Survivor. Roan could see why a skaa would follow such a god. He knew it was difficult to survive.

Roan traveled into the Eastern Dominance, following a half-remembered description an old skaa at the mine had told him months before. The Eastern Dominance was supposed to be less settled, with fewer Obligators. Though Roan hadn't seen an Obligator visit the mine at Doriel since shortly after he arrived. The weather was growing colder, so Roan traveled farther north than he had planned. He had seen a map once, and knew he was passing fairly close to Luthadel. Being so near the seat of the Empire frightened him, but he could freeze to death without enough shelter and heat. His makeshift tent, really just a few sticks and a sheet of stolen canvas, was enough to keep out mists and ash, but didn't hold in much heat.

The day was still young. Near dusk the day before, Roan finished a long uphill climb. Cresting the hill, he saw a vast black expanse bounded by trees. In the fading light, he couldn't make out whether it was burnt grassland or a patch of black, ash-rich soil. In the new day, the rising sun's red light caught faint reflections upon the darkness.

*Water, Roan thought. Thank the Lord Ruler, I've finally found water.*

The small stash of biscuits he'd stolen a week before had kept him from starving, but water had been scarce. Roan had never seen so much water, and he would have assumed this was an ocean if he hadn't been able to make out the curve of a shore on the far side. The water was deep and dark even in the light of day. Many of the trees were dead and gray, but most were a healthy brown. Amid the rocky, ash-covered hills, it looked like an oasis — a paradise.

*I can get there by sunset, Roan thought. It's still far, but mostly downhill. If I set up camp under the trees, out of the wind and ash, it will be a good night.*

\* \* \*

The sun traced its red arc across the sky. It cast a long shadow ahead of Roan, a second self advancing in step with him, eager to reach the treasure ahead.

By the time the trees stood only a few miles away, the sky had grown cloudy and dark. Roan came upon a standing carriage coated lightly in ash. Black flecks slowly danced off and away in the light breeze. Roan brushed ash off the open door, uncovering a noble house crest emblazoned with the name of the house. Roan didn't recognize the symbol, and he couldn't read.

*Too nice for a merchant's carriage. Must have been a coach for an important noble. Why is it here?*

Roan looked inside. The coach was unoccupied, dusted with ash. Raising his leg to step on the foot iron, he paused. He'd been trained from birth not to touch such things, not to trespass into the world the nobles inhabited. Survival on the plantation or at the mine had meant living by the rules set out by his noble master, and those of the Lord Ruler. On his own now, he had to learn new ways to survive.

He stepped into the coach. It was spacious, its ornate windows decorated with bits of stained glass. Roan searched about and found that the seats were loose — hinged. Lifting one, he found a compartment. After a furtive look out the window, checking to see if anyone was coming, though he knew no one could have snuck up on him across the gentle hills, he removed a small trunk and opened it.

*Clothes. I've seen nobles wear thick fur coats, but there's nothing like that here.* He pulled out a buttoned shirt and pair of trousers, both sized for a portly noble. *These won't be warm.* Still, his skaa work clothes didn't fit either, and at least these weren't full of holes.

After stuffing the clothes in his rucksack, Roan put the trunk back and picked up a covered basket next to it. *Bread. And is this red thing a fruit? It's squishy. I think that's what fruit is supposed to be like. Dried meat. This smells like milk, but it's hard. Gone bad?*

Roan reached the bottom of the basket. *No water. I can eat something better than stale tack, but it's still a long walk before I can finally drink.*

Roan continued on. The slopes grew steep, and the ground rockier. *Maybe the terrain was too rough for the coach, so the people went ahead on horseback.* He pulled a bit of the dried meat from his sack, saving the fruit for later. Most skaa meals on the plantation were meager soup or simple gruel. The occasional rodent the skaa caught for themselves provided some meat, but they could only eat what the nobles wouldn't want for themselves. The dried meat was strange and strongly spiced, a taste Roan was entirely unaccustomed to.

He could still taste it as he reached the tree line and made his way down toward the lake. The ash had been getting lighter as he traveled away from the Ashmount, and the tree branches caught almost all the ash flakes. The earth under Roan's feet was rich and black, scattered with a few twigs and patches of brown needles.

He crossed a set of animal tracks. *These look like the ones we followed when the master had us hunt that wild dog. They're larger, though. Much larger.*

Roan made his way down to the shore. The dense trees opened up to reveal the vast, flat expanse of water stretching out in all directions. He pulled a small pan from his rucksack. The water lapped up over his bare feet as he dipped the pan to collect enough to drink.

*It's black. It wasn't just the light and distance.* The water itself is black.

\* \* \*

The small fire crackled and popped, and embers drifted lazily through the air. The flames were the same color as the rays of the setting sun. Roan had waited to see if the dark clouds above would provide fresh rainwater, but the rain never came. He had eaten the red, pulpy fruit from the noble carriage, and it would keep him sated until the next day at least.

