

# Act 1- Test of Freedom

## Chapter 1- Magenild Keep

The eyes are closed, emptiness is what I see, and the darkness surrounds me. I suddenly hear voices, a horse riding, the cracking wood of a carriage, the wooden wheels hitting the rocks, my body feels so light, that I feel like I'm flying, and dropping down at the same time. The time has come to wake up after a long sleep, even though I have no clue where I am, what happened to me, and how I managed to be on that carriage. The time has come to bring light to the eyes, but I can hear I'm not alone; I shall wait for the right moment, when the voices will be clearer, I think I'm starting to understand what they are saying.

"Hey you, stranger, still sleeping?" A voice of a man coming towards me, he was speaking to me, but I didn't respond, or opened my eyes just yet.

"Can't you see, his eyes are still closed, he was like this the whole journey, why would you think something has changed, besides, why do you even care? It's not like you're going to be friends, we are going to be executed soon, judging by the road, it leads to the keep where they drain convicts powers." It was a voice of a woman, convicts...so that's what we are? That's who I'm traveling with, and execution? What have I gotten myself into, well let's keep listening.

"You mean the Magenild?"

"Yes..." A different male voice responded, in an indifferent voice, he was calm about this, like he either accepted the fact he was going to die or he has something else in mind.

"Well don't give up just yet, when they drain our powers they are vulnerable, they can't stop the progress until it's done, so we can strike the guards when it happens, besides ..." The first male started to whisper. Missing the most important part, that's a shame, well better keep listening, maybe I could be involved in the plan, and I don't plan to be executed just yet.

"Oh, that's what I like to hear, just say the word, and we're with you." The female responded to the plan, I wonder what the whispering was about.

They stopped talking for a few minutes; I guess there is no reason to pretend to be sleeping, I shall open my eyes. I was sitting on the left corner of the carriage, in front of me was sitting a male, dark skin like moonless night, short hair, and very muscular, he was the one who was calling me while I was pretending to sleep.

Next to him, there was the female, white skin, clean face, thin with a small build body, long brown hair, and addicting smile.

The third man who was sitting next to me has dark hair, but shorter than usual, like military style. A well build body, short hair, wide shoulders, with a subtle. He had an indifferent face, which fits to his indifferent voice.

"Oh look who has woken up, had a good sleep during the road? Too bad it's going to be the last one." Says the dark man, with a smug on his face.

"Where are we? What is going on?" I asked, acting clueless to the current situation.

"Well, first of all you're in a caravan, going into Magenild keep, where you're going to be executed just as we are, but at least you had one good sleep, what is your name anyway stranger – you're not one of us that's for sure, and you're not from Zaurac, how did you end up here with us anyway?"

My mind feels so empty, no memory of anything, I can't remember my name, where I came from, so many questions about myself that I can't even answer, mean I have to start over, a new beginning.

"Wish I could tell you, but I remember nothing, where I came from, who I am, nothing... it is like everything was wiped out."

The dark man starts laughing. "How convenient, there is always that one man who doesn't remember anything. Oh forget it...nice tattoo on your hand by the way, by the looks of it; you were either a slave or the torturer left his mark. But I can't remember such symbol in our land, which is why I know you are not from here." Says the man, while scratching the back of his head.

I looked at my left hand; my palm did have a burn with a symbol that was very unusual. It starts from the ring finger as a circle and continues as a string to the end of the palm. On the palm there are symbols that cannot be described, as if it is a letter or a word....but I can't figure it out. I don't feel the pain, so I assume it wasn't made recently.

"My name is Gorack, I used to be a slave trader, and I know everything about marks that we leave in our land, look at my shoulder." He pulls the ragged cloth of his shoulder to show me his tattoo. The drawing looks like a tree that its roots reach to his chest.

"Where I come from, this was called 'Paradise'."

I nod at him and look at the front of the caravan, there are two guards sitting at the front, one that rides and one that just sits and looks at us and back at the road every few seconds. I can barely detail their uniform, just yellow wool made cloth over the chainmail on the body area, the hands and the neck area were covered in chainmail as well, but without yellow wool. The guard who rides doesn't wear a helmet unlike the one beside him who wore a helmet made of steel covering his head, but keeps his face exposed. I look back at the people who are sitting with me, the female starts smiling for no reason.

"I'm Marian." Says the female and she starts to giggle.

"I'm a treasure hunter; I go into abandoned temples to find something valuable. You can assume that the kings' men didn't take it kindly." Says Marian and she start laughing a bit louder.

"You seem to be happy." I said, curiously due to her laughs and smiles.

"Why shouldn't I be? I'm not so easy to be killed; besides, they keep the females to last. I still got time." Says Marian with a grin on her face.

"Well that's reassuring." I said sarcastically.

"What about you? Aren't you going to introduce yourself?" I asked the third man who sits beside me.

"I'm not your friend." He responded with indifferent voice.

"Don't worry about him; he is always like that...serious." Says Marian right after.

"His name is Arlen, he is my brother."

"So he is a treasure hunter as well?" I asked leaning forward towards her.

"No, I'm not; I'm a soldier, not a thief." Responded Arlen, while looking at me.

"I was serving under the kings' name, as one of his captains. Till some soldiers set me up, framed me, and I was sentenced to death." Says Arlen looking at the side with a bit of anger. You could see him biting his teeth."

"I'm sorry to hear that." I responded trying to reach him with my tied hands.

Each one of us had ragged clothes and we were tied with metal shackles.

Arlen looks at me with determined look on his face.

"Listen here, I don't plan on dying today. We are getting out of here. You are either with us or against us."

A bit frightened by his look. "It is either this or death, so of course I'm with you."

"Glad we see eye to eye."

Arlen leans closer to me so he could whisper to my ear.

"We have a plan to escape, Marian knows how to pick locks so she will stand by us, and will free us every time someone will be executed, so do not worry...unless they are going to execute us first."

The helmeted guard at the back of the caravan turns around, looks at us, suspicious of every move we do.

"Hey back there! Stop whispering or I'll go back to you and cut your mouths out of your rotten face."

Arlen back off, he is calm as a dead man.

"We are near to the keep, any last questions before we proceed?"

"What can you tell me about Magenild?"

"It is one of the important areas around the land. The sorceress, or as they like to be called, volunteers, perform a ritual which drowns our life powers in order to create a magical barrier which will block of the enemies from being able to enter the area that will be closed. Humans who will pass or are inside the dome are trapped for their life is now one with the barrier, if they try to leave, they die...in a horrifying way. The more life power they drown the bigger the barrier gets, which means the land is more protected, yet we all live in a prison."

"Are there other places where this barrier already exists?"

"Yes, the capitol of course is already protected, some other cities with a lot of citizens as well. This keep is an important strategy point, that's why they decided to create a barrier there as well. Now don't worry, we will survive this, just make sure you won't get selected."

I nod at him and look back forward; we are approaching the main gates. The gates were already open and without delays we got inside. Suddenly, another guard is approaching to our carriage. He is wearing the same uniform as they are, but without a helmet just like the driver. They speak to each other, but I can't hear them. He moves to where he came from, and the carriage continues on its journey. We get further inside, it is a small town where some citizens live. On the further end there is a huge keep which is separated from the town by a bridge. On that bridge there are several stone columns. The whole town is surrounded by walls and in order to get to the top of the wall you need to go to the main gate and take the stairs. It is nearly impossible to climb it without special equipment. On those walls there are some crossbowmen that are guarding the town and make sure that we won't do anything stupid. The carriage stops by one of the town buildings, the helmeted guards get off the carriage, and goes to the back.

"Get you lazy body down here right now, before I'll beat you to it!"

Everyone is getting up, and I'm right behind them. Marian gets off first, as she sets her foot on the ground the soldier pushes her of the side and she falls. Arlen is right behind her, as he sees her falls, he gets angry.

"Hey, careful right there you peace of trash!"

The soldier punches him in the belly as he bends over.

"How dare you talk to a royal soldier you bloody convict...here's a punishment for you...kiss my boot."

Arlen lifts his head and looks him in the eye as we go off the carriage. We just stand there speechless and can't even move a muscle.

"Come on, what are you waiting for? Kiss it!"

Arlen slowly bends to his head to the boot, as he is about to kiss it. The soldier kicks him with that boots on his face and starts laughing. Arlen falls on the ground, with a bit of a blood on his face.

"Was it so hard?! Who would knew that one of the greatest captains in our land would turn out to be a traitor and kiss my foot. That's the greatest day of my life, to watch you die."

"ENOUGH!" A voice from a different man heard from a building. Come out another soldier. Nothing ordinary on his outfit looks like the rest of them. He is middle aged, short brown-black hair, slightly muscular, and a faint scar on the left side of his neck. The soldier suddenly stands still.

"Captain Cheswyck Wyanns, sir, I was not aware you'd participate in this."

"That's because people like you don't use their brains, what did I tell you?!"

"To deliver them unharmed." The soldier answered, while shaking out of fear.

"And what you do?! That is the last package you'll ever deliver in your low life serving. Now get out of my sight!"

"Yes....captain!"

The soldier leaves the area and hops on the carriage and rides off the town through the main gate.

The captain signals some soldiers to come out of the building. A dozen of them come out.

"Listen here boys, this is the last package, and I want you to take them to the ritual area, make sure no harm is done when that happens. I have other business to attend to. When the volunteer signals you that he is ready to create the barrier, get the hell out of there. Lieutenant you are in charge of this while I'm gone, if anything happens it is on your head! Do you understand?!"

"Yes sir!" The lieutenant responded.

The captain looked at him with anger, and he busted out like uncontrolled flame.

"I'm not a sir! I work for a living you MORON!!"

"I'm sorry....captain." The lieutenant was about to lose it and shit himself.

The captain takes a deep breath and leaves the area.

"Alright boys, you heard the captain, let us take them to the ritual."

So many guards to escort few convicts...feels strange, or they just can't take any chances. We continue to get further into the city after we passed few buildings I see a huge crowd and a stage. The whole crowd wears the same ragged cloths as we do, which means they are all prisoners like us. Now I understand why so many guards, the whole crowd is like few dozens of people so it is reasonable why they need so many guards. On the stage there is one man. He is young, yet bald. He is wearing on leathered skirt that goes till the ground and the whole upper body is exposed. On the chest there were few tattoos that look like two strange creatures, in a shape of a demon. On his left arm there was a tattoo on his bicep area looks like head jewelry. The whole body is well tanned, due to the fact that his body is exposed to the sun with that outfit. The soldiers put us with the rest of the crowd, but we stayed together in case of their escape plan, whatever it is. The man on stage was holding a staff that its' tall was from his shoulder till the floor, on the top of the staff there was a blue ball. He raises his hands with it his staff. He is about to give us a speech.

"Prisoners of the realm, you were sentenced to give the country one last use. Your souls, as you already know, our souls contain magical powers. Some decide to evolve its true potential, and some keep it as it is. I unlike you have evolved my powers and was given such task to perform a ritual in order to create a barrier around this city protecting it from our enemies. You can accept your fate in peace, and I will ensure you this will be as painless as possible...but if you'll choose to resist, the process will be slow and painful...."

He continues with his speech while Arlen leans to me in order to whisper.

