

Realm of Night

Book 1: Shadow of Destiny

By Sarah C.E. Parker

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Chapter I

Foretelling

Deep darkness lay over the Lands of Night, the very air heavy with the feeling of death that whispered softly on the wind. The face of Nyea Aterre stared coolly out the window, her blue eyes dark like the waters of the depths, frozen on the surface with miles of roiling darkness underneath.

She turned away from her contemplation of the landscape below, the city of Nocturne sprawling out beneath her in neat and ordered lines. It was but the smallest corner of a kingdom that should have been hers. Her bloodline and her talents should have merited that match, but the emperor had married a far weaker woman instead. He had married a traitor, and diminished both himself and their kingdom.

Not that anyone was brave enough to say that to Emperor Voren's face. They would be dead before they finished their sentence.

That power of fear had propped up this empire, and even Nyea was forced to admit it was a terror well earned. Voren had ruled for nearly thirty years now, expanding their borders far beyond the Lands of Night and into the southern realms. The borderline was just beyond the city of Terrinth, or at least it was now, as of early this morning. Nyea had watched the battle as it played out before her in the Looking Glass, seeing weeks in advance what was to happen and watching with satisfaction as each piece had fallen into place exactly as predicted. She was a seer, one blessed with the sight, but her abilities stretched far beyond that. She could read the thoughts and heart of a person simply by looking at them. She was a master of magic, and she could see what was hidden both in present and future with little effort. There were few in existence that had power enough to challenge her, no one she considered a true threat.

No one other than Voren.

She had served at his side for nearly twenty years, since she was but a child of fifteen brought to the palace because of her extraordinary talent. In all that time she had never once failed to predict what was to come. Never once had she been wrong. That was until Silena, and the night that woman had fled the citadel holding the child that would destroy them all. The seer had received no warning of the event until it had already transpired. She had read nothing of Silena's intentions, had seen not even the smallest omen, and the knowledge made her teeth grate. It had

been over sixteen years since that day. Still, Nyea remembered each moment in perfect detail. She had watched that woman's death at least a hundred times, over and over in the Looking Glass, sometimes in frustration, sometimes for the pleasure of it.

Voren had not had the chance to execute his wife. She had taken her own life first, a far too easy escape for that traitorous wretch. But at least they were rid of her, and the ultimate failure of Silena's foolhardy plans lessened Nyea's rage.

Nyea sighed impatiently, fingers curling into claws, as she continued to wait for the emperor to respond to her summons. He would be here in a minute or two, but a minute was not quick enough. Their talisman was gone. It had been gone for many hours, but she alone knew. She alone could have warned him of its theft. *Stubborn fool.* She thought bitterly. She had told him not to go to Terrinth with his army, warned him some misfortune would befall them if he did not delay the attack, but he had not listened. *Let him enjoy the price of his negligence.*

She peered once more into the pool of placid water that lay suspended on the dais near the side of the room, the calm waters changing, as she waved her hands over them to affirm what she already knew. She watched as the series of events played out before her, the picture wavering like a desert mirage. What was yet to be was not set in stone, but the reach of the empire was not absolute, and if no one acted to change the upcoming disaster, she knew their destruction would play out exactly as her visions had shown.

She drew away from the basin as the doors of the chamber flew open, her pale face taut with subtle judgment as her awaited visitor entered her room. His towering figure was poised and arrogant as always as he strode forward to greet her. "You've been fighting," she observed, her eyes skipping over his bulky armor, the faint dusting of dried blood almost imperceptible against the pitch black of the plate-mail.

"Terrinth has fallen, but you know this, Nyea. You saw it yourself, so why have you asked me here?" he demanded, the only person among the Nocturne who could dare to speak to her in such a tone.

"Patience, Voren," she chided. "You seek my services, but I will choose how and when to give them. I have seen what is to be, and unless fate is changed, your empire will fall. The armies of Kaleth and the other southern cities grow stronger, and the Light reaches forth for retribution upon the dark. This war has lasted long enough, and events shall soon transpire to end it. By noon tomorrow you shall be informed that the Xerkzes stone has been stolen, the vault broken into and the talisman removed just this morning. Without the threat of its power, you will be unable to hold Sol'aira when your enemies attack and you shall lose the city as well as the lives of three thousand of our strongest soldiers."

Voren's eyes flicked with frustration, his expression darkening dangerously. "Why did you not inform me of this earlier?"

Her lip curled. "You were not here earlier. If you wished to be informed of these things, then you should have done as I instructed and stayed behind while your armies took Terrinth. I will not run around like some common messenger, plodding all over the realm to inform you of something you could not have changed anyway. I warned the guards in Cayheir that she would come, yet still she escaped. Fate acts as it will. The stone was meant to be stolen."

He regarded her with a chilling gaze, his eyes black pools that drowned out dissension. That look made her shiver with excitement sometimes, even as it churned her stomach. "Do not forget, Nyea, that despite your many talents, I can easily find another to fill your place should something happen to you. Continue to prod me, and be sure something will."

She smiled, the expression never reaching farther than her mouth. "Now, Voren, you should know better. You could never find anyone either willing or able to do the things that I do, nor could you ever find one with the ability to see as clearly as I. Besides," she stated offhandedly, breaking free from his gaze with a carefully timed turn. "the one you seek is not far off. She travels swiftly through the villages to the south and shall arrive in Kaleth three days hence. Stop her there, and you will have back your prize."

