



Also by Vanessa Bettencourt

Whisperers and Keepers

The Silver Stone Challenge

Quest into Darkness

The Last Artifact

Lost Valley Series

Beyond the Cliff and Courage

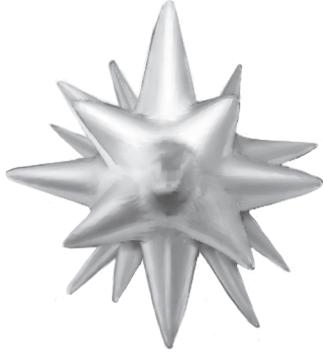
Graphic Novels

Polly and the Black Ink

Titans Island: Sally's Quest

Not From Brazil

*Never Give Up: a guide to
have ideas & finish tasks*



To the ones I love...



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Whisperers and Keepers Book One - The Silver Stone Challenge

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THE SILVER
STONE
CHALLENGE

*****This is an uncorrected sample*****

BOOK I OF THE
WHISPERERS & KEEPERS
TRILOGY

VANESSA
BETTENCOURT



ESKAR

VALKAR

NAYR

PAIR

WHITE TEMPLE

TVOER

ESSIL

WEIDIN

ARENT

CONSTANT

VER

INDEIO FOREST

TRV SEA

BLACK TIDE

SEK

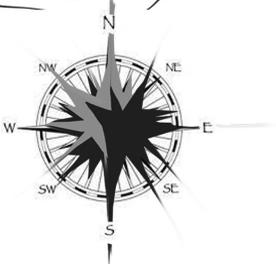
RUINS OF SUNDARIA

PORTKAIN

RUINS OF ARTHA

URGAR

DARMIR OCEAN



ETTEL OCEAN

KINGDOMS

IN

ICARATH

SIS

KARN

HIMA

HORG

THER

VAL TAIIR

TAIIR FOREST

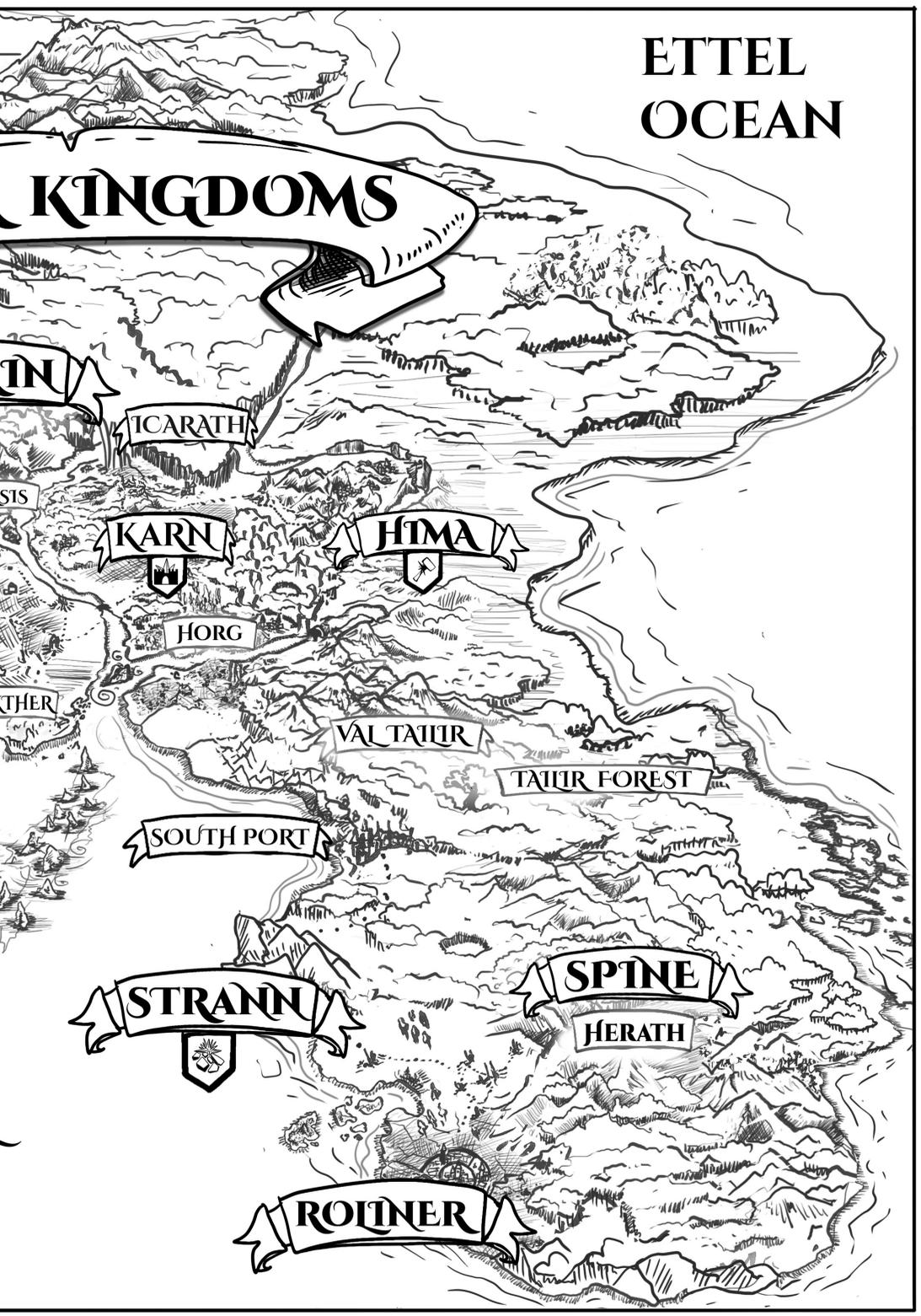
SOUTH PORT

STRANN

SPINE

HERATH

ROINER



ORDER OF ESKAR

Knights of the House of the Order (serve all Eskar Kingdoms)

House: Elren

Roof: Durmavar

Hall: Deimus

Stairs: (not taken)

Pillar: Anonymous

Crest: Xarkadi Keristan

Window: Muorg Maiers

Door: Enon of Till

Lighthouse: (not taken)

Sword: Dyllin

Each Academy has their own House to rule and administer, but the highest rank is the Hall.

Valkar Kingdom:

Ivoer: Hall Deimus

Constant: Hall Maiers

Nayrin Kingdom:

Weldin: Hall Wareth

Portkalin: Hall Voil

Karn: Hall Broar

Roliner, Strann and **Hima** have no Academies. They train warriors in a different way, but only Roliner has refused to participate in the Order's games.