"I grabbed the keys from the soldier who made me kiss his boot, Melonie will unlock us one by one every time they execute someone, it is the only way....just hope they won't pick you. Some of them would probably try to resist, so it gives us a greater chance. Nod to if you understand."

I nod but continue looking at the sorcerer to cause less suspicion.

"Without any other unnecessary words, let us begin shall we. Soldiers bring me the first convict on your list!"

The lieutenant reads a name out loud; one of the convicts at the center of the crowd comes forward and goes up to the stage.

“Behold, how one of the worst human beings can grant great service to us all, and it all will happen to you.” The sorcerer put the staff on the ground and starts to mumble words that no one can understand. Suddenly a green lightning strike comes from his hands into the crystal ball that is on the top of the staff. The crystal ball shoots a beam of light into the convicts’ chest. He starts screaming for few seconds and he raises his head up. His life energy fades away into the crystal ball as he becomes more silent. The sight was horrifying. I looked to the side to see how their escape plan is working out. Marian seems to be successful with opening her shackles. The convict became silent and falls to the ground as the beam fades away back to the ball. The sorcerer seems to be disappointed with this convict, and his powers.

“His powers are not enough to even create a barrier over a single house, we need more. Send me the next convict; let us hope he would be more powerful. Take this body and put it in the pit”

They remove the body and lieutenant comes forward to the crowd. The lieutenant reads the next name; another man comes from the crowd, this time from the first row. He looks younger and more active than the previous one. He is approached by the soldiers who escort him up the stage. Suddenly he pushes one of the soldiers of the stage and grabs a sword from the belt that is on the other soldier beside him. He stabs the soldier in the chest and rushes to the sorcerer in order to strike. The mage grabs the staff and hits the floor once while the convict runs towards him. Suddenly a wave is seen on the ground and when it reaches to the convict. He turned into stone. The mage made it out of there without a scratch and this convict seems to be a lifeless stone standing there.

“What a shame...his soul now will never reach the world beyond and shall serve no purpose for it is stuck in this vessel for eternity. Even if it breaks, it won’t change anything.”

He strikes the sculpture with his staff and breaks it to many pieces.

“I don’t want such fate to fall on anyone of you, it is better to be a part of something greater...because I deny your ability to reach the world beyond. Lieutenant, try to be better on your guard next time, and not let any of these convicts change their fate.”

The lieutenant nods at the sorcerer and looks at the crowd, and is ready to read up the next name. I look at the others. Marian seems to manage to release Gorack. It is only me and Arlen who remained to be release and try to escape, it requires a distraction though....but what kind of distraction?

“From caravan number 6 I call Arlen Macden.” The lieutenant called.

I looked at Arlen, he is frozen...unable to move. The soldiers started to approach him slowly, there’s nothing that someone could do. But him being separated from his family, from his sister, that’s cruel.

I can’t let this happen; they tried so hard to stay together.

“Take me instead!” I yelled at the sorcerer. “What difference does it make? Me or him, take me, I’m ready to accept my fate and be part of this.”

The Sorcerer looks at me with a suspicious look; he thinks to himself what he should do.

“Very well, bring me this one. You have the will to sacrifice yourself for others. You sure have more power than them, who knows maybe you the only one I need for this ritual.”

As the soldiers are approaching me instead, Arlen looks at me with unexplained look.

“What are you doing?” Arlen asks me, as the soldiers grab my hands from both sides.

“I’m making sure you’ll be able to live another minute...for your sister, you need each other more than you need me.” I responded while I approach the stage. I turned my back to Arlen, he still seems to be shocked by my action, but it grants him the chance to escape. Because I’m nobody, I don’t remember who I am, or who I was. They have better chance of survival in this land more than I do, because they have each other.

"You are the first one to actually volunteer to this, you could have become one of us if you weren't a convict. But with such deed, your soul shall not be wasted."

Says the volunteer sorcerer as he puts the staff on the stage to prepare for the ritual.

"One thing for sure, you could be far more dangerous if you'd reach the world beyond. At least you chose to be part of this than become one of them."

I got curious over this.

"What do you mean one of them?"

"You don't know?! Oh well, it is better for you not to know, you aren't going to the world beyond anyway."

"Wait a second!" As I say this and take a step forward he already mumbled his spell and lighting strikes the balls. Everything is so bright when you are so close to it. A beam is shot towards me...the pain was incredible, I barely could stand. I did not scream unlike the others. Suddenly I felt released, painless, but it is different than death. My left hand starts to glow. The mark on my hand, that tattoo. It starts to glow in a violet color. I look at the sorcerer; he seems to be terrified by my look. I just stand there, without the ability to move, yet there's a storm around us, caused by this anomaly. The crystal ball starts to glow red as blood. "I can't stop the progress till he is dead, but he won't die, his powers, are beyond imagination. The crystal ball is going to explode!" The sorcerer yells with fear.

The crystal ball explodes just as predicted...with it a huge wave goes around the town. The land started to shake, and everything starts to collapse. The wave knocked out every human down, but the volunteer...he turned into bones and ash due to the fact that the explosion happened in front of him. I was knocked backwards as well. It all blacked out in that moment. Everything is blurry I see building, columns start to fall. Even the mighty keep has its walls broken. I try to get up, but my body feels heavy. I look at the people they started to fight soldiers, a riot was started due to my action. What did I just do anyway?! I didn't know that was even possible. I guess that's the distraction that they needed to escape, I hope they are alright.

"Get up, you fool!" Says Arlen, while he helps me up.

"I can never thank you enough for what you did, but this...this is more than imaginable, let me get these shackles off." Arlen inserts the keys to the shackles and releases me.

"Come on, we need to get out of here, through the gates!"

"What about Gorack and Marian?"

"They grabbed some weapons for us, we will meet them on our way, let us not waste any more time. Follow me quickly!"

We started running, fighting is all around us. Blood, bodies, despair...the sight is horrible, but it is not the right time to grieve over the dead, it is better to stay focused and alive.

We reached to the house where the carriage stopped us in the first place, Gorack and Marian go out of there with axe, couple of swords and knives.

"Good, you managed to find something." Arlen says with joy.

"Yeah it was the smithy, I'll take the axe. Arlen, take the swords...Marian you wield what you wield best, daggers...but in this case you'll have to settle with knives." Says Gorack while stretching his neck.

"No worries, I can manage with that...but what about you? Can you handle a sword?" Marian asks me as she puts the dagger in her pants.

"I can try, better than nothing." I said being unsecure about this.

"Whatever you did there, was amazing...but we got their attention, and we should leave before they will come."

"What, the soldiers? They are busy with the riot and the escaped convicts." I said with confidence

"I was not talking about the soldiers." Arlen responds

"Then...about who were you talking about." I said with curiosity.

"There's no time to explain, come on we have to go. Hold on... your tattoo... it has changed." Arlen points this out as he points his finger at my hand.

I look at the tattoo, it became bigger and more symbols were added and spread further on the hand, like a disease.

"Strange...someone should check this out." I say as I rotate my hand around.

"Only the volunteers can help you, but if they'll know you are the one who killed one of them. They won't take it kindly, it is better to thing to become quite at first. We can all think about it when we are out of here...so let us just escape to the gates."

We exit the house and run to the main gate the road seems to be clear and no sign of resistance. I stayed behind them all. Arlen was the first in the group who is in a rush out of here. As we are about to approach the main gate, the land began to shake again and the walls started to collapse, watchtowers and the gates. Everyone began rushing to the gates, but I notice a column is collapsing the gates themselves. There is a chance that Gorack and Arlen will get through, but Marian and I won't be able to make it on time and would get crashed by it. I'm just behind Marian as the column almost reaches the ground; I could see them crossing the gates safely. I grab Marian by her belly and pull her backwards. Due to that action I fall over her and cover her body with mine over, protecting her from the crushing stones and the flying rubbles.

## Chapter 2: Another Way Out

The feeling of her body is worm, quite unusual, haven't felt something like that before. She starts laughing as the rubbles stopped flying around.

"Alright, you can let go of me now." Says Marian while laughing.

As awkward as it seems to be, I got of her and didn't show any unnecessary emotion.

"We were disconnected, how we get out of here now?" I ask desperately

"Well there's no option to climb the rubble or the broken walls. The walls seem to be too high even though it is broken, and the rubble doesn't give us the access we need in order to escape; besides the crossbowmen aren't giving us a chance either."

"Is there any other way out?"

"Keeps would have a secret exit to outside of the gates. That's our way out of here, through the keep."

"Alright, lead the way then."

We head to the bridge that separates us from the keep. The stone columns have fallen it was easier to sneak in hiding behind each fallen column. The soldiers don't bother with us, for we show no resistance or fight back, even though we are trying to escape. We reach the end of the bridge. Marian tries to open the main doors, but with no success.

"Damn, the doors are locked. We need another way inside."

"When the land was shaking, I noticed that some of the walls fell down. Maybe we can climb up from there."

"Good idea, we can try that."

Suddenly I hear the lieutenant yell to his men.

"FALL BACK! PROTECT THE KEEP!"

"We got to hurry, before they'll see us."

"HOLD FORMATION, DO NOT LET THEM BREAK YOU!" The lieutenant keeps yelling at his boys as they slowly advance to the keep.

Marian nods at me and we go around the keep from the right side. It wasn't that far, we reach the broken wall, but it is high for one person to reach.

"Marian, think you can manage get up there with my help?"

"Sure, just lift me up, and let me stand on your shoulders."

I go on my knees so it would be easier for her to go on me. She puts her both feet on my shoulders and I lift my body up, while holding her hands so she wouldn't fall off. I stand still with both of my hands lift up holding her hands, so she would stand still as well.

"So? Is it possible?"

"Yeah, just let go of my hands, I'll hold the wall and get up there."

I let go of her hands and she suddenly steps over my head and grabs the hole on the wall.

"I got it!"

She pulls her body up into the hole. She gets in and disappears for few moments.

"Marian? Is everything alright over there?"

She pulls her head out. "Everything is fine, was just checking a way for you to enter....you'll have to find another way in, I'm sorry."

"Well, the main entrance is no good."

"Maybe there's another hole in the walls so you could enter."

Suddenly a shady man behind Marian sneaks behind and grabs her.

"MARIAN!"

I need to find a way in. Now that I think about it, where are all the citizens in this town? Maybe they are all inside that keep. The land begins to shake again, and a whole tower falls down, with it opening a path for me to enter, just over the rubble. Luckily I managed to stay in a safe distance from the falling tower, for it was on the back of the keep. I run over there quickly and climb the fallen tower into the opened path. I get inside the keep; the area seems to be quite. I'm on the upper level of the keep, and I know Marian is on a lower than me. But if judging by the time it took me to get up there, the soldiers should be inside already. I better be careful, and not being seen is my best option. I still have the sword the Gorack managed to get, just in case, even though I don't know how to use it properly, but if it means I have to kill some of them in order to get out of here, I don't care.