"And how will I find this person?"

She crossed over to the Looking Glass, her almost colorless hair swaying behind her as she walked. "You will find her in Kaleth's main square at noon." She waved her hand over the basin, showing him the face of the girl he sought.

The emperor stared at the picture with features hard and cold. "An arrogant child," he judged.

"That arrogant child is Viera Tyrellen," Nyea purred, and Voren gave the slightest grin.

"What heartening news. I look forward to her death."

Nyea nodded her agreement, staring down at the girl's face. Her fair features were resolute and poised, with bright green eyes sparking defiantly with a fire and determination that spoke true to her blood. Still, Voren was right. The girl was little more than a child who had taken a gamble and entangled herself in a dangerous web far beyond her depth. She would meet the same end as her father.

The seer waved her hand over the basin once more, dissolving the picture. "Beware, Voren. Surprises await those whom you send into Kaleth. Many things are yet uncertain and may impede your efforts."

Those dark eyes found her once again, a near expressionless stare that still somehow managed to drain the warmth from the room. “Spare me your cryptic threats, Nyea. This theft is an inconvenience, nothing more. I will get back what is mine just as I always have.”

She laughed without mirth, her pale face mocking. “You said the same with Silena,” she reminded him. His eyes darkened dangerously, but the seer ignored the warning, continuing with a caution of her own. “Your past errors have left wounds upon the realm. I have seen them in my dreams, festering in the form of a chess piece that has not yet revealed itself upon our stage.” She ran her finger through the basin, clouding the image of the girl before her with a ripple of black fog. “Remember that as you leave, oh emperor,” she cooed, “for things work against you which none have foreseen.”

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Chapter II

Shadow

The rancid stench of sweat and vomit lay heavy in the air of the tavern, making Seth grimace with its strength. He stared out at the people clustered around the small room with a knowing gaze, his dark brown eyes holding an intensity and perception not found in most people his age. Even at seventeen years old, he held an uncommonly intimidating aura about him, with a lank muscled body that moved with a fluid ease similar to that of a wolf stalking its prey. Coal black hair hung low over his eyes, overshadowing his features and looking strange against the fair skin of his face. It was not uncommon for the people of Cammen to have dark hair and eyes, but even so he cut a striking figure, standing out among the populace like a hawk among a cluster of sparrows. People often remarked on how pale he was, guessing that he must be some noble's whelp or favored servant kept far from the work of the fields. The truth was he had spent far more days out in the wilderness and the elements than most, but the sun seemed simply to leave no mark, a peculiar trait that he had long since dismissed as irrelevant.

He slid silently into an empty booth, eyeing carefully the reason for his visit. The man sat cloaked and shadowed in the far corner of the room, his head bent low over his drink. He never looked up at the boy sitting just across the room from him, and Seth felt a deep resentment stir to life within him, wondering briefly if the man would recognize his watcher even if he did catch sight of him. Seth had been following the man for a long time now, hunting him ever since that night so many months ago when everything had ended.

The sword concealed beneath the tunic at Seth's side was a reassuring weight against his hip. His hand drifted down to finger the engraving laid into the pommel. This man would die tonight. Staying on the upper floors of the inn, he would be easy to catch unawares. He would remember then the face of the boy he had wronged, the only survivor of the destruction this worm had wrought upon Therin's manor all those long nights past.

Seth rose to his feet and moved out into the muddy streets, a faint mist of rain dampening his cloak and sending a deep chill right through to his bones. Huddled shapes stood hunched in the alleys of the city, cloaks pulled tight against them for warmth. He made his way back around to

the rear of the inn, settling down in the shadows across from the building to wait as the last of the light faded from the sky.

The last few citizens left the streets, heading home to escape the cold and damp. Few remained inside the inn, most leaving not long after dark, but even so, it was well after midnight before the tavern closed down. Seth felt a sudden thrill of anticipation, as the warm glow of the lanterns died into darkness. No sound disturbed the night, as he slid soundlessly from his hiding place and made his way to the side of the building.

He stared up at the cracked window in the wall above, a thrill of sudden tension and anger clenching his stomach, as he envisioned the fate that must be dealt to the worm of a man waiting inside that room. He took a few running steps up the base of the wall and pushed off the top of a doorway in the alley below, climbing silently up the side of the building with a fluid ease earned from years of practice. He leapt from the side of the building adjacent the inn, taking hold of the ledge and balancing precariously on the sill. He eased open the window, one with the shadows as he slipped over to his prey in the run-down setting of the room beyond.

The man lay sleeping in the far corner of the room, gnarled hands hanging limp at his sides, only a hairsbreadth away from the hilt of his sword. Seth stared down at the stranger with a look of disdain. The man's scraggly beard and lank hair were a dull blond turned brown from filth, his angular face worn and sallow. He was an unremarkable man, no different than any other person you might pass while out walking, except for the cruel twist of his mouth that marked him as something else, the air about him fouled in a way that few could sense. Seth knew him for a killer, the man who had destroyed the only fragments he had ever had of anything remotely resembling a family.