Now he sat between his fire and his tent, holding a pan full of lake water over the fire by its long handle. The water was about to boil, and Roan hoped that would make it good to drink. When he looked closely, he had seen that the water wasn't uniform. Inky whorls churned within it, even when he held it still.

The water boiled, but appeared to be unchanged. Roan poured it in his water skin, hoping that he wouldn't have to try drinking it, and prepared for bed. The night would come soon, and he hadn't come this far to lose his soul out in the mists.



He curled up into his small tent and threw the noble clothing, his rucksack, and anything else that might keep him a bit warmer over himself. He didn't know how far he would have to travel to get beyond the lake. The uncertainty of what the following day held for him made the night difficult. Routine, whether it was a day of eastward travel or a day working in a dangerous mine, had kept him focused. It brought him back to the way things had been on the plantation.

To sleeping on the floor next to her cot.

To tending the crops, spending every second in the field anticipating seeing her when the working day was done.

When the uncertainty took hold, he remembered the chaos of the end. How Ryia was taken from him. His cowardice. Running into the night instead of staying to die for her.

*"But you are a skaa, and pride does not suit a skaa."*

His taskmaster's words, rolling through his mind. Roan considered himself a good skaa, and he followed his master's commands. But she meant more to him. More than the master. More, even, than the Lord Ruler.

Roan's body was pulled tight in a fetal position to stave off the cold, his head tucked between crossed arms. Tears welled in his eyes, growing cold in the night air as they rolled down his cheek and were absorbed in the loose sleeves of his brown tunic. He was alone. Far from the plantation. Surrounded only by the cruel mists. He sobbed quietly.

A low growl answered him.

Startled, Roan looked out through the small slit between the tent flaps. His fire was dying, but its sputtering light was reflected back, shining in the eyes of the two massive forms in the trees on the other side of the fire. At first, Roan feared they were mistwraiths, the bogeymen of countless skaa stories.

*No, he thought. They're wolves.*

This realization did nothing to lessen his fear. Wolves might not wear his face after killing him as a mistwraith would, but they could just as easily tear a solitary skaa apart.

*If they come after me, there's nothing I can do. They outnumber me. My tent couldn't keep them out, and I can't run off into the mists.*

Roan paused, remembering something he had seen, but not allowed himself to accept. He peered back outside the tent.

*The mists... they aren't out!*

He crept forward just enough to pull the flap aside and look farther out. Far off in the trees, the mists gathered. Around his camp and across the lake itself, the air was perfectly clear. The sky above was still cloudy, and the mists looked distinctly different from the clouds. There were a few breaks in the cloud cover. Through them, Roan could see blackness dotted with tiny points of white.

The wolves were drawing closer, cautiously stalking toward the tent with their tapered heads low to the ground. Roan quickly stuffed his supplies into his rucksack and moved backward, coming out of the back end of the tent and using it for cover. He tossed a bit of the dried meat into the tent, and the larger wolf stuck its nose through the tent flap.



Roan backed away and hid behind the nearest tree. *If I can get away, I'll have to come back for my tent in the light of day. Maybe I can find a safe place to stay before I reach the mists.* He moved slowly away from his tent, ducking behind tree after tree. Then he heard a snap and rustle behind him, the sound of his tent collapsing. Low growling became a piercing howl that echoed through the forest.

Roan panicked and ran.

His dry throat rasped, and his legs almost buckled. He could hardly see, and he constantly struggled to keep from tripping. As he ran, he pulled the long-handled pan from his pack, in case he needed to fight back. He headed toward a wall of brush he hoped could hide him from the wolves. As he burst through, he saw the impenetrable wall of mists only about fifty paces away. He had been running away from the water, but hadn't realized how quickly he would reach the mists.

Out of the mists, three more wolves padded toward him. The mists curled away from them, as though even it was afraid to touch the beasts. Roan wheeled to his left, spilling food out of his rucksack, and ran westward. *I'll circle around. The first wolves might not find me.*

The pack had been more cunning than Roan expected. Less than a minute later, he was standing with his back to a tree, all five wolves surrounding and slowly approaching him. His head ached, and his dry throat burned. He grabbed his waterskin from his bag and pulled the stopper. *If I'm going to fight them at all, I'll need some energy. Better to be sick later than dead now.*

Roan drank. The lake water was cold and gritty, and it stung as it went down, as though it were full of minuscule needles. Still, strength flowed back into his aching body. He gripped the handle of his pan. *I feel strong. I can take on these wolves. I can.*

He stared at the largest wolf, the leader of this pack. Its stare met Roan's eyes, and the beast turned away. *It doesn't look like it's afraid. More like it's lost interest.* The rest of the wolves went to follow their leader, giving Roan a wide berth as they withdrew to seek new prey.