I seem to reach a bed room, some pictures on the walls and fancy rags. The bed itself looks rich, with red curtains on the top covering the whole bed. The room itself is empty and seems to be abandoned. On the other side of the room there's a heavy wooden door that leads to the hallway. I approach the door, and slowly open it to make sure I'm not seen. The door makes a creak and I stop for a hush second. I don't hear anyone around me; I assume it is safe to roam. I open the door till the ability for me to get out. Just as I assumed everything is clear, the room is in a corner between two paths. Which one leads to the stairs though, the path on the right or the path on the left? I go to the right side to see if it was correct. I see the stairs that lead downstairs, apparently it doesn't matter which path I would take because both of them would lead to the stairs. Due to the fact it is a squared hallway. I slowly go down the stairs. The stairs are circled with a red rag on the center of the stairs. When I reach the midway of the stairs I hear two people talking. I slowly approach closer to the end of the stairs till I'll be able to see them, and to see if they can see me. There were two soldiers in uniform handling a crossbow. They are already inside, just as I thought, probably got the doors open, or there were some soldiers inside before the whole riot started, doesn't matter, I need to find Marian. But I need them to move away, better to listen to what they got to say first. "Did we manage to get all the citizens out of the town?"

"Yeah, the secret path in the kitchen sure did its work, mostly women and children. The men stayed to fight."

"I'm happy, the more men we got, greater the chance to survive this."

"This is not an ordinary riot, since the accident with the volunteer, the land started to shake. Some of the walls have been breached and they come from all sides, so be on your guard."

"That's why I'm carrying my lucky crossbow and a dagger just in case they get too close."

"Right...just be careful. The lieutenant lost his mind already and willing to flee when he sees he cannot win."

"Bloody coward, no matter, we'll take him place...and take him out if he decides to run."

"Damn right you are. Go check with the others, I'll stay here, something feels a bit strange."

"Alright I'll be on my way."

The guard on the right went forward and the guard on the left was standing still, and looked at him leave the hallway. I think Marian should be one more level lower than me. So close, I can go around the guard it is also a squared hallway as well, but maybe there are other guards on the other hallway. It is better to take him out, and will make sure they are less defensive. I approach slowly to the corner of the crossing hallways. I look at the guard, his back is facing me. I need to make this as silent as possible, but how? I don't know to use the sword properly, but I assume a clean thrust to his heart would do the work...and of course shutting his mouth in case he'll decide to scream. I hold the sword with my right hand, as I'm about to bring the

thrust I prepare to grab his head. I grab his head with my palm closing his mouth. He drops his crossbow, and I thrust him through the back. The sword is so sharp that I cut through his whole flesh and chainmail that the sword reached out his chest. His eyes were widely open as the thrust went through. I drop the body and continue on my way. Of course I could grab the crossbow, but what is the point, if I can't shoot. As I reach the other side of the hallway, to see if there are other guards around. No one it seems, is it possible the convicts got most of them? I think not, they are supposed to be trained soldiers, better disciplined. One of the guards said that they are not ordinary...strange. I take the stairs to one more level down, this time there were a group of 5 guards waiting there, checking every door. It must be because of the breaches in the walls. One of them is the guard that was upstairs earlier. They are preparing on a breach and clear on one of the doors on the right. One of the guards kicks the door. Suddenly a bolt is shot towards that guard and hits him in the chest. Few convicts jump out of there by surprise and they fight each other. The soldiers successfully repel the attack due to their organization. But they lost few men. Only two of them remain. "Ah, we should have seen that coming. We need more reinforcement, but we cleared all the rooms here." Says the guard that was upstairs earlier.

"Yeah, you're right, we are done here. Let us go to the others in the main hall."

"I need to take Isaac, he is all alone upstairs."

"Right, well meet me at the main hall."

The guard holding his crossbow unarmed heading to my direction. He feels confident about the situation. I need to take him out as well; he can't see the body I left upstairs. I prepare the sword for a thrust to his throat. He is on my sight, no chance is better than this one, I thrust him to the throat. He is unable to yell for help and a splash of blood came out of him, some of it got my face and shirt. He chocks and falls down till he is dead, and I watch him...suffer with his last breath. Marian should be in one of these rooms, if she is not, I'm still on the second floor, and the main hall is on the ground floor, I need to check them. I search the dead body and picked up a dagger that he had. The dagger was carved with a wooden handle, nothing too special, but always could be useful. I check every room in that level and there is no sign of Marian, where could she be? I have only one more floor to check. I go downstairs to the first floor to check the rooms; no one seems to be around. This is strange I must say...I didn't even see the citizens. They must be in the main hall preparing for a fight. I hear talking in one of the rooms across the hallway, the door is a bit open and a light is seen. I come close to the opening and I see two soldiers and a citizen talking. The citizen seems to have noble cloths, maybe he is the landlord. They all look at one lying person...that person looks like...MARIAN.

"She is a beauty my lord." Says one of the guards, and they all start laughing.

"That wench looks better than my wife. I'm going to do to her whatever I'm pleased, you don't mind waiting in the hallway do you?"

"Of course not my lord, come on Elias."

The guards are about to leave the room, I need to save her before he'll do something to her.

They near the door as I barge in pushing the one on the left to the side and thrusting the one on the right, no mercy. Before the other one gets a chance to get up I thrust him as well. Both of the guards are dead, and the noble man turns to me terrified for his life.

"Hey you, stop, there's no need to do anything rush."

"Your keep isn't safe anymore. You got one chance out...through me."

"Well, just so you know my men will hunt you down, the king will make sure of it. Besides, I know how to handle myself you cocksucker piece of shit."

He pulls out his fancy sword to fight me. He has a smirk on his face. As soon he goes to his fighting stance he screams with pain stretching his shoulders back. He takes few steps and falls on his knees then falls down lifeless...it was Marian. She stabbed him with the knife while he was distracted with me. She stands there with a grin.

"I'm nobody's wench....I was about to cut him open when he decided to use me, but you came along. That whore son deserved it, noble or not."

"Are you alright?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. I just have some bruises here and there. But I will leave. Do you know how to get out of here?"

"Yes, I do. Through the kitchen, we can go through the balcony that is above the main hall and avoid conflict with the convicts and the soldiers."

"Sounds a good idea to me, how do we get to the balcony?"

"There should be a room that leads to it, some of the convicts are already inside, we better be careful."

We heading to the exit back to the hallway, everything seems to be normal. We search together every room. We find a room on the right, right next to the stairs leading to the main hall lead to a room with an exit to the balcony. Before we enter, I look at Marian, and realize she is unarmed.

"Here take this." I hand her the carved dagger.

"Thank you!" She smiles as she takes the dagger and hides it in her pants.

We enter the room, seems to be clear. As we enter suddenly the door is shut down. There is a convict holding it. He holds a club, his hair is rough and messy, pretty sturdy build body and a chubby face, and he holds a short wooden axe. From the other end of the room come out two other convicts one of them is bald and thin with messy face and he holds a wooden club. The other convict has more organized hair and more well build. He holds no weapon.

"Well, well, well...what do we got here? You don't seem to be from Sebastian group. Who are you people?" Says the unarmed man with a shady voice.

"Listen, we are all convicts, we know a way out of here...if you'll just let us through." I say trying to talk our way out here.

"Out of here? Please...we are taking the keep to ourselves. Sebastian will make sure of it."

"Who is this Sebastian?"

"You want to tell me, you never heard of Sebastian Lange? Then you are clearly not one of us. Sebastian said to take out everyone who isn't one of us."

"There's in no need for this."

"You have such a pretty flower over there. Give her to us, and you can go."

"I'm afraid I cannot do that."

"Then you'll die and we'll take her anyway."

The sturdy man grabs Marian and puts her against the wall. I turn around trying to protect her but the thing man knocks me down with his club. I helplessly look how their leader approaches Marian. He pets her face slowly and moves her long hair to the side. She kicks the sturdy man between his legs and pulls the dagger out slashing the leader. He steps back with a scratch on his face. Marian stabs the sturdy guy at the throat. Before she gets the chance to get the dagger out the leader punches her in the face, knocking her out.

"Bloody whore! So pretty yet so deadly...I should kill you for what you did, but I was sentenced due to raping noble females...I can settle for someone like you...wench."

"What about him boss?" Asked the thin man as he rotates the club around

"Kill him, there's no use for him."

As the thin man is about to strike the land begun shaking once again. The man lost control over his fit and I punched him between the legs, left him disabled. He drops the club and I pick it up, beating him few times till he spits blood and few more times till he stopped moving. The land stops to shake, and I turn to the leader. He holds the dropped wooden axe. Under him there's Marian unconscious, and helpless.

"Drop the weapon or I'll chop her head off, you bastard."

I drop the club and suddenly my hand begins to glow again...and last time it wasn't good news for the land.

"It's you...the one who killed the volunteer...why is your hand glowing? What kind of sorcerer are you?!"

"I...don't know."

He steps back, frighten for his life. When he reaches the locked door he doesn't know what to do.

"Take the girl, just leave....please!"

All the sudden his chest explodes. Through his chest there's a hand, made of some sort of metal. The size of it wasn't ordinary. The hand holds out the leaders' heard and he slowly crushes it, and then pulls out. The leader falls on the ground breathless. My hand stops to glow, there's a hole on the door where we came from. I better not take myself out there. I can't leave Marian like this, I need to carry her. I pick her up and carry her on my hands. We go through the balcony and reached the main hall where there are a dozen of citizens and soldiers preparing for a fight. Some noises come from the main locked door. The convicts are trying to breach it, or using it as distraction? Doesn't matter the kitchen is not far. The way to freedom is near. I continue to sneak with Marian on my hands, to make sure we leave unnoticed. I see the lieutenant nervous, walking back and forth, with it breaking down the moral. All the sudden a huge explosion comes from the main door knocking back few of the soldiers and citizens. One man comes forward with a fireball on his hand. He laughs like a maniac. He is not very tall, a hair the reaches to his shoulders, pulling back, around his forty's. Well build body...wears the same rags as everyone else.

"You thought you could keep Sebastian behind bars? You thought you could execute him with that method?! Think again, fear me. My servants...slay these fools."

Behind him men and women charging with salvaged weapons, sticks or whatever they could grab. Panic rose among the soldiers and citizens, they barely can defend themselves...especially against a sorcerer. I think I can sneak past them unnoticed. I reach to an entrance across the balcony. I go down the stairs in order to reach the kitchen. I open the door with my foot. I see the Lieutenant making a run for it, abandoning his people to die. He runs to the kitchen direction. I fear I'll see Sebastian again with his people, but it is better not think about it, not to mention the strange hand that busted through the door. Marian wakes up slowly.

"What happened? Where are we?"

"I took care of the convicts; we are almost out of here."

"Help me down...my jaw kind of hurts."

"Yeah one of them punched you, but I'm sure he suffered more horribly than you."

"I better not ask how you managed to take care of it."

"We can talk about it when we are out of here."

"Alright, you'll lead the way this time." She starts laughing as she says it.

We follow the lead of the lieutenant. He did reach to the kitchen area and tries to open the secret door.

He notices us as we enter the kitchen.

"Stay back, all of you stay back!"

Suddenly a giant light blue circle appears on the ground, and some particles of flesh rise from the ground and assemble quickly into a full human body. It is Sebastian Lange

"Thought you could escape lieutenant?"

“Scums like you don’t deserve to be in the world of the living you monster.”

“I’m offended Richard...did you forget who I am?”

“I will never forget people like you, but unlike you, I want to live. Take these two instead.”

“You’re right...who are you two, I don’t remember you being part of this.”

“We just want to leave this place.”

“Well then, what stops you?”

“Both of you...”