Seth eased his sword out of its sheath. The polished steel seemed out of place in the dingy room, given such a flat and ugly cast by the pale moonlight pouring in through the window behind. He stared queasily at the silvered blade and for the first time doubted the course of action he had set for himself here. He knew how to use this weapon. He had spent years perfecting the skill, but his hesitation did not spring from fear. He could see in his mind the face of Therin Whitewood, his cool blue eyes damp with disappointment as he stared down at the boy he had trained. *“Justice is not violence, Seth.”*

Seth tightened his grip on the hilt of the sword, steeling himself against the mix of emotions that roiled within him. He glared down at the man sleeping only inches away. The worm could not be allowed to get away with what he'd done. He had come too far to turn back.

A gust of wind rattled the shutters on the window behind Seth, and the man's eyes snapped open, the bloodshot irises unnaturally bright as they came to rest on the figure looming over him.

Staring into those eyes Seth felt all his doubt burn away. His sword darted downward, a quick and lethal strike right into the heart of his enemy. The brute gave a choking gasp, hand scrambling to reach the hilt of the sword at his side. His efforts were futile, as Seth ripped free his blade and stepped back from the flailing drunkard. The man's face was contorted in an expression of panic, but no words could work their way free of his convulsing throat as blood filled his lungs and he breathed his last.

Seth stared unflinchingly into the eyes of his enemy, as the head dropped limp against its pillow. His mission was done, but there was no sense of victory or vengeance, just a single thought screaming through his mind; *Therin would never have done this.*

Seth's head jerked up, as the door of the room flew open and the stunned face of a maid looked up from the body of the man lying gored in his bed. The blood drenched sword clutched loosely in Seth's hand gleamed menacingly as he moved further back from the corpse, and the servant girl's expression became lit with a mix of terror and abhorrence. A shrill scream shattered the silence around Seth, and he turned and leapt through the window, the sound of running feet pounding ominously behind him as he fled into the night.

He wove his way through the maze of pathways and alleys with mindless ease. He felt strangely detached, his face expressionless, as he stared down at the dark red fluid that coated the length of his blade. He slowed to a walk toward the edge of the city, concealing the weapon beneath his cloak and moving calmly through the shadows of a building at the base of the twelve-foot wall that guarded Cammen. The alarm bells ringing through the streets behind him were sounded far too late to make any difference as he climbed nimbly up the worn wooden posts and slipped over the barrier into the forest beyond.

He strode numbly through the covering of trees. He knew the guards would not pursue him outside the city walls, and even if they did, these commoners and farmers hadn't the experience to track him. He stared blankly ahead into the weave of branches that lay overhead. He had done what he had come here for, and he would not regret it. He refused to regret it.

It was hours later that he finally stopped to rest, concealing himself in a small depression at the base of a particularly dense cluster of trees. The sky was already beginning to lighten, the deep indigo of night giving way to the pale gray glow that heralded the day.

He drew forth the once bright blade that had been passed down to him with the death of its master and laid the weapon across his lap, scouring clean the gore that encrusted its length. He gazed somberly at the bright steel of the weapon. He had been in many fights. He had killed before, but never like this. This had been cold-blooded, a planned assassination, and the man he had avenged in carrying out his plans would be ashamed were he to see him now.

Seth shifted positions and thrust the sword back into its sheath, a futile effort to bury his guilt. Such foolish things as hindsight and remorse had no place in his thinking. The deed was done, and the man was dead. It was too late now to change it.

He lay back amongst the damp mass of roots that made up the walls of the hollow and allowed his consciousness to fade, the ghosts of his past rushing forward to greet him.

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Chapter III

Meeting

The sun lay high in the noonday sky, the stall nearest the boy calling softly to him with the promise of a meal that was long past due. The boy watched silently as the stall's vendor moved away from his wares to greet a new customer, enticing the people with the promise of the fresh bread and sweets displayed tantalizingly before them.

The boy moved quickly, sliding behind the vendor with a causal ease and slipping one of the rolls into the tattered bag he wore slung over one shoulder. The man paid him no notice as he passed, unaware of the theft as the boy continued down the narrow streets of the city toward the main market where he hoped to find another opportunity to take something a little more substantial.

He strode onto the main street, just another ragged child amongst a crowd of hundreds. He stopped in an alleyway to eat, the warm bread not doing much to fill his empty stomach, but still a delicious and valued prize as he scarfed it down. Many merchants and traders had entered the city this week to sell their goods. It was late in the spring, and the busy market was ripe for the picking.

The boy rose to his feet, brushing the crumbs from the front of his trousers as he prepared to set out once more. At ten years old, he had been living on the streets for almost three years now and had grown exceptionally good at stealing. Most of the time, it was just food, but every now and then he would break into the odd house or tavern to earn a little gold. It had not always been this way. Once he had lived in a house and had food to eat and a bed to sleep in, but he didn't like to think about that. He could never return to that place. Better to be out on his own.

He emerged back onto the main street, passing the hours by wandering through the city and scanning the stalls for a chance at a meal. It was not until sunset that the smell of beef stew caught his attention. It was too great a temptation to resist with the heavy scent wafting on the breeze, likely to be picked apart by crows or some other pest at any minute. He followed the lure and saw the dish set out in the open atop an untended counter: an easy target for his talents.