IVOER



CONSTANT



WELDIN



KARN



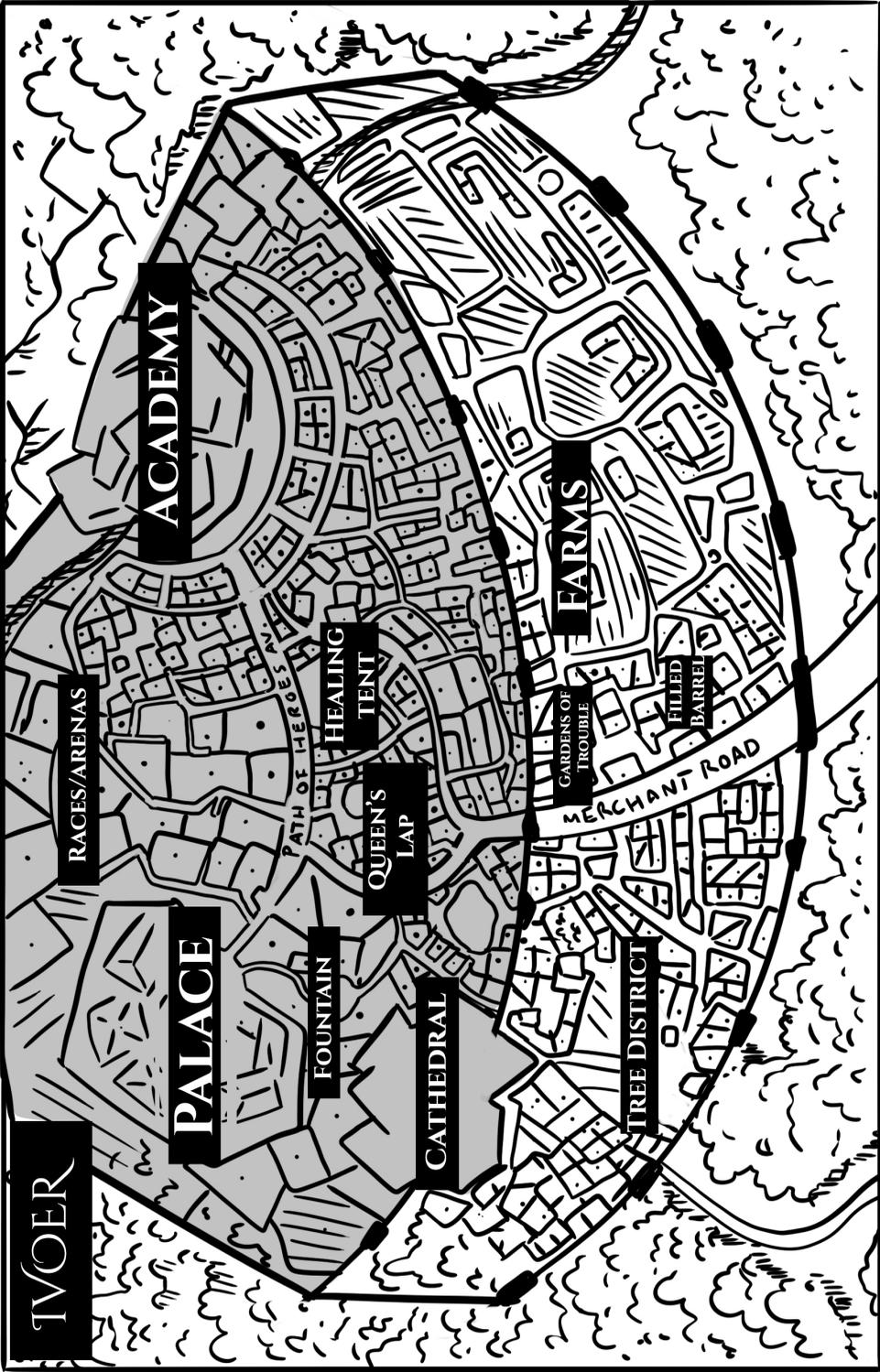
PORTKALIN



HIMA



STRANN



TOWER

PALACE

ACADEMY

RACES/ARENAS

FOUNTAIN

HEALING TENT

QUEEN'S LAP

CATHEDRAL

FARMS

GARDENS OF TROUBLE

FILLED BARREL

PATH OF HEROES

MERCHANT ROAD

TREE DISTRICT

Lurama, Silver Moon of Plurius, Year of Wind 1509

Mélien dipped a cookie in a bowl of warm milk, took a small bite, then carefully shared the rest with her baby brother.

“So how did King Elren come up with the titles for the House of the Order?” she asked Xarcadi Keristan.

Xarcadi paused and leaned forward to fill his glass first.

“One day,” he began. “In a miserable tavern by the road, a young woman asked House Elren who he was and what were his Knights’ intentions. She looked young and humble, so the King took his time to answer but did it in a simple manner as he pointed to each one of his knights and said:

“The Roof puts everyone first but himself.

The Hall leads the people along the right path.

Stairs elevate us with honor.

The Pillar holds it all together.

A Window to see beyond our ignorance.

A Crest to keep safe what matters, and a Door that gives passage to knowledge, but keeps danger without.

Like a house, we are a home to those who have none!”

“You forgot the Sword,” Mélien said, sitting amongst the others next to her baby brother.

“Of course,” Xarcadi nodded.

“The Sword’s duty is to protect House Elren, even if he must go against the people.”

Xarcadi raised his glass to her.

Mélien shrugged and sat her baby brother on her lap, smiling at him. “But Kellann can become the sword one day, like father. When I grow up, I want to be Crest.”

“I guess I’ll have to watch out for this one,” Xarcadi laughed.

Ruac, Blue Moon of Safir, Year of Fire 1519

PROLOGUE

THE SENTENCE

I wish we had a dragon on our side too... Elren thought, without looking at the ghostly face of the creature floating beside him. *Impossible... there are none left behind. Even if there were... none would answer our prayers. Especially those of my people...*

The creature was made of blue smoke, and she had borrowed her physical appearance from one of the palace paintings just by touching it. Trailing the king, another cloud of purple smoke pressed a vase on the ground and borrowed the form of the woman etched on it. Other smaller creatures woke up and followed them, less materialized and definitely not of human shape, but extremely curious and playful.

Not tonight... Elren sighed, walking away.

They ignored him and insisted, hovering about, filling his head with their constant warnings and demands. The sealed doors Elren was leaving behind him were no obstacle to them.