Sebastian laughs, and a ball of fire appears on his hand. He shoots the fire ball on the lieutenant. The lieutenant falls through the door and a wall of fire appears on the door way.

“You see, I can’t let you leave.”

“Why can’t you?”

“Because you killed a volunteer, and I heard him saying you have powers beyond imagination, and I want that.”

“You’ll have to kill me first.”

“Well that’s not going to be a problem for me?” He starts laughing like a mad man.

“I’m can turn you into ash, or put a sleeping curse and use your body later.”

Marian suddenly pushes me a bit to the side and steps forward.

“He’s lying, I know sorceress use a lot of their powers in order to teleport to some place, the best you can do now is barely a fire work.”

“You underestimate my powers young lady, hmm, I could use a maid. You look perfect for that job.”

My hand starts to glow again, the violet color turns brighter that it almost blinds. The glow fades away and a wall crushes, from there turns out a body made of the same metal as the hand that crushed the convicts’ heart. A body made of heavy metal with some carvings on the metal, symbols that look similar to the symbols on my hand, a mask that covers all the face except of the eyes, the eyes glow in a violet color. The whole body is a size of two strong men combined, with a fist of an average head. There is no sign for any flesh in that body. What kind of creature is that? Sebastian surprised by the wall crush and felt powerless for a second; he turns around to face the creature.

“Is that what I think it is? NO it can’t be!”

He panics and starts to use flames on the creature. But Marian was right, he is weaker than he was. While he tries to stop the creature, he slowly approached him. Sebastian lost hope and fell on his knees.

“No please!”

Marian looked terrified that she fell on her back while I stood still, we both were frozen.

The creature grabs Sebastian, puts it in front of his face. It yells with a powerful voice and says things in an unknown language.

“Fi ais kru....zikon ais lafren...makin himer.”

Whatever it means, I’m sure it doesn’t mean well.

The creature crushes Sebastian with its’ hand, and throws the body to one of the walls. With Sebastian death the fire wall fades away. The creature looks at me and gets closer. Terrified as I am, I am not able to move a muscle. It garbs me, takes me closer to its face and just breaths. I put my hand against my face and it starts to glow again. The creature drops me down and gets terrified and screams.

“Ais Bluewynn Magadon!” Says the creature while scratches its’ face.

It leaves from where he came from without leaving a trace. I get up and so does Marian.

“What was that?” I ask Marian hoping she knows what is going on.

“That...my friend was a creator.”

“What is a creator?”

“That’s the enemy that the humans fear so much they kill each other in order to create barriers in order to protect themselves from those creatures. What is more important, why was this creator afraid of you?”

“If I only knew, maybe it is connected to my past...to where I came from.”

“Well, only a volunteer can answer that, and there are no volunteers in this keep anymore, let us get out of here quickly before it will change its’ mind and decide to finish us after all.”

We go to the secret door in order to escape. It leads to an underground passage away from the keep. We go down the stairs and there is no sign of the lieutenant.

“The lieutenant seems to have managed to escape.” I pointed out.

“Cowards always find a way to survive.”

“I can’t argue with that logic.”

The whole underground area is lighted with torches to light our path to freedom. We reach another stair area with it a metal door.

Marian and I open the door together with no problem, we get out. Apparently the underground passage leads us to an open field outside the keep. The field is not far from a forest that we can hide in. But before we go we look at the keep. Ruined, lost. I look at the top and I see that creature looks at us. A beam of light is shot on him and he disappears. He must have teleported to a different area...wherever it came from.

“So...Marian, Do you have any idea how to find Arlen and Gorack now?”

“Yes, I do. We agreed in case we get separated not to wait to each other. Our people await us in our camp...the ‘Freedom Camp’.”

“Is it far?”

“We can make it before dusk, if you’ll keep up.”

“What about the events today?”

“Listen, I’m tired, we’ve been through a lot, we can discuss about this once we’ll reach the camp, with everyone.”

“Won’t it be dangerous, after all, not everyone knows about my hand.”

“You’ll be fine. If something happens, I’ll vouch for you.”

“And how can I meet a volunteer?”

“We do business with them sometimes, they are neutral. But for that you’ll have to become one of us. It will grant you many benefits.”

“I see. Is it difficult to join?”

“It depends on your will power, and your ability to survive. Arlen will explain it to you in a better way once we’ll reach there. I do hope they don’t think we are dead.”

“I’m sure they are worried, but I doubt they lost hope. The day is not done yet.”

“You’re right, so what you say? Do you want to accompany me to the camp?”

“Sure, it is always better to travel with someone, lead the way.”

“By the way, welcome to Zaurac, stranger.”

## Chapter 3 – The Hunt

Marian and I are inside the forest, seems to be quite. Not even a single animal is in our line of sight. The trees are so tall that it blocks most of the daylight. There is enough light to guide our path though. The land is dry assuming there was no rain for a long time. We spend our time walking for few hours till she suddenly stops.

“Is something wrong?” I wondered.

“We are here. Someone should be meeting us at any moment.”

One man drops down from one of the trees in front of us. Golden hair, buzz cut on the back, from the ears and forward there’s a plenty of hair, but, not too long, yet not too short. The forehead area covered with his hair. Looks young, around his twenty’s. He has a subtle as well, light just like his hair. Physically very well build and not short sized, he is around my height, maybe even taller. Eyes are blue like the sky color and he is very clean for someone from the woods. He is Dressed with gray leathered armor with fur all over it, only his arms are exposed. Around his throat there’s an orange scarf that is a bit torn at the edges. He holds a heavy dark long bow with pack of dark wood arrows on his back.

“Marian...you finally made it. Arlen was getting worried.” The man from the woods seems relived and happy to see us.

“Jakubo! It is good to finally see you.”

“Who is this man?”

“Don’t worry about him; we got ourselves a new recruit. Arlen will be responsible for him.” Marian puts her hand on my shoulder as she says it.

“Does our stranger have a name?”

“I...” I hesitated to say that I don’t remember it.

“Forget it. I’m not interested with your name. Your actions make you who you are not some empty words. My question is, how did manage to escape? The gates blocked your way out as far as Arlen told us.”

“There was a secret path in the keep to the outside world, that’s how we managed to get out.”

“Alright, let us not waste any more time here. The camp awaits your return. As for you stranger, speak to Arlen as soon as you can. So you could discuss about you joining us.”

I nod and we all start heading to the camp. After few minutes we reach a huge hole on the ground. On that hole there are several shacks and a cave on the far side. Next to the cave there are two standing torches and two guards holding a long two handed carved axe with a sharp steel point of spear. The wear the same outfit as Jakubo with slight difference, their scarf isn’t torn, but goes all over the mouth area and even covers the right shoulder. All the shacks are made of wood from the forest, dark and hard. There’s a campfire on the center of the camp. On the fire there’s a huge animal that is held on a metal rotating stick to cook it on all the sides. One man rotates it around and around. The animal looks like a bird, just its size much bigger than a normal pigeon and there are no wings, not even a trace of them being there. Some men and women are sitting around the campfire dressed the same as Jakubo. We can all assume it is their uniform; some people have their arms exposed. Some even have a steel armor plate on one of their arms, mostly right. The shacks don’t look too big, but not too small. Feels like they all live together and there is no private house to each one.

“We made it. I’ll go back and watch out in case for unwelcome guests.” Jakubo points out, turns around and leaves.

“Thank you Jakubo!” Says Marian while smiling from ear to ear.

Jakubo raises his hand to wave us to farewell while walking. “You know where to find me.”

“Ok stranger. This is the ‘Freedom Camp’. I know it may not look rich like the keep or the town itself. But, we got all you need, hunters to bring us food and leather to make clothes, shacks to sleep in, if you don’t mind sleeping with other people. Arnold takes care of the supplies. He is the one sits all day next to those boxes near the cave. Not far from here there’s a hunting camp where usually the hunters meet up before they go out hunting. Do you have any questions?”

“What is inside the cave?”

“Our leader and the high ranks live inside. You’re not one of us so they won’t let you in. And don’t try to sneak in. They will kill you before you’ll get the chance.”

“Where is Arlen?”

“He should be inside the cave. I’ll call him to explain to you what it takes to join the camp. You can talk to the others in the meantime. Get yourself something to eat, tell them I sent you, to avoid unnecessary conflict. If you want new clothes, better check with Arnold. But, there is one slight problem.”

“What problem?”

“You’ll have to pay for them; Lotem is the currency in Zaurac. But because we are Freedom Fighters, so we don’t usually use Lotem, you can trade with items. In your case, you’ll have to give up the sword for clothes, if you don’t mind that.”

“I’ll think about it. Thank you Marian.”

“Always a pleasure, now try not to die.” She smiles, the smile got so addicting, I almost smiled back, but I look away to avoid this. “One more thing, don’t talk about what we saw there, some of us don’t take magic and creators kindly.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

She goes inside the camp. The guards let her in with no problem. Now the question is: What should I do? First, I could use something to eat. I go into to the campfire where everyone sits.

“Who the hell are you?” One of the men sitting down asks me that question. Everyone suddenly starts laughing. The man has thick rough beard, long dark hair that reaches the back, curly eyes and two scars on the face: one on from the edge of the left eye still the mustache, and the second from the edge of the inner right eye goes around the cheek and reaches the beard as well.

“I came here with Marian.”

“Marian you say? Well then, welcome new brother.” Everyone laughs as he says it.

“I’m Shrike, the best warrior among the freedom fighters. Come, sit with us, tell us about yourself and enjoy the meat. Ground flyer meat is the best meat around here. The hunters did a good job getting it today.”

“You’re not one of the hunters?”

“Me? No, I’m a warrior, I help with the raids. If you notice these weapons and armor plates didn’t exactly come from the smithy here.”

I nod at him. One of the females hands me a chunk of cooked ground flyer meat. I taste it. Shrike was not wrong, the meat tasted incredible.

“Don’t rush with it, you still got time. What can you tell us about yourself, brother?”

“Wish I could tell much. I barely remember something from my past. I was sent to Magenild keep with Marian, Gorack and Arlen. During the executions something happened and everyone begun to riot. We tried

to stay together, but we were cut off at the main gate. Inside the keep there was a secret exit. We escaped and traveled here...that's pretty much about it."

"Looks like you've been through a lot today. You can stay in any shack you like, we are all sharing here. Enjoy your meal, looks like Arlen is coming here soon."

I finish eating the chunk, even though the size wasn't big, it feels quite a feast. Arlen comes out of the cave with Marian. Marian is dressed with the usual outfit, but, Arlen uniform is quite different. He wears Chainmail over his arms, a leather shirt, with steel plate on the shoulders, leather gloves and red striped pants with chainmail under them, no sign for orange scarf just like the others. He also wears a belt with a sword inside a handler next to his left leg.

Arlen approaches me, with indifferent face as usual.

"Can I speak to you, privately?"

I nod and get up to talk to him.

"It was nice talking to you." Says Shrike, while I leave.

We leave into a safe distance from everyone, just me and Arlen. Marian is with the company at the campfire.

"How do you feel?"

"A bit worried, you know why..."

"You are talking about you hand, well that's not the only thing that worries me. Marian told me what you say...and lived to tell the tale."

"We were lucky."