His movements were casual as he sauntered up to the stall, eyes scanning the deserted street for some sign of the owner. Heavy steel lockboxes lay tucked behind the counter, and it was easy to tell that the trader dealt in much more extravagant goods than soup. By the looks of things, it was a jeweller's stall already closed for the night. The stew was simply a neglected dinner that the merchant had not yet had a chance to consume. The boy glanced away from the wares, eyes fixing on the pot of stew bubbling before him. Whoever had made it would probably not be gone for long. Haste was more important than caution at the moment, and with no one around to report him, the boy saw no need for stealth. He moved forward, seizing a large bowl of the stew and preparing to leave.

A rough voice sounded from behind his head, the hand strong and unyielding as the shopkeeper seized his wrist. "Think you can steal from me, you filthy runt?" the man growled, nails digging painfully into the boy's arm. Any more pressure would put his wrist in danger of breaking. The boy grit his teeth. If the man brought him to the guards, he was in danger of a flogging. The officers did not much care for street kids, and judging by the gleam in the merchant's eye, he would not be satisfied until some brutal punishment was delivered.

The boy glared up at the stocky man. Not many people were able to sneak up on him, and this man was far from the stealthy kind, but he had allowed himself to become distracted. He had deluded himself into thinking no one was there and now he was paying the price for his carelessness.

He acted without thinking, smashing the clay bowl he held into the side of the man's face with his free hand and kicking free of the grip that held him. He took off at a sprint, knowing it would be easy to disappear into the maze of alleys that lined the street. The man howled in pain. Large fragments of the clay were now embedded in his cheek, as the bowl had shattered on impact. The merchant reeled backward, the boiling liquid searing his skin as he clawed blindly at his face.

The boy did not look back as the man started after him, flying swiftly across the rough flagstone toward the shadows between buildings where he could scale a wall and lose his pursuer. He had gone only a few steps when a tall figure moved to intercept him, the foremost soldier in a company of guards headed back to the barracks. The angry yells of the shopkeeper alerted the men to his presence, and the boy skidded to a halt. He moved to back away, but one of the guards emerged from the street behind him, and a metal backed gauntlet locked tight around his arm.

The merchant sauntered over, his condescending smile flooding the boy with a mix of rage and frustration. "Got you now, brat. You'll get more than the usual jail time for this," he growled, rivulets of blood running down from his soup-stained face, with patches of greasy broth staining the velvet finery of his tunic. "About time you felt some discipline, I'd say." He raised his hand, but

a gauntleted fist quickly knocked aside the strike as a pristinely dressed soldier stepped to the front of the gathering.

“Hardly an appropriate response, sir, to be taking punitive action in front of a guardsman. You have not even informed us yet how this child has wronged you,” the man chided, splitting his stare between the bloody vendor and the ragged child held by his men. The boy stared mistrustfully at the soldier looming before him. The badge on his chest marked him as very high up in the ranks of the city guard, his brown hair streaked at the temples with lines of gray.

“I caught the vermin trying to steal from me!” the vendor hissed. “Then, when I confronted the brat, he attacked me! Lucky you came or the little demon would have gotten away.”

The guard glanced over at the boy, raising an eyebrow. He turned back to the merchant. “And what exactly was he trying to steal?”

“That hardly matters, captain. The point is he’s a thief and he assaulted me!”

“If you do not tell me what he took, we can hardly charge him for it, now can we?”

“It was soup,” the vendor sighed. “He stole a bowl of soup.”

The guard stared at the merchant’s ruined finery. “I didn’t take you for a food vendor.”

“I’m not, though I don’t see what that has to do with any--”

“And is that there on your face the soup that was stolen?” the man asked placidly. “Because if it is, it never really left your possession and thus cannot be considered pilferage. An unintended meal taken by one hungry child is hardly a reason to throw someone in jail. As for the wound you referred to, if you grabbed him first would that not make you the attacker?” The jeweller glared at him, eyes burning with rage.

The officer turned to address his compatriots. “Return to the barracks. I will see this matter closed.”

“Yes captain,” came the chorused reply. The merchant remained where he was, silently fuming as he waited for the soldiers to depart.

The captain of the guard turned to look at the boy, blue eyes steady, “What’s your name?” he asked, calmly ignoring the angry mutterings of the man behind him.

The boy glanced at him uncertainly, eyes flickering to the merchant beside them. “Seth,” he replied, tone hesitant.

“Am I right in assuming you’re out here alone, Seth? Because you seem awfully young for that.”

The boy frowned, his dark eyes wary. “Why would it matter if I was? You aren’t going to arrest me. I know that already. And no guard is really worried about street kids, so why would you be?”

“Because maybe the idea of kids wandering the streets at night doesn’t exactly appeal to me. I had a son once, but he died quite young. My wife passed away many years ago, and I’ve lived alone

for a long time now. Do you want a place to stay, boy, or would you prefer to remain with that new enemy you've made, out here in the open?"

The boy glanced uncertainly at the shopkeeper standing a few meters away, weighing the dangers, until the rumble of his stomach decided him.

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Seth stared up at the clear blue sky, the tangle of branches obscuring his vision. He blinked away the sleep from his eyes, the dredged up memories consigned once more to the past with the fading of dreams. He remembered well the meeting that day, but it did no good to think about it now. Therin Whitewood had been Captain of the Royal Guard, a skilled veteran in the wars who had given up life as a soldier and joined the city watch in Savhor a few years after the death of his wife. Seth stared down at the sword sheathed neatly in its casing. The man had been like a father to him, raised him from the time he was ten until a few months ago when Azriel's men had come and destroyed that life forever.