Before heading back to his camp, Roan went to collect the food he had dropped. As he drew near, he saw the mists ripple. He stepped closer, and the mists pulled back. *They fear me. The mists fear me!*

\* \* \*

When Roan awoke, he was standing up. The water's edge was only a foot away, and his waterskin lied empty by his bare feet. This shore seemed familiar, and he turned to see his fallen tent under the large tree some distance behind him. It was day now, but overcast. He had been awoken by the soft tapping of rain on his shoulders and face.

Hustling back to his tent and the cover of the trees, Roan thought, *Where did I sleep? I didn't fix my tent. Why can't I remember how I got back to camp?* He sat on the tent cloth, which was still mostly dry. The rain was growing heavier, the soft thumping on the boughs above him growing to a steady patter.

A strange, metallic taste filled Roan's mouth, and he wiped his fingers across his tongue. They came out coated with black, inky liquid that filled his fingerprints and the wrinkles of his weathered workman's fingers. *I've never seen anything like this. They protected us from so many things on the plantation. We knew our place, and we were useful. Out here, nothing means anything.*

Roan stood and looked toward the water. The rain poured down, and the black surface of the lake bristled with countless tiny splashes. *What is my survival worth if I have no purpose?*

Then Roan caught sight of three figures trudging slowly along the muddy shore, coming his way. The one in front was a skaa. He wore the clothing of a servant rather than a laborer, and was soaked through in the rain. Behind him came two young people, a man and a woman, in elegant clothing. The man was rotund, with cheeks covered in stubble and a bright red woolen cloak stained with mud. His dueling cane hung in a scabbard at his side, protruding past the cloak. The woman wore a long coat made of delicate fur. It was torn and stained with black splotches, and her hair hung matted and disheveled around its collar.

The travelers looked toward Roan as they walked. He thought, *do they know I stole from their coach? Surely, they would be more aggressive. They might need help. If I show the proper deference, this noble might use me.*

Roan bowed his head, cowering as a show of respect and obedience. The three didn't come closer, though. They stopped at the water's edge and simply stood, staring at him. The rain continued to pour over them, but they stood still, slouching and dead-eyed.

*Do they want me to join them? Will this man be my enemy or my master?*

*You have a master.*

Relief washed over Roan, a deep comfort he hadn't felt since he struck out from the mines. Roan didn't remember saying anything out loud. He hadn't even noticed the noble's lips moving. The promise of these words compelled him forward, crossing the sodden ground to where the three figures stood. *This is my chance, he thought, to do more than survive. To have purpose again.*

*And you will, Roan. Through your servitude, you will matter more than you ever have.*

When he reached the shore, the other skaa rapidly bent down and grasped Roan's legs, holding them tight. Roan struggled, but the servant was stronger than he looked. The nobles each clutched one of Roan's arms, and all three lifted him up and began trudging into the water.

"Stop!" Roan cried. He thrashed as they forced him under the rippling chaos of the lake's edge. His vision turned dark, clouded over by the black water. The nobleman let Roan's left arm free, and he flailed as the noble's hands clutched at his mouth. They wrenched his jaw open, and the black water spilled into Roan's throat. His lungs stung as they filled up.

The three let go, but Roan didn't rise. He had stopped struggling. The last bubbles of air escaped his lungs and popped on the surface of the black lake. Roan floated within darkness. No pinpricks of light illuminated his way. There was nothing.

Roan didn't know how long he drifted there. The rain had become a drizzle by the time he crawled back onto the shore. He heaved, and vomited water onto the saturated earth.

It was as pure and clear as rainwater, as though all the impurities were left within him. As though they had become the insistent, cruel influence he could feel embedded deep within his mind. He could barely form a thought, much less overcome the will that had taken him over. He had no choice but to follow the other three as they headed west — back the way Roan had come.

\* \* \*

The days passed, each the same. The group had turned northwest, and traveled without rest. They camped outside a small city. Roan had no idea which one it was, but they were close enough to the road that he could hear travelers speak of going to Luthadel, so the capitol had to be nearby.

Tonight's campfire was carefully prepared to be especially hot. The other skaa had made it to be so. Roan rotated the long iron handle he had broken off of his pan. In the bright orange coals, it glowed. He pulled it free and set the end on a flat stone, then used another rock to pound it to a point. The process had taken time. Minutes? Hours? Days? Roan couldn't tell anymore.

He held up the finished spike. The noblewoman was already standing there, ready to take it from his hand. Roan pulled off his tunic and laid down on the rocky earth beside the fire. The nobleman joined the woman. They knelt on each side of Roan, and put all four hands on the blunt end of the spike.

*You were worthless in life, Roan. This is your moment of substance. The one time you were a part of something greater.*

The nobles plunged the burning spike through Roan's heart. Blood spurted up, bright red infused with small streams of black. As he felt his strength vanish, pulled into the iron spike, clarity returned for a brief moment. *I wish I had died a year ago, at the plantation. Not to serve this horror; but to save my love.*

The spike pulled free and what remained of Roan was extinguished.