“I wasn’t wrong!” Elren said as he stopped in the middle of the hall to face their ghostly shapes made of specks of dust, glittering in the silver moonlight. “No... it just...” their voices filled his mind all at the same time. “May I speak? It just wasn’t the right time... That’s all! That stone is our people’s only chance of survival.” Elren pointed at the door at the end of the hall.

Did I say it out loud? Elren sighed as he noticed two guards ahead, standing uneasily, and he now recalled ordering constant vigilance since the incident.

I did, Elren shrugged ...and now they think I’m mad too because I talk to myself... when they’re the ones who can’t see what walks among them.

No one in the palace could, and he was starting to believe no one in the city or kingdom could.

Of course they matter, Elren’s thoughts silenced the creatures’ voices

The Silver Stone Challenge

inside his mind for a moment. *Am I not doing all of this for them? For my people?*

Elren turned a little to his right and saw one of the ghostly female figures smiling at him. Her voice reached his mind stronger than any other. *“Were we not once your people too? All things fade...”* She stretched several of her ghostly arms to touch Elren’s face before her smoky figure dissipated into the night.

Soon enough, it won’t matter, he thought. One way or the other, it might be too late.

Elren walked up to the guards in front of the heavy carved door.

“Don’t follow me inside!” Elren snapped, turning his head a bit over his shoulder to address the creatures that had been chasing him and were now filling the hall behind him. But only the guards took his order seriously and quickly shuffled into awareness to stand at attention.

“Y-y-yes, my King...!”

One of the guards hesitated before opening the door.

Elren stepped into the room and closed the door behind him.

The room was submerged in purplish darkness. The late hour of the night made it even more absent of life, and the lack of windows only aggravated the heaviness of the air.

For a brief moment, Elren stood motionless in the dark. His focus on the cold and silence. He knew every corner of the room by heart. Being blind in the dark was his choice. In fact, he liked it.

He had rare moments of peace, and recently less time to enjoy it. The creatures walking unseen among them not only chased him day and night, they incessantly whispered, begged and taunted him.

Elren moved slowly. He climbed the small steps in the middle of the room and raised his hands to the silver chest on the velvet pillow.

The radiance of the chest pulsed softly. It brought some light into the room. Two circles ignited on the back of Elren’s hands. One made of silver and another of gold. Then another two lines stretched from each circle, connecting dots from his wrists to his elbows. A pattern of intricate constellations covered his skin. The light of the tracings on his arms was softer than the pulsing silver box in front of him, but just as pure.

As expected, three ghostly figures appeared, like a wisp at first, then

The Sentence

growing from flickering flame until they stood tall around him. These guardians were different in their manners and intention from the ghostly creatures waiting outside. They were armored and had always belonged to Elren for as long as he remembered. His mother had summoned the guardians with her last breath of life the day Elren was born. And for a lifetime, they had been bound to protect and guide him. They had lost their voice a long time ago, and now...

Elren looked over the three warriors. One was mostly apparent. Half of another was already gone, and the king could see through what was left. The last was almost wholly invisible.

They're starting to fade... or am I?

The flames inside their chest had different colors, pulsing weakly in the darkness with the rhythm of Elren's own heart.

Elren waited a moment and opened the silver chest between them.

Inside, there was a rough and cold faceted crystal, with innumerable protruding spikes of different sizes. It filled his hand. The guardians' colors reflected on its surface as it pulsed with only bright silvery light.

"Yes," Elren nodded as a gentle girl's voice echoed from the artifact and filled his mind. He whispered, "I finally came to a decision..." The crystal hovered from his hand to float in mid-air, lighting the entire room. Elren frowned and stepped back.

I see. She's controlling it... It might be too late. My magic fades fast.

"No, I do not forgive you," Elren answered aloud. He raised his hand to protect his eyes from the strengthening light. The voice persisted, filling his mind too, but Elren's voice echoed in the room. "Your mistake will cost us deeply. No..." He shook his head as if he could shake away the voice. "There's no such thing as a *chosen one*. And you certainly wouldn't be it. You're nothing but a thief! You are not and will never be the true keeper of this light. And the longer we keep it from its true owner, the easier it will be for KsiDurack the Devour to find it."

She quieted for a moment and reduced the strength of the crystal's light, descending it into the silver chest.

She's stronger than I thought. It's no longer my star.

Elren pondered for a moment and calmed his voice. "But..." he continued walking closer to the silver box, "...there's no turning back now, so..." Elren sighed. "I have decided that I will not silence you."

The Silver Stone Challenge

The light fluttered like a little bird's heart.

"I will curse you with a promise instead. You will make things right."

The light pulsed slowly in response, like long eyelashes assenting.

Elren stretched his hand to hold the crystal, and the heartbeat calmed down.

"I will allow the Silver Stone Challenge one more time, and you will do the right thing. You will let go of the Star."

She spoke, and Elren shook his head slowly. "No. I'm afraid nothing can restore you to your body."

He could hardly feel the heartbeat now.

"The Star will finally belong to its rightful owner, and in the end, you will fade, knowing you saved... at least some of us."



PART I

Carint, Silver Moon of Sirentus,
Year of Earth 1520



CHAPTER ONE

BREAKING CURFEW

W*icked luck. They're coming this way.* Eilenar slid to an abrupt stop on the smooth stones of the alley. Sentry guards marched from the well-lit stone arch towards his position. Eilenar dove quickly back into the mouth of the alley and crouched among a pile of empty wooden boxes. Hide and seek had been one of his favorite games as a child, but a box didn't cover him as well as before.

Did they notice me? He peeked out from among the shadows of the silver moon. *Wicked, wicked luck!*

Eilenar held his breath to take another quick look while tucking his precious message into his loose and worn-out trousers. Then he crept among the barrels and unbearable stench, feeling the cold blue and silver cobblestones under his stained bare feet.

If the scroll is real...

And Eilenar wished it was. If it was, it would change his life. Forever. Becoming a Knight of the Order of Eskar was his only wish. Were it true, he would be able to help not only his mother, but protect the people of the districts.

Eilenar couldn't risk approaching the guards and showing them the message. If they thought it was fake, they would definitely try to take him in and interrogate him for such perfect forgery. If they thought it was real... then... how could he explain having it? Him? Eilenar didn't even own a sword. They would probably take him in anyway, accuse him of stealing such an important document.

Meller will know. He will know just by looking at it. He won't even have to read it. Besides... he would be the only person available at such a late hour... who wouldn't ask questions.

Eilenar trusted him with his life. It had to be Meller.

Where is he?