Azriel. He had avoided saying the man's name, avoided even thinking of it for months while he hunted him down. Now Azriel was dead. *As he should be.* But such assurances did little to quiet the faint nausea he felt stirring inside his empty stomach as he thought back on the man's corpse lying skewered in his bed and the teary eyes of the maid, staring at Seth in horror: an assassin stepped out from some nightmare to exact his bloody vengeance right in front of her.

Seth rose to his feet and locked away all such memories. He carried no supplies or possessions other than the sword, a few coins, and the clothes on his back. It made it easier to navigate the dense brush of the forest. He made his way swiftly through the worst of the tangle, rejoining the main path that led west to the city of Kaleth where he could buy more supplies and find a tavern or an inn where he might sleep in an actual bed for a change instead of hiding in the shadows of buildings or sleeping on the forest floor as had been his routine for the past few months as he tracked Azriel. *Therin's murderer, not Azriel. A murderer is all he was after all, a murderer and a drunkard.*

He continued down the wide dirt path, passing the occasional traveller on their way to the cities that lay farther south. There was no sign of the cold and rain that had lain so heavily over the land yesterday, so he travelled with his cloak rolled up in a pack he had bought from a passing merchant, the sword wrapped neatly in its folds to avoid suspicion. It was not really illegal to carry a weapon in most parts, but a four foot sword did look a little out of place on a ragged boy still in his teens. Most people this far south only carried a hunting bow, and once he reached Kaleth, carrying a weapon of any sort was an offence punishable by imprisonment.

Should anyone see him carrying the sword, they would have questions as to where he had gotten it. Swords as fine as this one were expensive pieces of craftsmanship after all, and with a murder already on his conscience, he really didn't feel like being arrested for theft.

He stared ahead at the rutted road, the path becoming broader and more crowded as he neared the city. He had been to Kaleth but once before, years ago when he had taken to roaming the streets. He had not remained there long. He found it easier to keep moving than to stay in any one place. He ran a hand through his hair, his dark eyes serious as they stared steadily at the path before him. He did not have many good memories of the city, and he went there now only because he knew he could not return to Cammen or any of the other nearby cities. In fact, it would probably be best if he were to leave the deep south altogether, or at least for a short time while the rumors of the murder he had committed died down.

He slept that night under a ceiling of trees, the tight weave of branches giving only brief glimpses of the velvet sky above. His rest was fitful, racked by nightmares and memories, and he was grateful when dawn arrived and rid him of the need to keep trying to sleep. It had been many months since he'd had a full night's rest. It should have been better now, with Azriel dead and the hunt that had consumed him finally ended, but it wasn't.

Seth gathered up his things and set out before the sun had fully risen. He had no need for urgency. He would have reached Kaleth before the day was out, but an offer from a passing wagoneer encountered only a few hours into his hike up the main road proved too good to pass up. He hitched a ride on the traveller's cart, the cheery man's voice an incessant buzz as he spoke pleasantly of what was happening in the world. He seemed unduly optimistic about most things: the long and harsh winter that was finally turning to spring, and the closing of the north trade road: "Just means less bandit raids and unwanted drifters if you ask me," he asserted. His tone grew darker though and he frowned disapprovingly, as the rant turned to the Empire of Nocturne and the fall of Terrinth not three days past.

The news of Terrinth sparked Seth's interest, and his patient absorbance of the man's long rant turned to genuine investment for but a moment before the man moved back to more ordinary matters.

Everyone knew of the empire and the people of the Lands of Night who fought for them, ruthlessly destroying all who refused to submit in their quest for domination of the realm. The other city states fought against them, but one by one they were falling. Terrinth had been one of the main garrisons that held the Nocturne at bay, a border state with a strong military and naval force. The number of Terreth troops had been plummeting for many years now. If their city had truly fallen, then the last of their soldiers were likely dead, and all that remained was the

Venishians, the Kalethiens, and the Altairens, before all the real threats to the empire's rule were destroyed.

The war in the north was hardly Seth's business, but he could not help but feel saddened by the news. He had lived all his life in the south, and if the rule of Night reached this far, all freedom would disappear, swallowed by death or subservience.

He looked up, realizing finally that the man had asked him a question. "What would a young man like yourself be doing in Kaleth, eh?" the wagoneer queried, glancing back at him with eyebrows cocked.

Seth took a moment to reply, his thoughts elsewhere. "Just travelling, taking a chance to see the world before the war gets too near to do so."

The man nodded. "Suppose that's smart," he mused, gaze distant. "Not sure what to do m'self if things get any worse."

It was another hour before they finally reached the gates of Kaleth. The thick iron portcullis stayed open throughout the day, as it was too much of a hassle to raise and lower for each of the hundreds of travelers who came knocking at the gates this time of year. Kaleth was a city that had been built for war, and unlike Cammen, there was more to its defenses than just a couple of sharpened sticks fashioned into a wall. The walls here were solid stone. An army would have a hard time breaching them. Though pitted against the armies of the empire, such defenses were not nearly as formidable as they seemed.