"I wouldn't call it lucky. A creator is a dead human soul that reached to the world beyond and was forged into a new vessel, destroying all emotions and created for one purpose, to kill other humans so they could create more. When I heard that a creator feared you, and was not able to kill you and instead ran away. Something is defiantly wrong. But you can't find your answer here in our camp. You'll need to go to the volunteers' camp to discover the truth about yourself. In addition, not every volunteer can answer that question. Their Spiritual leader has to agree to help you. Know this, magic always comes with a price, I hope you are willing to pay it."

"Whatever it takes to find out what is the deal with me and the creators."

"You better keep quiet about this subject with others. I can help you join the camp, you'll have to perform few tasks for others in the camp, and gather influence. Once you think you gathered enough influence talk to Marian or Gorack to call me. If you will play your cards right, you can join in no time."

"I understand. Who I should consider?"

"It is always good to get on the good side of everybody: Jaeger the leader of the hunters, Arnold our merchant and master of supplies, Shrike our raider. You will do tasks for them, and then I'll give you permission to speak to our leader, who will let you in within our people. That way you'll be able to enter the volunteers' camp and speak to their leader about your issue. Do you have any questions?"

"I think I got it...nice outfit by the way."

"Don't even think about it, to get this armor you'll have to do something beyond these tasks...you'll need a greater impression to make. First get within the ranks of the freedom fighters then we can discuss your further service with us."

"Alright, I'll take care of it."

Arlen nods and leaves back to the cave. I think I'll start with Jaeger and the hunters. Marian did mention a hunting camp not far from here, I should check it out. Hunting is useful skill, gathering meat and materials to sell later on. I leave the camp and head back on the wooden stairs to the outside world in search after

the hunting camp. I spot a smoke not far from the camp, I should check there. I go to the location. There are two males and one female sitting around a campfire. They all are dressed in the same uniform, with only one different detail. The orange scarf goes all the way back and covers half of the hand. One of the males waves at me to come closer. I approach them with no problem, hoping over the dead trees and stumps. The man who signaled me isn't young but isn't old, light hair color, with a ponytail. A beard that covers his chin and goes around the mouth, that connects with the mustache. Light blue eyes with tired look. His body is strong build yet looks pretty light. The other man looks young with brown hair color, buzz cut from the sides and a small Mohawk on the top that goes till the neck. Clean Shaven, as if it was recently. He unlike the other people is topless, wears only an armor to cover his shoulders. He has a hairy wide chest, with a flat stomach, and a tooth necklace that is chained to the armor. The female looks youngest among the hunters, chubby face, with golden long hair that goes till the center of the back, light eyes like a bright day in the sky. The waving man gets up and approaches me.

"Greetings, you look like you've been through hell. I'm Jaeger, leader of the hunters and this is my small group of loyal hunters: Pfeiffer and Lara."

"Pleased to meet you, I want to join the camp."

"You do? You came here to ask for my support. You do know you'll have to work with me in order to get it. Tell me, do you know how to skin animals?"

"I don't."

"That's too bad, I could teach you, but it would cost you. By your look you can't pay me with Lotem, and you are buying my support by working. You're in a problem my friend."

"What are you hunting?"

"Ground Flyers, they look like birds the only problem for them, they can't fly. They simply don't have wings. But they are dangerous creatures. If you are all alone, you better not stumble into a pack of them for they can tear you apart with their hard beak."

"Any tips you can give about handling those creatures?"

"If you can't handle a bow or a crossbow, and only have a melee weapon. Try to separate them one by one, that way you'll have a greater chance to survive. Once one of them starts to feel annoyed by you, it will start smashing the ground with the beak and yell. Do not worry; for it doesn't alert the others, these are proud creatures that prefer to attack a prey alone. Once it decides to charge you, it won't stop till it hits you. Their only flaw is their giant beak that covers their eyes once they try to bite. It usually charges forward and with high speed tries to knock their prey down. My tips for you in that case, don't get hit. So what do you say? Want to hunt with us?"

"Of course, lead the way."

"Pfeiffer, Lara, Get your ass up, we've been waiting enough. Let's hunt some food for our camp."

They get up and start walking downhill. Each one of these hunters has a long bow on his back, with it a pack of arrows. I follow them with little I have. They all walk casually without fear of what they are going to encounter, nor even on guard with their weapons drawn. I can assume I'm safe with them. We march further into the woods. Jaeger suddenly raises his hand and stops. We all stop with him and they pull out their bows and prepare an arrow. Jaeger turns to me with a smile.

"We are near to the Ground Flyers, some of the best meat. You want to impress me? Beyond this part they are spread around. Get some of them attention. We will kill one group at the time, till we'll have enough food for at least a week for the whole camp."

I nod at him and go further into the woods while they stay at the back. I notice a group of several ground flyers. It looks like the flying animals in the sky, only with a size of human scavenging over a dead deer, no

wings just as described, with a beak that is a size of a human head with small eyes on the sides, there are no feathers as well, just a naked skin with a lot of meat shown. I try to get their attention, it is better one by one, but the night is approaching and there is a need to hurry, for I don't know what kind of creatures come out during the night. I grab a rock from the ground and throw it on one of them. It hits one on the left. It turns to me and starts charging; slowly the others turn around to me as well and start charging. I run back to the hunters so they would take them out. Arrows are shot around the woods hitting a ground flyer one by one. The flyers fall down and the entire group was killed. Jaeger runs towards me while the others start getting the meat out of the dead flyers.

"You did good back there, but it is not enough, few more groups like this and we are good to go."

"If you hunters are such good with bow and arrow, why don't you shoot them before they get the chance to charge?"

"A distraction is always handy, and I needed to give you a task to impress me. In addition, their meat becomes more tasty once they get pissed, which you did. Now let us not waste any more time, for the night is approaching, and we don't have unlimited supplies of torches."

I nod and continue to find a new group of flyers to distract. Not far from our current location there is another group with more than a dozen of those flyers. It will be harder for all the hunters to take care of them, maybe it is better to separate them into smaller groups. I approach slowly, for they are just walking around and not distracted like the previous group. Some of them are digging on the ground searching for food, or something to grab with their beak with. The closer I get to them, the more fearful they sound. Suddenly one turns to me and starts screaming and shaking its' head around. After a minute of doing so, it starts charging to me. I start running like an idiot from one simple ground flyer. Why not fight it head on, I just need to avoid from getting hit, and I can kill it. I pull out the sword, standing still, and waiting for the right moment. The flyer opens its' beak making itself blind while striking. I shift my body to the left and swinging the sword. It hits the flyer at the neck decapitating the creature. It falls down, breathless and without making a sound. I feel my heart jumping up and down. Another near death experience, well at least for me, for I don't know how to handle myself very well. Maybe I should continue do the same, but it may take a while. I know what to do, while only one of them notices me: he will only start screaming. I can still approach closer, making others to notice me as well, that way I'll drown the attention of some of them in one go. With the help of the hunters and this handy sword we can clean them up in no time, just need to run fast enough for them to shoot them down. I get back to the group of the flyers. All keep scavenging the ground, not sure what they are hoping to eat though...One of them notices me, turning around slowly. I still continue approaching hoping for others to care about me as well. The others start to turn to me as well, not all of them. The first one to notice me starts screaming and after him the others. The all start to charge me, and it is my chance to make a run for it. I run back to the hunters' location. They seem to be alerted and ready to shoot the flyers down. I reach to one of the trees while flyers are at my back. I grab it with my right hand and rotate around the tree to give the hunters a clear shot. Arrows are flying hitting the targets one by one. They are clearly well trained to hunt down moving targets. Few of them remained and I pull out the sword again and helping killing them from behind. One of them knows I'm about to strike and hits the sword with its beak. I didn't hold the sword strong enough and it flew away from my hand. The ground flyer runs towards me and hits my chest with the beak. I fall down, and I can't breathe all the sudden. I grab my chest with both hands and trying to bring the breath back. The pain is greater than expected. The ground flyer is approaching me, opening its' beak to about to eat me. I grab the head with all strength remained, although it is difficult without the ability to breath properly. I struggle to not let the creature to feast on me, trying to push it back. I manage to push it to my left. It falls on the side struggling to get up. I pick up the

sword quickly and thrust it before it grants another chance. I notice another flyer behind me charging, I don't have the time to react to it, but an arrow shot the flyer down. I see Jaeger on my right with his bow drawn...he saved my life. The area seems to be clear. It was the last of them. He approaches me, while the others scavenge on the corpses.

"Impressive, you manage to fight off one of them while he was on top of you. Usually people are done for when that happens. You seem to be a good survivor in that case."

"I try to do my best, and I'm not going to die to some walking bird."

He laughs, and places his hand on my shoulder. "I think we have enough meat, we can hunt a bit more or head back it is your choice."

"One question though. Did I earn your vote?"

"Well, you helped us collect the meat, which means you are useful. In addition, you managed to fight off a flyer that was about to feast on you. Last but not least, you showed some quite interesting tactics in order to lure them into our clear shot, that's far from being a hunter, but it's a start."

"I'll take it as a yes."

He taps me on the shoulder and laughs again. "You have enough brain to infer from that. Come; let us regroup with Pfeiffer and Lara."

We head to their direction, they collected all the meat they needed and put into the bags, and just standing waiting for us.

"Pfeiffer, are we ready?"

"Yes, the meat is in the bags, we can head back."

Suddenly out of nowhere a hook is shot piercing Lara in the chest. We are all shocked, and surprised, frozen from this. She looks at us, with blood dripping of her mouth, the whole body is bloody. Her body suddenly gets pulled off. She screams while get dragged, the scene is horrifying. Her body is dragged dipper into the woods where nothing is seen. We just look at her till we no longer hear her scream. I turn at Jaeger and by the look of his face. It seems he knows what just happened.

"What was that?" I wondered.

"We now became the haunted."

"What do you mean?"

"That hook, it's one of the tools of the stalkers. It is a wise predator, a beast of the woods. I didn't know we entered its hunting ground."

"What should we do?"

"We have only one option...survive. The greatest reward of a hunter is to get the skin of this mighty beast. I cannot turn down such chance."

"What about Lara?"

"She is gone. He shot her in the chest and dragged her away from us...he is already getting her bones and makes a trophy out of it...the only remains of her will be her head placed on one of the trees, in order to mark his territory."

"How we fight such creature?"

"He is vulnerable in his chest area. We don't have time to discuss strategy...if you can hit him, or shoot him down, don't waste your chance. That includes you too Pfeiffer."

Pfeiffer nods as do I.

"Any spare bows you have, it might be better if I could shoot it down and not have to face it so close."

Jaeger points his finger on the ground where Lara was taken from. "Lara dropped her equipment, take what is left of it, and use it wisely."

I grab the equipment: a long bow with a bag of dozen arrows, with it the bag of dropped meat that they collected. Nothing too special, but I hope enough to deal with it. A sudden growl is heard from the woods, it sounded like they were many and surrounding us.

“Don’t be afraid, stalkers hunt alone. But be alerted, he may attack in any minute now, and from any direction.” Says Jaeger while cocking the bow.