Fortunately, Eilenar found Meller walking under a veranda. Unfortunately, the sentry guards were about to find them both, for Meller was wandering towards them, unaware of danger.

The Silver Stone Challenge

Would they punish anyone tonight for breaking curfew?

Eilenar took a moment to think. All he needed was to make some sort of noise or signal to warn his friend, but the noise would only bring the guards to him.

The urgency of the situation distracted Eilenar from grasping a better course of action. He looked up at the curtain wall. From above, the guards had a clear view of the middle of the street, but not of the corners and shadows of the curves which Eilenar often used to move around the district.

The wind shifted and snapped a massive banner from one of the balconies, fully decorated for the festival that would start at sunrise. The cloth fell at Eilenar's feet. It was one of those red-blooded colored banners from the Heart of the City with the perfect Silver Stone silhouette embroidered in the middle of it. That same symbol was stamped on the most prestigious guards' armor – and also on his scroll.

Eilenar reached his hand to pull the banner from the moonlight to hide it, then hesitated, as if touching it would somehow curse him. Some people worshiped that symbol more than anything in life.

Eilenar decided to leave it alone. His eyes shifted from the fallen banner back to Meller.

Real or not, the scroll in Eilenar's possession would mean less than dust if the guards caught them both breaking curfew. Eilenar tensed.

At that point, the sentry guards turned unexpectedly right onto the main avenue, missing Meller.

Not all is lost, Eilenar sighed, squinting his eyes with a silent but victorious smile.

He was about to stand up and join Meller when hurried steps made him lift his head like an attentive dog above the rotten barrels to look down the street. That led straight to Meller.

What now?

Nearby, a boy in charge of lighting the street lamps abandoned his work and fled as the shadows of six soldiers grew tall and thin on the ground, surrounding Meller.

Damn, more guards!

These approached from the left, and they wore dark leather armor not at all like the Order sentry guards. These were Durmavar's own

Breaking Curfew

mercenaries. Eilenar almost wished the silver armored guards would come back.

What are the mercenaries from the outer wall doing here?

Slowly, Eilenar moved on all fours from behind a rotted barrel, crawling from one to the next to hear the mercenaries better. The precious scroll scratched his ribs, reminding him of his urgency.

One of the warriors turned his head slightly to Eilenar's position, making him freeze. Slowly, Eilenar stepped back, softly, to merge with the cold shadows, lowering his chin closer to the ground like a predator bracing before an attack.

The mercenary turned his attention back to the group as one of them spoke.

"Feeling damned brave to take a stroll outside the curtain wall this late and alone..." the heaviest mercenary with small malicious eyes said to Meller, smirking. "Where's the miscreant who's always on your tail?"

Meller frowned and backed away. He looked around, counting his enemies and his odds.

"Which miscreant? You have to be more specific..." Meller said quietly.

One of the mercenaries lunged and punched him in the stomach. The rest surrounded him.

Are they talking about me? Eilenar tensed. And why is Meller allowing that? It's not like him to be caught off guard like this. Eilenar frowned as the tip of Meller's sheath poked the knee of the largest mercenary, now behind him.

"Look at that," the tall one said. "*It has a sword.*"

"Looks expensive," the large one said, grunting to clear his nose. He stepped forward, spitting on Meller. "You stole it? Give it to me."

"I'm not a thief," Meller answered, in the strongest voice he could manage. He continued to step back. "I'm on a mission. I have something rather important to deliver from Master Moril—" The name of the prominent man didn't save Meller from the next punch in his stomach, ending any kind of explanation.

Meller fell onto one knee. The silver moon reflected on his white shirt, making his long wavy black hair even darker than usual. It was an uncommon color to be found on the more important citizens' heads.

The Silver Stone Challenge

“Lornshit. We know very well what your kind do at this late hour, filthy Trader. Finding your way in the dark to fill your pockets and slit some throats, right?”

“Did we ruin your plans?” the one on the right laughed, then placed his muddied boot on Meller’s shoulder, pushing him down.

Meller turned, making the man’s foot slide down his arm, then tried to stand up, but the warrior stepped on his hand.

Meller’s free hand reached towards his sword, but he managed to stop himself and braced it on the cobblestones.

“Stay down, dog. That’s where you belong, Trader.”

Meller is no Trader! Why isn’t he fighting back?

Eilenar scratched the prickling on the back of his neck, assessing the situation.

He has no ink or drawings on his skin. The kingdom of Roliner is not even close to the Spine. Not that Eilenar was an expert. He had never left Ivoer his entire life. But even he knew this much.

They want him to fight back... Of course... And I’ll only make things worse if they see me.

Eilenar pursed his lips and again felt the scroll against his skin. It was unbearable for him to remain silent.

Meller recovered himself and stood quickly, leaning against the wall, watching the mercenaries advance. He tried to run between two of his attackers when one raised his gigantic arm to block him. It caught him in the middle of his chest, knocking him to the ground once more.

Shit! Eilenar closed his fists tightly. *Don’t unsheathe your sword, Meller. Don’t do it. Not tonight. There’s too much at risk. Be patient. Take it like a Roliner, a true Roliner warrior.*

“Not so fast...” the tall mercenary kicked Meller to the ground. “Tomorrow is a day for Valkarians, but not for you. You should go back to some corner of your own fucking continent.”

The man kicked him again.

No. No...

“See what he’s delivering that is so important to break curfew..”

Eilenar turned to the voice. A redheaded soldier who had not yet spoken stepped out of the shadows.

Captain Politus... Eilenar recognized him even in the dark. He was

Breaking Curfew

wearing a clean green mantle over his right shoulder that distinguished him from the other warriors, but like them, he lacked the Silver Stone mark on his armor.

One mercenary leaned down, searching Meller's clothing roughly, then stood to give Politus a small parchment.

"That is confidential," Meller said, rising to his feet. "That message is not for you—" another punch came.

Eilenar looked around for anything he could use as a weapon. He pulled half of a broken broomstick from a pile of trash.

No. Eilenar held back. Stay quiet and don't glow.

Politus' gestures were similar to those of Durmavar – the man who held the Order's position of Roof, Commander of the Order's Army. His private mercenaries, no doubt, were vicious, for they had an excellent model to follow.

Politus read the parchment slowly, then ripped it into tiny bits, impossible to restore.

"I believe you are breaking curfew for no reason," he said calmly.

Eilenar shivered with the sound of his voice.

I have to do something... but they're only going to take my scroll and destroy it too. Eilenar looked about at doors and windows, his heart racing. He felt the scroll again. No one dared to come to their rescue, and they were too far from the safety of the tavern.