The sentries at the gates waved through the wagoneer without so much as a second glance at his passenger, too preoccupied with the crowds around them to give careful scrutiny to every traveler that passed. Seth shouldered his pack and dismounted from the wagon as soon as they rounded a corner. The small cart continued onward toward the market at the center of the city, its driver not even seeming to notice his abrupt departure. Seth's eyes scanned the dull gray streets stretching out before him. He could just make out the large square-topped battlements of the palace on the bluff ahead, looming over the sprawl of squat stone structures that made up the city below. Kaleth had not changed much since the last time he had been here. Coming back now, he felt an odd sense of reassurance, part of which came from the comforting feel of anonymity provided by the crowd.

He made his way forward through the tightly packed streets, the numerous small squabbles that broke out among the men gathered there quickly broken up by the guards supervising the chaos. Seth peered closely at the soldiers, taking in their nervous stance and uneasy air, their hands hovering over the pommels of their swords. They seemed on edge, like they were looking for something, their eyes dutifully scanning the rabble around them.

Seth turned toward the main square, stopping at a small stall to down a quick meal before continuing on toward his intended destination. The people packing the square around him perused the stalls with sour-faced frowns, haggling over each cent no matter how fine their clothing or fat their purses. Despite the fact that the armies commanded by Kaleth were one of the main defenses against the empire, the people within the city were a little too used to living in luxury and held nothing of the fierceness and valor possessed by their soldiers. Seth had forgotten in his time away just how obnoxious they were to deal with.

He glanced upward in an attempt to determine the time and was greeted by blinding brightness. The sun lay high in the sky, not a cloud in sight in the clear canvas of the heavens that hung overhead. Judging by its position, he would say it was around noon, giving him plenty of time before he needed to find a place to stay for the night.

“If you’re quite finished,” the merchant before him muttered, and Seth moved along obligingly to clear the path for the next set of customers wanting a share of the man’s sandy-textured bread. He would leave this city early, as soon as he was rested.

A cluster of men standing on the outskirts of the crowd caught his attention as he set off across the square, their dark features and pale skin looking odd among the fair-haired populace of Kaleth. They were garbed in rich southland clothes similar in style to the garments worn in the city of Cammen, but something about them seemed odd. Seth frowned, disconcerted by the hostility and coldness that emanated out from the group, reaching out to him even from so far a distance.

A hand clamped down on his shoulder, and he whirled about, dark eyes locking on the bright hawk emblem emblazoned on the culprit’s chest. The man was a soldier of Kaleth it seemed, and he studied Seth intently, eyes shrewd and expression wary. “What’s your business here?” he demanded.

Seth met his gaze without flinching, voice steady and direct. “Just travelling. I came from the south, cut through the wilds. Here was the nearest settlement. Now if you’ll excuse me.”

He pulled away in an attempt to leave, but the soldier refused to release his grip, his eyes narrowing. “And your friends over there, what would they be doing?”

Seth glanced confusedly at the dark-eyed men gathered at the edge of the square. “I’m afraid you’re mistaken,” he said truthfully. “I don’t know those men.”

The soldier continued to glare at him. “Most wouldn’t know the *Sur’Aterre* just by looks, but I’ve served in this war long enough to recognize an *Aterre’Ro* when I see one.”

Seth shook his head, becoming decidedly uneasy. He had no clue what the man was talking about, and whatever his suspicions, Seth didn’t really want to stay around long enough to find

out. "I'm sorry, sir, but I honestly don't know what you're talking about. I arrived here just a few hours ago, and I've never seen those men before," he repeated, decidedly agitated by the man's accusatory glances and irksome scowl. "It would be better for both of us if you stopped wasting my time and just let me be on my way."

The soldier raised an eyebrow, his eyes lighting up, as if a thought had just occurred. "In a rush to be gone then? And not from around here you say. Would the place you came from perhaps be Cammen? Because there were reports of some unpleasantness there. I have a cousin who runs a tavern there, says one of his guests was killed during the night by some dark assassin. It's reasonable that you would want to leave after something as shocking as a murder, but still..." He paused. "What's in the bag?"

Seth's face remained expressionless, but he felt a twinge of worry. He reached over his shoulder and opened the pack, his manner relaxed as he showed the guard the wadded up cloak and the neatly wrapped pieces of food he had bought earlier. He knew what the man suspected. The inn's maid had probably given a general description of the murderer, but there were hundreds of travellers coming from other cities each day, and it was impossible for her to have given a detailed outline from nothing more than a momentary glance in the dark. The soldier could not arrest an unarmed citizen simply because of a suspicion. If he found the sword however, that would be a different matter.

The man glowered down at the contents of the pack, suspicion still evident. He seemed about to turn away when a particularly violent shove from the people arguing behind them sent Seth tumbling forward, the cloak-wrapped sword falling out of his bag with a hollow clang. The soldier turned back in surprise at the sound, the glimmer of steel sparkling in the sunlight. The man lunged toward him, but Seth was already up and moving.

He scooped up the bundle and shoved forward through the crowd, the angry shouts of the guard to "Get back here!" lost in the noise of the mob. He shoved the sword back inside the bag, knowing there was no chance now of pretending he wasn't guilty. He moved back from the main square, heading away from the business section of the city to an area where there would be fewer guards. He glanced quickly around the square to make sure no one was following and was surprised to find that the strange men he had sighted earlier were gone. He dismissed the thought from his mind, finding more important things to focus on, as he came to the edge of the square and started down a winding street toward the west side of the city.