From the thick bushes from the sides jumps the creature flanking us, and willing to hunt us down. This creature seems to be the size of one and a half average man including both height and width, full of fur except from the front area. It walks on two legs, which are bending so his steps are like springs, and each step is a slight jump. It is a combination of saber cat and a lion, with four giant tusks on the upper and lower part of the mouth, and enough small teeth that he can use in order to feast on his prays. The claws are sharp as the mightiest sword, full of blood. I assume from Lara. And it seems it can bend his fingers in order to grab or climb. In addition, it has a small sized mane like a lion but a lot of the mane fur goes to the back that makes it look like a long hair with a beard. It is completely colored in white like snow, but not as clean as the first snow due to its killing. I seem to be the closest to it which is why it charges towards me. I try to dodge but due to its high speed and jumpy legs it recovers quickly and manages to scratch my back. With its mighty nails it was able to penetrate the cloth...obviously, and with it left two marks of blood on my back. It is more painful than imaginable, feels like the bones stopped responding and the muscles just died. Arrows are shot from Jaeger and Pfeiffer direction, trying to save my life. They manage to hit it on the back, but the thick fur seems to soft the hits, which is why Jaeger mentioned to try to get him on front. That means I or anyone else has to get it while it is charging. The stalker retreats back to the woods to prepare for another attack, in the meantime my body seems to be restored and I can function again. I don’t remember handling a bow before, but I try to cock it, and prepare for its next attack. Another attack from the side, it jumped off a tall tree on started charging towards me again, I try to shoot but I miss him completely. It is a shame for I cannot handle myself properly. I try to aim again, but suddenly Jaeger jumps towards me and moves me out of the way. The stalker was too close, and I could have died. We shoot him over and over, but it seems smart enough to block the front, and retreats back to the woods.

“We need to get into an open area. That way he won’t surprise us.” Yells Jaeger while helping me get up.

We start running towards the camp, where there are no woods. Suddenly a hook is shot scratching my leg and opens up in order to grab my leg. I fall down and the others stop, the freeze thinking I’m dead for sure. I think that myself, and I get pulled quickly back to the woods. I try to struggle my way out but it seems pointless, I can hear the stalker laugh while pulling me. All the sudden my left hand, the tattoo, starts to glow again. With it I stopped controlling myself. I prepare the bow...at least the body does, not in my mind. The body shifts towards the stalker and shoots him right on the chest before he manages to block it. How does my body do that? Who is controlling it?! The stalker falls down wounded, but preparing for another charge, it doesn’t giving up on me, does it? The body cocks another arrow and shoots another direct hit, seems getting closer to the heart. The stalker slows down, but my body doesn’t stop, another arrow is cocked and shot right to its eye. With this shot the stalker falls and no longer moves. The hunter became the haunted. The creature was slayed and the arm stops to glow, with it my control over the body has returned. Whatever that was, saved my life, but made me wonder if it may happen again. And under which circumstances it may happen? This thought is frightening but I better not think about it. It is a problem that may be solved by someone else, and not by me.

“I killed it!” I yelled, in case they are not far, and may be around to hear it.

They were hiding behind the bushes. They come out and advance towards me. The scratch on the leg doesn't seem to be that damaging, but the scratches on the back may leave a scar. I stand barely in front of the dead stalker while the approach. Jaeger shocked and impressed taps his left hand on my shoulder. "I can't believe it...you actually managed to kill one of those beasts, and by yourself, and in that kind of situation. You have earned my vote and even more...your first trophy. Let me teach you how to skin animals so we can take that beauty back to camp."

"Too bad Lara didn't live long enough to see this." I added.

"Hunting is a dangerous business, and we didn't expect to encounter such beast, but think about the fact that you're alive and even more, the one to actually slay the beast."

"Teach me how to skin animals then."

"Let me show you, do the same as I do, but on the beast of course, I won't defile your trophy." He laughs while pulls a sharp knife.

"Place carcass, belly up, on a slope if available. Remove genitals or udder. Remove musk glands at the knees. Split hide from tail to throat. Make the cut shallow so you do not pierce the stomach. Insert your knife under the skin, taking care not to cut into the body cavity. Peel the hide back several inches on each side to keep hair out of meat. Open the chest cavity by splitting the sternum. You can do this by cutting to one side of the sternum where the ribs can join. With the forward end of the intestinal tract free, work your way to the rear, lifting out internal organs and intestines. Cut only where necessary to free them. Carefully cut the bladder away the carcass so that you do not puncture the bladder (urine can contaminate meat). Pinch the urethra tightly and cut it beyond the point you are pinching. Remove the bladder. From the outside of the carcass, cut a circle around the anus. Pull the anus into the body cavity and out the carcass. Lift or roll the carcass to drain all the blood. Remove the hide, make cuts along the inside of the legs to just above the hoof or paw. Then peel the skin back, using your knife in a slicing motion to cut the membrane between the skin and the meat. Continue this until the entire skin is removed. Most of the entrails are usable. The heart, liver, and kidneys are edible, so we got extra food to our camp."

As he instructed me I did it, the skin is heavy and so are the rest of the entrails. The carcass remained empty and we headed back to the camp.

On our way Jaeger turn to me.

"Even though you made such great deed and got my honest vote, you still have to impress the others. Speak to Shrike, our best fighter. I heard he plans to raid a royal carriage, which contains quite decent amount of Lotem. Ask him if he requires another man, if he refuses, tell him I sent you."

I nod and we continue on our way. We get back to the hunting camp, the hunters stop and Jaeger hands me over the meat.

"Give me the skin you got, the stalker torn your rags, but with this, I can manage to make something for you, just give me few days and the new clothes shall be ready. It is your trophy and proved you're an ok hunter. Therefore I'm doing this for free. Take the meat into the camp and give it to Arnold, our merchant. He'll know what to do with it. He is our cook as well, so you get the point. He sits all day, so you'll know it's him."

"Understood, and thank you."

"Don't mention it, we have to take care of each other, and you sure deserve it."

I head to the camp, getting down the stairs. I see a man sitting down thinking to himself and doing nothing. He is quite tall, with a sharp haircut. He is quite chubby, but he doesn't seem to be an old retired person, who let himself go. I approach him to hand him the food.

He sighs out of tiredness. "Yeeeeessss, what is it?"

"Are you Arnold?"

"Who's asking?"

"One of the hunters, I'm supposed to give you the meat that we gathered."

"Let me see." He goes over the bags I handed him, nodding and mumbling to himself.

"That's even more than I imagined you'd manage to bring, and the unique stuff that you brought...forget it, I don't want to know where you found it. As long it is edible."

"According to Jaeger, it is."

"Good, is there anything else?"

"I'm trying to join the camp and you are one of the influential people in the camp. Do you have any tasks for me?"

"I may have something, but not now, I need to think. Speak to someone else; come back to me some other time."

I nod and head off. My next stop is with Shrike, the fighter. He sits at the campfire with everyone else, the sunset seems to have arrived, and darkness approaches. But it doesn't stop me to talk to him.

"Shrike, I heard you have plans, do you require another man for this?"

"Trying to join the camp after all eh? Why should I pick you instead one of my fighters?"

"Because Jaeger sent me."

"Jaeger you say...Well so you know, it doesn't include hunting creatures and gathering food. We need supplies, and we get it by raiding caravans. There's a caravan passing by the main road to Jedrek tomorrow, seems heavy according to our scouts. You help me with it, and you'll get my vote."

"Seems easy enough, when are we heading off?"

"Right at dawn, so get some rest at the hut, and prepare yourself for the raid...you might as well get new clothes for you look like a beggar like this."

"Jaeger is making me new clothes."

"Good, I hope they will be ready tomorrow then."

I nod and head off to bed. It was a long day, but it was fulfilling and useful, I'm one step closer to join the camp, and I'm not planning to stop now. About the hand I can worry later. Maybe a mage can help me with this situation, but the only mages I heard of are the volunteers and I don't have quite the good reputation with them...especially I killed one of them. I lie on the bed, getting comfortable. The pain on the back seems to pass...that's quite a quick recovery. I close my eyes and sleep off till tomorrow dawn.

## Chapter 4: Shrike

Waking at the next dawn is not so pleasant. The eyes aren't so used to the darkness and waking up so early. Shrike and a small group of people are waiting right outside the door. Shrike grabs me by the shoulder.

"Good you are awake. I thought I'd had to kick your arse up."

"Looks like I saved my arse for now."

He starts laughing and starts to squeeze the shoulder before it starts to hurt.

"You better keep yourself safe, for we must not fail. Now come let us head to the location, unless you want to visit Jaeger and get your cloths...if he finished them."

"Might be best to get the cloths, for it may protect me."

"Be quick about it, we will wait by the entrance."

I run quickly to the hunting camp where Jaeger and Pfeiffer stay. The sun slowly starts to rise, but it is barely seen due to the fact that the large woods are covering the light...most of it. I reach to the hunting camp and Jaeger seems to be awake, and happy to see me.

"Hello! It's good that you came before you head off with Shrike."

"Is it ready?"

"More than ready, I managed to make and light armor out of it, such tough skin. You'd stay a better chance against the royal soldiers out there, or different creatures in general. Come, I'll show you."

We both head to a small wooden chest next to Jaegers' bed. He opens the chest and shows me the armor. A dark skinned armor that covers all the body, fur on the bottom that covers the legs with, and both sleeves. With the remains of the Stalker he added the bones into an esthetic way, mostly one the arms. The gauntlets are made of the bones that go all the way one the left arm. The right arm is covered with fur only, with straps and other tools to make as one. I wear the armor and feel light even though it all looks heavy. I keep the belt on that holds my sword. Jaeger seems to be pleased with his work.

"I have to say, I couldn't believe I would be able to finish it in one day. But I felt so honored to do so, and look now. Such masterpiece, you better wear it well, for I have another gift for you."

"What kind of a gift?"

"Well I can't let you walk away with such great armor, and yet wear ragged pants with those torn boots. I managed to salvage and make you in addition, pants and new pair of boots."

"That's very nice of you."

He hands me over a set of leather boots and pants, both dark as the skin of the armor. I put them on, and it fits like a glove. So comfortable and doesn't disturb the movement.

"There you go, now you look like one fearless warrior and with it a great trophy that you'll carry with you, the skin of the stalker, its own fur and leather, protecting you from future danger. Unfortunately some of its impenetrable values were lost in order to keep it light, so don't think you're an immortal now. Now go, the raiders are awaiting you."

"Thank you."

"Don't mention it."

We wave each other goodbyes and I head off back to the camp entrance. I arrive there and everyone is waiting for me. Shrike with an impressed face greets me back.

"Wow, that's a beautiful armor. Jaeger better tell me how he managed to create such beauty...and where you got such leather and fur."

"You can discuss it with him when we'll be done with our job."

"Right, now follow me everyone. We might still catch the carriage before it gets to our location."

We all head off and follow Shrike. We run quickly, and loudly. He doesn't seem to be worry about us getting caught or getting someone's attention. We reach to the main road surrounded by woods and no sign of any hostile units. Shrike turns to us getting excited to what is about to happen.

"Good, we made it before the caravan. Soon they'll pass by. When that will happen, we will strike them down, killing everyone and then get the Lotem. "

A crazy idea came into my mind, which could spare unnecessary fighting.

"Shrike, can we make fire arrows?"

"Yes, of course, we are shooting them down after all."

"What about getting everything without a single bloodshed?"

"How exactly?"

"They will be caught off guard and will have to make a choice. As far as I know they would prefer their lives over some Lotem."

"You want to leave witnesses? That's ridiculous, next time they would come back with more soldiers."