Meller evaded another punch with a quick sidestep, then tilted his body right to unstrap the sheath of his sword from his leather belt.

Shit, no turning back now, Eilenar thought.

Whether Meller jumped right or struck left, from his hiding place Eilenar mimicked the motions with his head. Meller elbowed one of the mercenaries, breaking his nose, then choked another with an instinctive strike to his fat throat.

"There's..." Meller dodged a sword blow. "...no need for..." He blocked another blade with his unsheathed sword. "...us to fight..." One blade pierced the sleeve of his tunic. "...over nothing."

Obviously, there *was* a need. When the largest warrior moved to strike Meller from behind, Eilenar stood up, ready to shout a warning. The man's iron fist knocked the Roliner to his knees upon the stone. All six fell upon Meller, kicking him down repeatedly.

The Silver Stone Challenge

That's it! I've had enough! Eilenar jumped forward.



CHAPTER TWO

TRUSTFUL FRIENDS

Eilenar scrambled onto one of the sturdier boxes, jumped against the nearest wall, and kicked the giant mercenary's back. Crouching quickly, he tripped another and hit the back of the knee of a third adversary with the broken broomstick.

Distracted from Meller, the mercenaries turned on Eilenar. One tried to grab him, but Eilenar rolled on the cobblestones, hitting the warrior's wrists with the stick.

Eilenar knew he was no match for the soldiers' power or ability.

"Run..." he shouted to Meller.

Meller tried to gain his footing. The commotion had attracted people to their windows, but only to shut them as fast as possible.

"Leave him alone, asshole," Eilenar shouted. The tallest soldier disarmed him of the stick and grabbed him by the hair, tossing Eilenar far from Meller, who was struggling not to be overcome.

Captain Politus lifted Eilenar and pushed him against the wall with his elbow on Eilenar's throat. As Eilenar struggled to free himself, Politus searched him, turning Eilenar's pockets inside out.

Eilenar could hear all his loot raining down and across the alley. It would not take long to find the scroll behind his back.

Nearby, Meller thrashed, punching his way out of the circle trying to get to him.

The alley darkened just then, as beyond Meller two of the lamp posts extinguished.

No. Not them too... Wicked night! Eilenar turned his head and bit Politus' arm through his sleeve. He slid down the wall and pushed the warrior out of his way. Now he saw them. Dark blobs, ridiculous creatures, licking away the flames.

Eilenar had named them gluttonies, when he learned to walk and chase them.

Always hungry for light...

To his knowledge, no one could see them but him. With either short

The Silver Stone Challenge

or no limbs at all, these blobs of dark, turbid slime slid quickly along the cobblestones, moving up and down like jellyfish in deep water. Whatever jellyfish were, for Eilenar had never seen one, fresh or dry. He trusted Tinnan's descriptions and knowledge for this sort of thing.

The gluttonies' tongues extended as fat and sticky as those of the slimiest frogs to the next light, leaving a trail of mucus around the lamp post. Eilenar had seen the gluttonies grow as large as the largest soldier, but these now had only fed a little upon the nearest lights.

Only then, the alarm for breaking curfew rang out. *This will bring the wall guards*, Eilenar thought, uncertain now if it was for the best.

Meller rushed forward to protect Eilenar, but Politus kicked Meller away, and the Roliner fell upon one small gluttony, splitting the creature in two, each as tall as a cat.

Infuriated, one half scampered to feed on the closest light, while the other half tried to bite Meller.

"Don't!" Eilenar stretched his hand to the vengeful creature.

The gluttony stared straight at Eilenar, as astonished to be seen as much as Eilenar was to be heard. Next to it, Meller rose to his feet between the mercenaries and Eilenar, blocking most of the scene.

"Time to learn your place, Roliner dog," Politus shouted.

Eilenar rolled onto his hands and knees. He reached to his back to make sure the scroll was still there. He couldn't find it and looked about just in time to see it roll into to a pile of boxes. Behind him, it sounded as if the warriors were hammering a pole into stony ground, with rhythmic and well-coordinated strikes among them.

Meller struggled against the full wrath of the mercenaries.

Right then, a gluttony licked the last nearby flame. It grew larger in front of him as the alley fell into pitch black darkness.

It was now too quiet. Eilenar crouched behind a pile of boxes and rubbed his eyes as they adjusted to the darkness.

The sound of sentry guards' boots approaching down the cobbled street broke the silence. Eilenar could just see that the six mercenaries had stepped back from the pitch dark alley a bit, breathing heavily.

Politus stepped uneasily again toward the darkness where Meller lay quietly. "Is he dead?"

Eilenar focused on the darkness too. They waited for a sign of life.

Trustful Friends

The sound of guards from the wall grew louder and closer, and Politus hesitated.

“Bring him,” he said to his men. “We still have an empty cell.”

“The boy got away...” one of his men said.

“Leave him to the sentries. He’s breaking curfew,” Politus said and led them away.



CHAPTER THREE

IN THE DARK

Eilenar searched the pile of boxes for his scroll, but it had rolled farther than he could reach. He knew when it was time to retreat and left the cover of darkness before the sentries arrived.

Have to come back for it.

Eilenar ran quietly up the empty widening street. The wood and stone buildings here elbowed each other, with less and less room between each climbing story. They had their recently fixed or brand new signs hanging near the doors and polished vitrines, ready for visitors. Each store displayed their best products or produce for tomorrow's festival. Unfortunately, Eilenar had no time to stop and appreciate their competitive exhibitions.

Above Eilenar, paper or cloth flower chains crossed from roof to roof, window to window or veranda to veranda. From each window, silky bed mantles waved on the breeze. It was a custom for families to display their best to visitors.

At the top of the street, Eilenar found several sentry guards approaching from another downhill path.

"Bring him to me," one said, and the guards split into two groups to encircle him.

The gluttonies were another good reason to keep running.

Rushing to avoid both the sentry guards and the gluttonies, Eilenar slid and staggered down a side street and past a dry rusty fountain without catching his breath. Skidding to avoid a wall, he opened his knee on the sharp cobbled road.

He quickly recovered his footing and rushed past the blacksmith's shop, then ran along the street, chasing the fragrance of freshly baked hazelnut bread.

At the next crossroads, he hesitated between streets, choosing the one which offered him the steepest climb.

As he ran, friendly dogs chased him to the top, barking and panting playfully. Only four of the guards had followed him. Two of the guards

The Silver Stone Challenge

were now far from sight, but there was no time to wonder about them. Eilenar topped the next hill and stopped to take a deep breath. He punched his chest to convince his heart to slow down, considering the dangerously steep slope on the other side.