He swore silently as he passed another group of soldiers. The angered shouts of the first soldier still in close pursuit caused the guards to take notice, forcing Seth to quicken his pace, as a new group of men took up the chase. He sprinted across the sunlit streets, ignoring the irate

shouts of citizens as he elbowed his way past. He wished desperately that there were shadows or fog in which he could hide instead of the bright light that reduced his chances of remaining undiscovered to almost nothing. If he had been any slower, he was positive he would have been caught already, but his speed did not mean much with the indignant cries of the people around him constantly giving away his position to the guards trailing him. He left the main street behind and entered a fairly deserted part of the city. This shattered ruin of houses and shops sat on the outskirts of Kaleth near the southeast wall, a tragic result of an attack on the city a few years past.

He tore around a corner, colliding with a girl who had been running the opposite way with enough force to send them both groaning to the ground. The force of the impact jarred him completely, and he sat up with a curse, dark eyes fixing on the person across from him with an irritated glare. The girl met his scowl with one of her own, her vibrant green eyes burning with indignation.

She opened her mouth to speak and then closed it just as quickly, glancing down at the small stone lying on the ground between them. The object was smooth like glass, pulsing with an eerie light that instantly drew his gaze. The glow seemed to alarm the girl greatly, and she quickly scooped up the stone, shoving it in the front of her tunic before glancing nervously over her shoulder, as if sensing something closing in from the street behind. Seth did not question her wariness. He also sensed something closing in on them. It was that same sense of ominous cold he had experienced in Kaleth's square, and he knew instantly that it was not the city guards that were drawing up behind them now.

The girl motioned him to silence and backed into a narrow alley, crouching down behind the tattered remnants of a few baskets and jars. Seth followed without hesitating, blending in easily with the shadows that cloaked the alley.

The pair of them waited in frozen silence, until a tall figure emerged at the mouth of the passage, followed by several others, all holding the wickedly curved blades of scythes tightly in hand. Seth stared at them in surprise. These were the same men he had seen standing at the edge of the square. Now their cold eyes were fixed on the cluster of cracked pottery he had selected as a hiding place, performing a slow and far too careful scan.

He glanced over at the girl crouched furtively beside him. Her olive-toned skin was smooth and clear, her green eyes unnaturally bright as she stared out at the men gathered before them. She was about his age, long brown hair falling just past her waist and tied back by a single strip of green silk the same color as her clothes. An ornate gold necklace dangled down from around her neck: an emerald studded tree with a distinct design that was instantly familiar to him,

though he could not immediately remember why. He could tell by the way she held herself that this girl was no petty thief or runaway. She was the reason these cold-eyed hunters had come to Kaleth. She was what they had been searching for out in the square, and he got the feeling that unpleasant things would happen should the men discover them now.

The pounding of footsteps sounded in the street without, and the figures at the mouth of the alley quickly retreated from the sound, blessedly unaware of the two crouched only inches away from them. The girl gave an audible sigh of relief and started to rise, but Seth motioned for her to stay where she was, holding his position for a few moments longer as the company of guards rushed down the street right past where they lay concealed.

He rose to his feet a moment later, the girl following close behind. "Far too close," she murmured, shooting him another glare. "You almost got both of us killed. Do you know that?"

His eyes narrowed. "You weren't exactly watching where you were going either. It's your fault just as much as it was mine."

She stared at him with calm composure, her mouth fixed in a frown. "And I suppose you think a few guards chasing after you is a reason to go ploughing through the streets just bowling over anyone who crosses your path?"

He flushed, eyes dark. "Blame me all you want, but I'm getting out of here before I'm arrested, or maybe worse if those men come back..." He hesitated, that same prickling sense of wariness creeping up on him as he stared down the street behind them, opposite the way the guards had gone. "They're coming back," he stated.

"What?" she demanded, unwilling to believe him, but Seth stayed firm in his conviction.

"Those men, they're coming back."

"How would you--?"

"This really isn't the time for an argument," he snapped. "Can't you sense them?"

The girl pursed her lips, staring quickly down the alleyway beside them. "By the Light," she breathed. "We can lose them in the city." She started off back toward the square, but Seth quickly seized her arm.

"Do you want to get arrested?" he demanded.

"The king of Kaleth would not arrest me," the girl stated haughtily, and Seth's eyes narrowed.

"Maybe not," he conceded, "but his guards would still delay you, probably try and confiscate whatever that is," he added, eyes drifting down to the heavy bulge in the girl's pocket, still pulsing with a strange blue light from inside the thin veil of material. "That's why those men are after you, isn't it?"

She glared at him, face taut with wariness as she ripped her arm free of his grasp. "That is hardly your affair," she asserted, and he shook his head.

"Your pride aside, I know a way out of the city, one where we wouldn't have to go through the main gates. It's the only way we're likely to lose those people following you."

Her responding look was more than a little skeptical. "And I'm just supposed to trust you? You just want a way to escape the city watch."

"Are you coming or not?" he demanded, starting down an alley behind them leading off toward the east wall.

The girl hesitated, casting another glance down the street beside her before darting quickly after him. "If you lead us into a dead end and those men catch up to us, you'll be facing a fate much worse than jail," she warned him coldly.