"That's why you have to prepare as much fire arrows as possible. That way, they would think they are surrounded by an entire army. It will spare your men fighting, and other families out there. Those soldiers could have families and children."

"They don't mind killing us, and taking our souls in order to create those magical protection spells in order to keep themselves safe."

"This is war, people die, but at least try to save your own soldiers today, to fight another day. There are bigger threats out there, and dying because of some Lotem is a waste of time. We could get it quicker and safer my way."

"Fine, but the first moment it doesn't work we will attack. You have to remember you're still not one of us, and you have to remember who is in charge here."

"Being in charge doesn't make you wiser. And as the leader here, you have to care for your fighters."

"You watch your mouth before I'll rip your tongue off."

Suddenly one of the men interrupts us.

"Shrike, the kid got a point. Sometimes it better to avoid brute force and bloodshed. The men agree with his plan. Like you said, if it doesn't work, we'll charge."

"You all decide to listen to him. Fine! I'll go back, you kid take the charge then, nobody listens to me."

Shrike just leaves the location mumbling to himself and kicks one of the woods. The men who interrupted us turn to me.

"You heard him kid, you're in charge now. What you want us to do."

"Prepare as much fire arrows, but don't ignite them just yet. Wait for my signal. Position yourself around the tress to cover every corner, to make them fear. Do it quickly, we wasted enough time already."

He nods and rallies the men to prepare themselves to do as I ordered. After few hours of waiting, we hear horses riding. I yell to the people.

"Get into positions!"

All the men hide behind the trees, unseen by the upcoming caravan. I stayed still on the middle of the road, wearing my unusual armor. I start to see the riders, the royal troops, two horse men at the front and two horsemen at the back and between them a carriage with few chests on it. They notice me just standing there, and start to slow down. I pull out my sword and just look at them. They all stop in front of me. One of them starts to laugh and asks me.

“Out of the way, or we’ll crush you.”

“I have a proposal to you. The lotem belongs to the king, and your life belongs to you. So you may turn around and leave, or you’ll die and we will still take the lotem.”

The horseman starts to laugh again.

“You alone, take out all of us. I want to see you try.”

“You see this armor, this is the skin of a stalker, which I killed by myself.”

“You’re still only one man. You alone cannot take us all.”

“Who said I was alone. MEN!”

Fire arrows ignited from both sides, many arrows, more than enough to scare them.

“What shall it be?”

The horseman looks at me with anger and looks at his people. He closes his eyes, and thinks for few seconds. He raises his hand and yells.

“Retreat!” They all turn around start to ride off, taking the carriage driver as well with them. They left all the goods behind for us to take. I put the sword back and start laughing. The men are leaving their positions and gather around the carriage.

“Nice work men, may this always be that easy.”

“Impressive kid, your trick actually worked. Screw Shrike and his ways. I hope you’ll join us and our leader would make you as the leader of the raiders.”

“You are more familiar with Shrike. I’m just someone who just gave a plan for this specific raid. Next time I might lead you all to your death. Don’t rush with your decisions.”

“Because of Shrike we always lose someone, with you for the first time we all can return safe. Now let us see what we got.”

“Everyone grab the chests and let’s head back.”

They all clear the carriage, and start to head back while I stayed for a bit and observed the carriage even further.

“Are you coming kid?” Says one of the men.

“Go without me, I’ll meet you back home.”

He nods and enters the woods. I keep searching till I stumble on a notebook on the driver’s seat. I open it, several words were written on it. These words are names, quite a strange list. Maybe at the camp someone would know what to do with it. I leave the place back to the camp. Everything seems to be peaceful and quiet. I reach the entrance and Shrike awaits me at the front, angry while everyone is happy and cheerful for bringing the chests over. I enter the camp and Shrike ‘greet’ me.

“You managed to do everything after all, congratulations.”

“What is your problem?”

“The problem is that they decided to remove me as the leader of the raids and put Cedric instead, all because of a kid who managed to make one ‘smart’ plan and lived to tell the tale. You’re nothing compared to me. I won’t forget it. You can forget about my vote, you undisciplined prick.”

“Who’s Cedric?”

“One of the lads who were with us...he is now in command over the raids. You’ll never get my vote, but it no longer matters for you need his vote now.”

“I guess I’ll go and talk to him then.”

“Just so you know, he is no leader, and he will fail soon. When that happens, I’ll become the leader again. And you I shall never forget kid, the one who ruined my reputation. I swear I could send you to the world beyond right now. But then I’ll spare you from the upcoming pain that is expected.”

"Thanks for nothing then."

"I'll look for a day, when I'll have a reason to put my hatchet into your skull. But till then, enjoy your glory kid. It shall not last long."

"Glory is not what I'm seeking, but you wouldn't understand, for your name is what matters to you."

"My name is everything I build. You took it, but I'll get it back. You better go. I don't want to look at your mug anymore."

"As you wish, just tell where Cedric is and I'll be on my way."

"Find him yourself, arsohole."

He walks away, kicking the dirt. Now I need to find out who Cedric is...he is one of the men who raided with us...but which one? The campfire, that's where everyone is assembling while they are resting, he should be one of them. I approach the campfire and one of them calls me over.

"There he is. Our cunning strategist, we couldn't have done it better without you."

I smile with a bit of shyness, for I wasn't expecting such greeting. They all drink with happiness. I approach the man who called me over. He is a red haired with a rough beard, eyes clean as pearls. He wears the uniform of the camp but he is different. He wears a head warp that covers his entire hair, and covers his neck area, light tanned person. He seems to take care of his look quite often, in a matter of cleaning.

"Having a good time?"

"Are you kidding? Total four chests of lotem, that's quite a lot for a simple trade. We usually get less going by Shrikes' plan. You blew our minds back there. Once I told Arlen what happened, and our will to continue with such plans, the raids would become easier. Therefore, Arlen took the advice and dismissed Shrike the bastard and made me the new raiding leader."

Now I recognized the person. He was the man who defended my plan during our fight with Shrike. He wasn't wearing a head warp back then, and a lot dirtier, which is why it was hard to recognize. Apparently that's Cedric according to his words.

"Cedric, right?"

"Indeed, at your service. Now that I'm in charge, I'll make sure our lads will return safely after the raids, and avoid unnecessary bloodshed. Shrike is a fool, using only brute force with no brains. I'm glad we don't work with him anymore, as far as I'm concerned he can go shove his hatchet to his arse."

We both start laughing, but I turned serious a moment afterwards.

"Cedric, now that you're in charge. You should know by now that I wish to join your camp, to become one of you. I need your vote."

"After the trick you pulled today, you impressed me. Thanks to you, I was promoted. You can have my vote anytime. You still have one man left to impress."

"Who?"

"Arnold, he is our merchant, cook, and many other things. He is one tough man, but if you managed to impress me and Jaeger so far. You shouldn't have a problem with him. He usually asks for simple errands, but lately he is being troubled about something. This might be your chance to get his vote."

"I'll think about it, but before this I have to speak to Arlen."

"I hope it is important. He hates to be disturbed for no good reason."

"It is, I think."

"Alright, wait by the entrance, I'll go get him."

He stands up and heads into the cave. I head to the entrance and just sit on the wooden stairs. Few moments later suddenly one man approaches me, with a drunken look and shady face, dark haired with a shape of a hat that covers his ears, mushroom type of hat with a huge mole on his cheek.

"Hey lad, Jaeger wants to see you. It's quite urgent, come with me quickly."

"I'm waiting for Arlen."

"Don't worry, he can wait, it's a question of life and death."

"This better be quick."

"Don't worry, just before the hunting camp. Come with me, it all will clear out soon."

I suspect something is wrong. Why would Jaeger want to speak with me? I don't like where this is going, and I want to give Arlen the notebook that I found. I fear this man won't let me be till I'll come. I don't have much of a choice. I follow this strange man outside the camp. We were getting near the hunting camp till suddenly the man stops.

"What is it?"

"Whoops, I meant Shrike wants to see you, not Jaeger."

He starts laughing and behind the trees Shrike comes out with two other men, with weapons drawn.

"I thought I could live with this, but I cannot. Every thought I have is watching you die. Men kill this kid."

They draw their swords as do I. They are too many for me. I better take them one by one. I barely know how to handle a sword. How can I manage to best trained fighters? It seems I don't have a choice but to kill them, but how? The ugly man pulls a dagger and tries to strike me. I quickly shift my body to the right side, making him slip over and miss. He falls and rolls down for he strikes with no proper stance, he was drunk though. I can't blame him. The others two take more proper stance and try to strike me one by one. With the speed I have I try to parry their attacks. I don't know how to fight correctly therefore, every hit kind of shift my body away making me unbalanced. They all laugh for me lacking the ability to survive this. Now would be a good time for my hand to glow...and do what it did with the stalker. One of the fighters filled himself with confidence that he charged me without a stance swinging like an idiot. I shift my body to the left avoiding his hit, making a side step, with that step I thrust with my sword holding it with my left hand. The thrust enters cleanly under his armpit. I rotate and the cut goes through his body as he continues his mindless steps forward. He still doesn't die, for it cannot be an instant kill. He recovers and charges again with his arm raised, with fury and in more idiotic way. I don't understand. They were handling me well without getting over confidence. Suddenly my head starts to hurt and my hand starts to burn...but unlike the last time I didn't lose control over the body. The fighters still charges and is about to reach me. I feel a relief. I bend my body a bit and take a step to the right using my left leg. At the same time as I make the step I thrust my sword into his chest for he left his body exposed the whole charge. He bends his body due to the pain. I take another step using the right leg and raise my body, rotating into a comfortable position where he is defenseless and pull out the sword as I do so. The fighter seems to be helpless and unable to react. After I pull it out I throw the sword to my right hand and swing it right to his neck with an angle that is given to me. As the cut goes cleanly, he falls down and stops to move. The other fighter seems to be shocked and frightened, for I just killed his friend in front of his eyes. He approaches me carefully and with a safe stance that covers himself. He is afraid to make a move, but he is in fury as well. I trick by swinging a bit and he tries to thrust me. Using my left hand and the gauntlet I hit the sword aside and thrust his throat with my sword, while taking a step with my right leg on the side. I pull the sword out and blood starts to burst out of his mouth, and he slowly falls down. I end his misery by thrusting to the heart while he is down. The drunken fighter charges me from behind thinking he can surprise me, but screaming like while doing so, give it away. I grab his right hand where he holds his dagger and hit him with the handler. Like a puppet he falls down unconscious. I look at Shrike. He is shocked and amazed by the fact I just killed his men. I imagine it's the same thing that happened with the stalker, so I'm not that surprised this time, even though it is still a

mystery. I approach slowly towards Shrike, and he pulls out his Hatchet. As I get close enough he swings it up and down. I manage to parry it and hold it with my sword. He pulls it back and with fear asks.

“What are you, some kind of monster?”

“I don’t know yet.”

He tries to strike me from my left but I grab his hatchet and thrust him through the chest. He lets go off the hatchet and I rotate around Shrike. As I pull out the sword out of his body, I strike his back with his own hatchet. He spreads his arm and back with the hit and falls on his knees. With his last breath he asks.

“...How?” and falls to the side. My whole armor is filled with blood including the face. It was a bloody battle.