Eilenar started down carefully enough, but it was not long before his footing grew difficult. He moved more swiftly to keep his balance, and dirt and pebbles came loose under his bare feet. Somehow, he managed to keep his legs beneath him, but by the time he was halfway down, he was accompanied by an avalanche pebbles and dust and descending much more swiftly than intended.

It was then that the two missing guardsmen jumped into the middle of the road with wide-open arms, trying to catch him as he flew.

Eilenar excused himself from the brotherly hug, skidding between one's legs. He regained his feet and tried to stop himself then, swerving.

Nonetheless, he smashed against the wall where the street turned, then in the darkness, he stumbled and fell among wooden boxes filled with garbage. Overripe turnips, rotten tomatoes, and castaway cabbage leaves exploded from the boxes and littered the alley among old springs and rusty screw-nuts, and Eilenar rolled to a stop along with them.

Wicked luck!

He stood up, swallowed the pain, brushed the worst of the rot from his clothes and hair, and limped away from the guards down a well-lit side street.

Eilenar looked over his shoulder to smirk at the empty street, and as he looked forward to see where he was stepping next, he raised his arm instinctively to protect himself from a gigantic gluttony.

The creature in front of him was taller and wider than any Valkarian Eilenar knew. It didn't attack at first, but instead lapped up a nearby lamp flame.

The small flame was its limit. The gluttony exploded, blasting light and thunder, tossing Eilenar to the ground and sending thousands of tiny sticky gluttonies raining down on him like free pudding at Maia's place on Tumag's night.

Panting, Eilenar sidestepped and struggled to keep his balance as the creatures hopped all over him, climbing his clothes to tangle their tongues amidst his silver hair. Behind him, he could hear the sentries

In the Dark

cursing as they slipped upon the garbage.

“Leave me alone!” Eilenar shook the creatures from his shoulders and arms as he looked for a place to hide.

The sentry guards among the garbage blocked one path, and he could hear footsteps approaching from the alleyway. A cat shrieked violently from the left, denouncing a clever pursuer.

Eilenar was now at the alley where Meller had been ambushed, but his plan only half succeeded. He still had the guards on his tail.

Looking about, he found a new row of empty crates he had not yet managed to smash. He hid inside the last of these, right at the moment a guard picked Meller’s sword up from the ground.

Through a space in the slats of the crate, Eilenar could see the boots of young Captain Samar as he stalked down the alley after the scared cat. He stepped on a small gluttony with his perfectly shiny leather boot, splitting the creature in two, and then three, as he paused to address the two guards who had recovered and now approached.

Eilenar could see his stiff posture, picture the frown of his stern face, and imagine the punishment Samar had in mind for him.

“How many were they?” the captain said.

“Don’t know, Sir. A boy and—” one of the guards sputtered.

“A boy? You called me here to pursue a boy?”

“A young man. Any troublemaker after curfew, Sir. You said it yourself. This young man and a Trader were—”

“If you waste my time again, and for a boy, you’ll serve in the pit.” Captain Samar shouted at the guards. Unlike theirs, his silver armor had seen real action.

Now Eilenar wished he had tried to climb to one of the low windows behind the boxes instead of hiding among them, but these were now too small for him. He tried to slide one foot in, but was it worth it to save half a leg?

“There’s no way out of here, and he isn’t underfoot. Go search another garden, you idiot.”

“Y-yes, Sir.”

“It’s after midnight, and everything is running late,” Captain Samar continued. “I should be heading to the headquarters by now. What news from the Merchant Road?”

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“Just a young acolyte driving a wagon full of baskets and dyed paper flowers.” The tall and slender guard showed him one. Eilenar recognized her voice and her face. Her name was Trisha, and she loved to drink at Maia’s tavern. Captain Samar grabbed the fallen banner from the ground. His back was to Eilenar.

Tinnan is not so far... Eilenar thought. *Luck has not completely abandoned me.*

Eilenar bit his lip as a gluttony upon his shoulder stamped a slimy tongue against his ear, forehead, cheek and eye, making him uneasily ticklish. Eilenar pulled his dirty hemp shirt up over the glow of his hair. He always felt like a firefly at night.

“Flowers?” Captain Samar asked. “Vicious and dangerous flowers, I suppose. Return to your duties...” Captain Samar sighed in a soft voice, and she smiled back at him. Eilenar couldn’t see Samar’s face, but the glitter in Trisha’s orange eyes revealed secrets.

“It will be my pleasure to return to duty, siirrrt.” Her fingers walked up his chest to the tip of his nose while she smelled the paper flower.

He cleared his throat. “Other duties, Trish. It’s late, we have much to do, and Hall Deimus loathes excuses,” he said, kicking at some of the boxes near Eilenar as a guard approached.

Eilenar held his breath. At that moment, it seemed the most logical way to becoming invisible.

“They wait for you at the gate, Sir,” the guard said hurriedly.

Captain Samar sighed and followed the young guard, carrying Meller’s sword and the banner, with Trisha a few steps behind. Eilenar saw his scroll near the wall where the captain had been standing. Without thinking, he stretched his hand to it, although it wasn’t safe to come out yet.

A box hit the wall and pinched Eilenar’s leg. Adding to the lack of air, Eilenar shut his eyes to improve his childish wish of invisibility, imagining himself made of thin air, hoping it was enough and Trisha didn’t notice.

The last thing on his mind was to be arrested on that particular night and have Hall Deimus yanking him out of a prison cell by his ear.

Trisha stopped at the sound, turning to look back over her shoulder. She winked at the boxes before continuing on, leaving the scroll on the

In the Dark

ground, and Eilenar breathed a sigh of relief.

Eilenar waited, measuring their distance by the sound of their steps. He grabbed the scroll and jumped over a wall nearby to run quickly towards the square, where he hoped to find his friend. He needed reinforcements, and there were only two living souls in Ivoer right now whom he could trust with such a critical mission.

Under his bare feet, the cold stones gave a pleasant feeling that Eilenar missed during the daytime, when he often fled the guards as much as the burning cobblestones.

“Who goes there?” The startled acolyte turned from the top of the wagon under a stone arch.

“Tinnan?” Eilenar exhaled happily to see his slender friend. He was one of the people who treasured and loved the Silver Stone symbol, supposedly above any other who claimed to love and worship it. At the moment, he was armed with a small hammer that he used to decorate the arch. He stood atop the wagon pulled by another old friend named Easygoing. The dwarf ox tossed his head toward Eilenar.