Seth shook his head, saying nothing in response as he led the girl through a narrow side passage between two decimated shops and over to a small grate set into the base of the east wall. His gaze drifted once more to the pale glow of magic still emanating from the side of the girl's tunic. His eyes seemed constantly drawn to the object, and the compulsion set him on edge. "You should probably find a way to stop that from glowing," he stated dryly, jerking his eyes away from the glow and trying to focus on the crumbling mortar around the edges of the grate before him. "unless your aim is to be a walking beacon to everyone you pass."

The girl frowned, stuffing the object deeper inside a small rune-marked pouch belted at her waist and tightly sealing the top to eliminate the glow. "The top of its case was just lose. And it doesn't normally glow. Probably just means those men are much closer behind than we think, so if you wouldn't mind?" She looked pointedly at the grate before them.

Seth undid his pack, pulling free the sword wrapped safely inside and prying free the grate as quickly and quietly as he could manage.

"That's an expensive piece of craftsmanship," the girl murmured, eyes scanning the elaborate engraving of an oak tree set into the sword's pommel.

"Not the kind of weapon you'd expect to find on a teenage criminal?" Seth countered dryly, making her roll her eyes.

He set aside the heavy piece of corroded ironwork that had been blocking their passage forward, gesturing for her to proceed. She shook her head. "You first." He arched an eyebrow but complied without protest, feeling still the creeping sense that something dark was drawing near.

“Just put the grate back when you go,” he warned, crawling his way forward through the passage. The girl grimaced at the smell and grime but followed quickly after him, settling the grate loosely into place behind her.

They cleared the tunnel in a matter of seconds and slipped out into the woods beyond the city. They did not stop running until they had made it well back into the treeline and the sense of foreboding Seth had been experiencing ever since catching sight of those men in Kaled’s square finally began to ebb.

Seth stared at the endless stretch of trees before him with a fatalistic expression. He could not go back to Cammen, or really anywhere else in this region. Heading north was his best option right now, though the idea of living on the streets again, broke and on the run in some criminal town like Telvor or Cazour right on the border of the empire was hardly an appealing prospect.

He glanced over at the girl beside him. She was staring at the maze of trees around her with an expression of anxious indecision. It seemed she too was conflicted, but probably not because she didn’t know where she was headed. No, it seemed more to Seth that she had no idea how to get to her chosen destination, and the very idea of trying to navigate through this region daunted her.

“You’ve never travelled these woods, have you?” he asked her softly.

The girl glared at him indignantly before giving a nervous swallow. “Tracking and navigation were never my strong suit. I suppose you know the way through this tangle?”

He nodded. “It’s hundreds of acres of this between us and any major city. You could take the main road of course, but I get the feeling you don’t want to do that, seeing how easy it would be for those men to track you that way.”

The girl eyed him narrowly. “Are you offering to help?”

He shrugged. “So long as you’re headed far from here.” He glanced back at the tree emblem on her necklace, finally remembering the significance of the sigil. “You’re a Venishian, aren’t you?”

Her eyes narrowed but she nodded nonetheless. “I am. Headed back to Venir on a mission of great import. So, do you know the way or not?”

He hesitated, studying the girl across from him with renewed interest. Not many Venishians ever ventured outside the walls of their city in the far west. It was only their soldiers loaned out to the armies of the southern kings that dared linger so far from home, and Seth was fairly certain this girl was no soldier. *Whatever she’s mixed up in though, if those men catch up to her alone out here, they’ll kill her.* He knew. “I suppose Venir’s as good a place as any right now,” he concluded, starting off up the rise behind them. “This way.”

The girl followed him up the slope, trekking for hour after hour through the dense foliage without ever slowing or voicing a complaint. *I guess I underestimated her.* Seth conceded.

It was long after sunset when they finally stopped for the night, the flat terrain of Kaleth's forests just beginning their transformation into the pine-studded hills that lay farther north. Seth glanced over at the girl sitting silently beside him as he settled down for the night. It seemed the cool spring air was cutting through the thin blankets she had wrapped about her to ward off the chill, but she made a point of stifling her shivers and kept her back firmly to him, making him instantly discard the idea of offering her an extra blanket.

He pulled his own cloak out of his bag, noticing for the first time the bits of dried blood that encrusted the right side near where he'd held his sword and knowing bitterly that the blood wasn't his.

He lay aside the cloak and stared out into the night, impervious to the chill of the wind as it washed over him. He stayed that way until dawn, the milky gray light left in the wake of the departing night giving the forest around him an alien feel.

He glanced at the sword lying undisturbed on the ground beside him. So much blood had drenched this blade since it had passed into his hands. It was hard to look at it the same way he had when he was younger and the blade had belonged to Therin. It had been just an ornament then, retired from service and hung on the wall of the manor as more of a family crest than a weapon to kill. Seth had looked at it then in admiration. Now he felt only emptiness and nausea.

He rose to his feet, trying to shrug off the weight of his past sins, but unable to do so when so many of them were such recent errors. *I shouldn't have killed him.* He thought once again. *Therin wouldn't have killed him.* But Therin had been a good man, free of the darkness that plagued the boy he had tried so hard to mentor. Seth brushed aside such pointless broodings, strapping on the sword and feeling the drag of its weight like an anchor at his back, pulling him down. It was time to move on.

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