“I need your help,” Eilenar panted.



CHAPTER FOUR

THE RESCUE

Eilenar had no time to explain. He turned Easygoing around slowly.

“What kind of help?” Tinnan asked with some concern. His blue icy eyes defying Eilenar. “Is this the type of mission that will end with us in a prison cell? Tomorrow is a very important day for me, Eilenar. I’ll be getting my new robes and—”

“It’s a matter of life and death,” Eilenar said over his shoulder.

Tinnan sighed, nodding a little.

“I see...” he said, throwing his hammer to the wagon’s floor. “It is the kind where we’ll end up in a prison cell, or worse...”

“Who goes there?” A sentry leaned over a balcony. “Curfew is in place.”

Eilenar lowered his head and let Tinnan take the lead.

“Bless you,” Tinnan said, giving time for the guard to notice his robe. “I’ve taken more work than I thought I could handle.” He motioned at the decorated stone arches. “What do you think? Aren’t the paper flowers exceptional this year?”

“They are... but you shouldn’t be outside the Heart of the City on your own,” the guard answered.

“I didn’t notice that I’ve been decorating the arches so far out...” Tinnan sounded genuine.

“I can escort you to the cathedral,” the guard suggested.

Eilenar cringed a little.

“No need to trouble yourself,” Tinnan said, sitting down at the front of the wagon. He took Easygoing’s reigns. “My father wouldn’t like to see my futile tasks take his guards from their posts. I have a servant to assist me. We’ll head to the well-lit Merchant Road so no one confuses me for... a criminal.”

Eilenar smiled.

“What are you waiting for?” Tinnan hit Eilenar on the shoulder with the tip of a branch. “Be useful and point the ox in the right direction...”

The Silver Stone Challenge

servant.”

He sounded just like a priest.

Tinnan waited for Easygoing to turn the corner, then stopped. Only then, Eilenar jumped into the seat next to him.

“Don’t look at me like that,” Tinnan said. “You look like you’ve been living on the streets for months. He was going to be suspicious of you if I hadn’t treated you as help.”

Eilenar shrugged. He wasn’t concern about that at all. “They got Meller, and I think he’s injured.”

“Who did?” Tinnan asked, but quickly dismissed Eilenar with his hand. “Where did Captain Politus take him. To Durmavar’s new headquarters?”

“Not yet,” Eilenar pointed towards the square. “The outpost near the market. We need to hurry and get him out.”

Eilenar nudged Easygoing. He didn’t move, so Eilenar jumped down from the wagon to look into the ox’s eyes.

“I need your help,” Eilenar pleaded. “Just one more time. I promise.”

The ox turned his head away from Eilenar instead.

“I know I still owe you turnips from last time.” Eilenar sighed. “Alright, seven carrots and two extra turnips on top of the six I owe you. That’s more than ever before.”

Tinnan laughed quietly. “Do you really believe he can understand you?”

Eilenar nodded with confidence. “Of course, we’re partners. We have equal responsibilities and equal rewards.”

“What about me?” Tinnan asked with indignation.

“We’d consider extending the partnership,” Eilenar said. “But you must understand. You’re wearing the enemy’s robes!”

There was only one other who wished to protect the people of Ivoer more than Eilenar and Easygoing, and that was Tinnan, but he had chosen the power of words over the power of a sword. Eilenar couldn’t blame him. Tinnan wasn’t very good with swords.

Eilenar patted the ox’s head twice. “I’ll walk with you, and we can discuss Meller’s rescue... together.”

Easygoing started to move, slowly.

Eilenar had been getting acquainted with Roof Durmavar’s outposts

The Rescue

for the past year. Some were smaller buildings of only one level with barred windows, or even none at all. Some were made of wood and kept the prisoners on the top story. Only one had the prison cells underground. Luckily, it wasn't the one where they would have kept Meller.

The outpost at the square was large, each cell with its barred window framed with wood. Eilenar knew this outpost best, for he had already spent a night in its rough accommodations.

Tinnan disengaged the wagon from the ox, leaving it behind on a strategic side street, ready to reattach Easygoing for the escape.

"What have you done to the robe I gave you?" Tinnan asked softly. "It comes in handy in situations like this, in case we get stopped by guards again."

Eilenar had no idea where he had put his favorite boots that morning. He certainly wouldn't remember something he would never wear.

"I'm not a priest!" Eilenar whispered, rather loudly. "I will never be one, not even pretending."

They looked at the outpost for any signs of movement of scouts or other guards. Eilenar leaned back to the wall as he raised his hand a little to warn Tinnan and Easygoing to be quiet.

Captain Politus was leaving the outpost, quite satisfied, followed by his guards.

"Are we done here?" one soldier asked.

"I think this time he finally got the *right* message," another snorted.

"Keep an eye out for that urchin," the captain said. "He likes to pay visits to prisoners from time to time. Now, who's up for a celebratory drinking game?"

"They know you're coming and they're going to find us," Tinnan whispered in distress.

Eilenar shook his head. "They would if any of them had stayed behind to obey the order."

Eilenar counted the guards. The moment Captain Politus challenged them to a drinking game, they all followed him, and he forgot to order any of them to stay behind.

"But," Eilenar warned. "There will be at least three guards inside the outpost. First, let's find out which cell they put Meller in."

Eilenar patted Easygoing to get him moving first. He and Tinnan

The Silver Stone Challenge

followed along slowly, hiding on the far side of his furry body. The guard at the door didn't notice them passing in the shadow of the building.

Tinnan clasped his hands to help Eilenar climb on top of Easygoing's back so that Eilenar could look inside the first cell.

"This one is empty."

Tinnan patted Easygoing, making him walk slowly to the next cell. Eilenar walked his hands along the wall so he wouldn't fall. He grabbed the bars of the next cell and peeked inside, hoping Meller was within.

"This one is full..." Eilenar said, surprised.

"Meller?" Tinnan asked from below.

"Not him..." Eilenar said, glancing back at Tinnan.

"Next one," Tinnan said, ready to pat Easygoing.

"Wait..."

"Eilenar, you said we're here for Meller!" Tinnan whispered, anxious. "Tonight is not the night to extend charity to others."

"But I can see Meller from here," Eilenar said. "He's in the far cell, but not one with a window..."

Eilenar ducked at the sight of a guard in the corridor. The dry wooden frame around the iron had rotted enough that the strongest ox in Ivoer could surely pull the bars away without much trouble. After a moment, he peeked back into the cell. This time, one of the warriors was at the window, staring at him.

"It's past visiting hours," the prisoner said, smiling.

His skin was darkened from the sun, and he had the build of a warrior. He wore three large gold rings in his right ear. His full garments resembled those of thieves or pirates, depending on who would have described him.

Eilenar wished he had gold rings in his ear too.

"There's only so much you can get away with the night before the Festival games, Eilenar," Tinnan warned him.

"The Festival, yes! We're one of the teams," the man said. "There was a misunderstanding, and we ended up here..."

Tinnan climbed up on Easygoing to look at the prisoners too.

"See? They're one of the teams..." Eilenar said.

Tinnan frowned. "They definitely don't look like it."

"Are you here for the Roliner?" The warrior pointed at Meller beyond

The Rescue

the bars of the cell. “He seems to be in pain.”

“We have to hurry,” Eilenar said. Then he shook the window bars to test them.

The warrior seemed amused. “You’re going to pull them all by yourself?”

“My partner will,” Eilenar answered. “He’s half ox, half lorn... strongest in the capital, maybe all the kingdoms, I would say. If I release you, will you help me take over the outpost so I can rescue my friend?”

“Take over?” Tinnan almost shouted. He lost his balance and had to jump from the ox’s back.

The warrior looked to his four companions. They all stood up, nodding.

Eilenar nodded back to seal the deal, then jumped from Easygoing’s back. Tinnan had resigned himself and was now passing along the ropes and hooks that Eilenar always kept in Easygoing’s double shoulder bags.

Eilenar wove the ropes and hooks around the bars and yanked on them to make sure they were snug. Easygoing began to walk towards Tinnan, or at least the apple Tinnan was holding away from him. The rotten wooden frame started to groan. The termites that Eilenar had spread around the windows the last time he had scouted the outpost were paying off.

“I knew that would work,” Eilenar said, then warned the warrior inside. “Stand back.”

The wood exploded in a cloud of dust and splinters, muffling the sound of the iron bars as they fell to the ground, leaving a hole large enough for the warriors to climb through.

The first two warriors to emerge raced ahead and down a dark street, gone without hesitation. Eilenar didn’t stop them, but only stood aside and waited for the one who seemed to be their leader to make the next move.

He was the last to climb out and only waited with the other two. In moments, the warriors who had left returned, but now carrying blades.

“We were able to hide a few when we got surrounded,” the leader explained as he took one of the swords. “We thought it would be best not to fight back this time and talk, but they didn’t care to admit their mistake. Men, Eilenar here needs our help.”

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Eilenar smiled, not completely sure if it was good that he had learned his name.

“Let’s get inside and bring the Roliner to that wagon.”

The warriors bowed and obeyed.

“The name is Kahurk,” the man said, offering his hand to Eilenar. “I’m the head of a... large family. It’s been years since we came to the Silver Stone Festival, but this year we have come to win. I hope you cheer for us.”

Eilenar nodded with a smile, while Tinnan kept his distance.

“How common a name is Eilenar?”

“I don’t know any others,” Eilenar said.

The warriors soon brought Meller from the outpost.

“I’m not sure he can stand,” one of them said.

“We’ll take care of him from here,” Eilenar said. “Thank you.”

The warriors placed the wounded Roliner on the wagon among the ornaments and colorful paper flowers. Tinnan climbed into the wagon and covered Meller with a large dusty blanket that he kept in a corner of the wagon.

Eilenar climbed onto the driver’s seat to take up Easygoing’s reins urgently, rushing him towards Torg’s farm. It was the safest place he knew to hide at that hour.

“Is he awake?” Eilenar looked back.

Tinnan lifted the blanket and nodded. Meller moaned something.

“What did he say?” Eilenar turned his eyes back to the road, not wanting to take his eyes from the ox, who was picking up his pace as if something was chasing him.

Eilenar glanced to see moving shadows beside the wagon.

Wicked Luck! Gluttonies!

“He says he needs to go back to the alley for his sword...”

It’s not there anymore. Eilenar thought of Captain Samar picking it up and leaving the alley.

Eilenar watched out for the gluttonies following them now, almost a dozen, not taller than his knee or waist, leaping down the street with tongues waving loosely and eyes unblinking.

They kept up with Easygoing. One whipped its tongue at Eilenar’s head.

The Rescue

“Stop it,” Eilenar said with a circling movement of his arm to defend his head from a second lick. Easygoing slowed down. “Not you.”

“What’re you seeing, Eilenar?” Tinnan asked.

“Nothing!” Eilenar said quickly. He didn’t like to lie to Tinnan, but it was hard to explain that ever since he could remember, Eilenar could see creatures that others seemed unable to. Eilenar had put some effort into pretending he couldn’t see them either for a long time, but it never worked, for the creatures also put more effort into being noticed.

The large gluttony was distracted by a stronger flame on the sidewalk, and it doubled its size with a single lick before returning to the pursuit. Eilenar kept staring back over his shoulder as the gluttony jumped faster, but more heavily, chasing and stretching its tongue to catch each flame in its path. Somehow, it managed to keep up.

“Faster, faster,” Eilenar rushed the ox. The bumps on the road shook the wagon, making Meller moan with pain.

“Easygoing, let’s go this way...” Eilenar said. “I know a shortcut.”

“No shortcuts,” Tinnan said. “Keep to the cobblestone road.”

Eilenar knew they would be safe if they crossed the well-lit market past the Gardens of Trouble.

They made it to where he could see the whole market square.

Eilenar gulped.

The square was populated with a dozen eight-foot-tall giant gluttonies in place of the market stands, licking the lamps and stones. Among them, a much larger gluttony, perhaps ten feet tall, stared back at Eilenar with piercing eyes. It was the second time it had happened that night, and never before. It leaned its gelatinous body from left to right, ungluing itself from the ground with great effort to close in for the hunt.

I wish they blinked... Eilenar shivered.

Easygoing began to swerve out of the way.

Can you see them too?

The largest gluttony could have swallowed Easygoing whole. But like the first one, this too focused on Eilenar instead and jumped toward him, ignoring the ox. They had as much interest in him as they had in flames.

“What’s wrong, now?” Tinnan asked.

“Not this way.” Eilenar turned Easygoing to a side street and down

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a long slope that almost disassembled the wagon.

Easygoing burst out of the congregated buildings of the market district to an open area free from gluttonies. Eilenar had little need to drive now. Without instruction, the ox swerved towards the main road and along the small creek that led to the more isolated farms, including Torg's.

“Hang on Meller,” Eilenar said. “We’re almost there.”

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