These fighters were foolish and unable to coordinate attacks...for they could strike me on the same time making this harder on me. They chose glory, and with it came their downfall and death. Only remains the drunken fighter, who led me to this trap. I put the sword back to the handle that is on my belt. I grab his leg and start to pull him off back to camp. It is strange no one heard the gore and the pain of this fight, I guess he indeed led us far enough to make sure his death would be unknown. Not far back to the camp I see Arlen and Cedric getting up the stairs angry...can’t blame them. That quickly changed as they saw me drag the body and blood over me.

“What is going on?! Why are you bloody and why are you carrying this man...and how did he get our uniform?”

“I was attacked, this man approached me and led me to a trap...It was Shrike.”

“Shrike?! Are you serious? That bastard...if you are here...then it means.”

“Yes, Shrike is dead and so are his companions. He wasn’t working alone.

“Cedric go back to the camp I want to discuss with him privately.”

Cedric nods and leaves us alone.

“The thing is, this man is not one of our people, and the fact he wears our uniform worries me. It means we have spies in this camp, more people that could be one of us, but yet working for someone else...maybe the king, killing us from the inside.”

“Maybe it has a connection to this notebook that I found during our raid. It contains a list of names.”

“Give it to me. Does anyone know about this?”

“Not as far as I know. Only you and I know about this. Do you trust anyone to take care of this situation?”

“I will have to report this to our leader. He will know what to do about this.”

“What will you do with him?”

“When he will wake up, we’ll question him, torture if we must. People like him can endanger the whole camp...with it ruin our freedom. In the meantime, finish your tasks and get the votes. So far you’re doing quite a progress, and nice new armor. Jaeger doesn’t disappoint when it comes to creations. Cedric speaks highly of you. You have quite a cunning behavior and wise approach to situations. The fact that you managed to kill Shrike and his goons, you showed that you can take care of yourself, and you are a good fighters. May not be the best, but you still proved yourself very well. Only get Arnold to support you and we can discuss your joining.”

“Very well, I’ll get onto it.”

“One last thing, when you’re done with it, you have to come straight to me. You have no reason to be with the others.”

“Alright, can I ask you something?”

“You just did.”

“I’m serious...”

“I’m just joking, go ahead.”

"How are Marian and Gorack doing?"

"Gorack is doing fine, nothing special. Marian...I sent her on a mission."

"What kind of mission?"

"It's quite important to keep it quiet for now. Once we will be done with you joining us, then we can discuss about her mission."

"I understand."

"The day is still young, go see Arnold, and I'll go see our leader...you might consider wash yourself first.

There's a bucket of water insider the camp, use one of the towels next to it and clean yourself up."

I nod and we both head back down to the camp. He heads off back to the cave, and I get to clean myself. My armor may not be the shyness anymore, but it may still be affective...the face is still kind of dirty, but it will clean up during time. Now all that remains is to speak to Arnold and get his task. I'm one step closer to join the camp and be part of the freedom fighters.

## Chapter 5: Franco

Without wasting additional time, I approach Arnold at his bench. He sits there all disappointed and angry. I might as well check what is going on with him.

“What do you want?” He asks with a rude tone

“I want to join your camp.”

“And, why should I care?”

“I need the support of influential people around the camp, and you seem to be the right type.”

“It has been a while since I put someone to a task to prove his usefulness. You’re lucky that I have something for you. One of my boys, Franco, was supposed to bring a precious cargo to this camp. You might as well prove your usefulness by tracking him down. If he’s alive, make sure he has the package. If not, that would be a problem. The cargo is very important, and if it cannot be retrieved we will be in big trouble. Can you manage that?”

“Where should I start?”

“If I knew that I wouldn’t have been sitting here. Ask Jaeger, the hunter, or Jakubo our scout and entrance guard.”

“Why didn’t you ask them yourself?”

“Because I already did, and I sent another boy to find him...he hasn’t returned as well. You might be luckier than they are.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll find Franco and deliver you cargo to the camp.”

“Good, no need to waste any more time with me.”

I head off to the hunting camp. Jaeger and Pfeiffer are there preparing hunting tools, sharpening knives and creating new arrows. I approach Jaeger while he handles the arrows. When he notices me he puts them down.

“I heard what happened with Shrike...that’s horrible, couldn’t handle the fact he got replaced. He always was that way. But now he is dead and Cedric took over as the leader of the raids. He can only thank you for it. Personally, Shrike was trouble from the start, but his friends among the high ranks in the camp gave him the privilege to act that way.”

“News spread faster than I thought. Friends among the high ranks, who do you mean?”

“It is not your concern, he is gone now. Why did you come here anyway?”

“Arnold sent me. He wants to find one of his boys, Franco. Do you know where I can look for him?”

“Franco? Arnold came over here not long ago, about him already. I sent one of my boys, Leon, to find him. He has disappeared as well. I’m worried that they both might be dead. If you happen to find him, bring him here as well. Take Jakubo with you. He is usually at the entrance guarding or scouting around.”

“I know Jakubo, he greeted Marian and I when we arrived.”

“He is more familiar with the near areas, he grew here unlike us.”

“Where did you come from, if you don’t mind me asking?”

“Pfeiffer and I come from a different land. The land is called Jedrek. You have no reason to visit there, at least not yet. We might speak about some other time. Right now you have other concerns.”

“You are right. How about I’ll get us a drink and we can sit and talk about the Jedrek when nothing is concerning us.”

Jaeger starts to chuckle and puts his hand on my shoulder.

"I'll remember that, but not at the moment. Pfeiffer and I might travel to Jedrek soon. Who knows, you might go with us and then you'll get me that drink."

"Why are you planning to leave?"

"Something big is happening, and Zaurac isn't a safe place to be in, not anymore."

"Why leave your home in the first place then?"

"We are hunters, we like to travel and seek adventure with the desire to find a good price. The creatures in Zaurac are far more dangerous and unique than in Jedrek. Therefore we have traveled here to seek adventure and get the satisfaction out of it."

"How did you end up in the Freedom Camp then?"

"It's a long story, and you don't have the time for it. Now if you don't mind, Pfeiffer and I prefer to prepare our gear before we head out. We will meet again don't worry."

"It was a pleasure working with you."

"Likewise my friend, may this armor remind you of me, once in a while."

I leave them be, while they prepare their equipment. I head back to the entrance in the words, and looking for Jakubo. There is no sign of him though. Going between the woods and there's only silence. Out of nowhere someone speaks to me.

"You know, walking like this makes you suspicious. What are you doing here?"

I'm looking around and there's no sight of the mysterious man.

"I'm up here."

I look up and there's Jakubo sitting on a thick tree branch relaxing with his crossbow drawn and armed.

"I was looking for you actually."

"Hold this for me for a second."

He drops the crossbow on me, and I catch it with no problem. He drops down while I hold it, quite an athlete and swift. I hand him the crossbow back and step away. We both start walking along the woods while talking.

"Quite a nice armor you got there. Why were you looking for me anyway?"

"I'm working for Arnold. He is looking for his errand boy, Franco."

"I know who you're looking for. Another boy, Leon was looking for him as well. I told him to head to the farm nearby."

"Can you show me where this farm is?"

"Then the camp will be exposed if no one will be watching it. Talk to Arnold to arrange me a replacement and I'll show you the way."

I nod and run back to the camp, and speak to Arnold.

"I need Jakubo help, but for that I need someone to replace his post. Can you arrange it?"

"Of course I can, consider it done. Now go find Franco, you wasted enough time already."

I run back to Jakubo location, where I left him. I didn't waste much time for him to leave the location, and he seems to be ready to accompany me.

"I talked to Arnold, you got your replacement. Now show me the way to the farm."

"Follow me then. One thing you should know, this farm belongs to my uncle. He greets travelers, and Franco should have stayed there for a night before heading here. Leon disappeared too, which means something bad has happened. Good thing you are coming along, I wanted to check there. I hope he is alright."

"Lead the way."

Jakubo leads me to the exit of the woods. The area is a huge open field, with a river splitting the fields. At the sides there are few stone bridges that connect the fields. If looking at the other side of the field, after

the bridge, not very far away, there are few wooden houses. In addition, there are corps growing as well, and few dots that look like humans working there. That must be the farm that Jakubo is talking about. We continue on our way to reach that farm. Jakubo seems to be worried about what he may find there. Although there are people working in the corps fields, so there must be people still alive over there and might know something about Franco, or Leon. We reach the farm and approaching the main house, the other houses seems to be used for storage for they have no doors and you can see the collected corps in them. At the entrance of the house there is a man standing and holds his hands on a handrail that connects itself with supporting poles that holds a small roof to bring shadow to the entrance. As we are about to approach him he leaves and heads to the field, all the workers are gathering around an open area. I look at Jakubo and he lifts his shoulders up.

“We better wait and see what is going on...they seem to ignore us.”

“That wasn’t my uncle. I don’t like the looks of this.”

From the hills there are a few armed men approaching the farm, three of them to be more precise. They all wear a chainmail with a dark armor with a sign of a head on a pike. Quite brutal sign I must say. IN addition, they all wear a mask that covers their face, so there’s no special look between them, pretty much all the same, a dark look with no sign of flesh. They all approach the farm and speak to the man that we saw earlier near the house. We cannot hear them but by the look of it the conversation isn’t going well for the farmers. Why everything has to contain a difficult moments within. Well, at least it will impress them if I’ll succeed, even though I may end up dead in one cave or another. I look at Jakubo.

“Who are they?”

“I don’t know. I’ll go flank them on the side. You might as well approach them and see what the whole fuss is about. If it will go down I’ll shoot them down. Be careful.”

“You too, try not to shoot me though.”

He laughs and heads off. I get closer to the location and everyone starts to notice me. One of the dark people points his finger at me.

“Keep walking stranger, you have no reason to be here unless you want trouble. Now Elijah, bring the protection money or you wish to be replaced?”

Elijah, the man who was standing by the house, that’s his name, a long haired with red fancy clothes. Doesn’t look like any of the simple farmers. He looks like he has lotem0in his pockets. He seems to be frightened though. These men seem to be alarming.

“I can get you the money, just give me two days.”

“We don’t have two days, now or be replaced. You know we did this before.”

“I know, but please, the season was weak and there were no much rain this winter. The crops didn’t grow that much. We weren’t able to sell them. “

“You know Baltimon doesn’t like excuses. We don’t have other choice. You will be replaced them.”

I had a choice, either do nothing or interfere. I need information about Franco though, and he is probably the only one could help me. I have to interfere.

“What is going on here?”

“It is none of your business. This is your last warning. Walk now or remain a corpse in the field.”

“I’m looking for someone. You can give me a location and I’ll leave.”

“Why should I give you information, you are nothing.”

“At least let me talk to this man before you ‘replace’ him?”

“Are you here to cause trouble? You sound like one. Leave before I’ll ask number five and six to take care of you.”

"I'm looking for a man, Franco is his name."

The dark man stays silence for a second. Suddenly without hesitation Elijah screams at me.

"Franco? I know where he is, save us and I'll tell you."

The dark man closes his fist, even though you can't see an expression of his face. You can still assume that he is angry.

"Trouble makes everywhere. Five and Six, take care of them."

Suddenly a bolt is shot hitting on of the goons at the throat piercing pretty well. He slowly falls and chokes on his own blood.

Their leader looks at the direction of where it was shot from. Of course it was Jakubo who took that shot. He points his finger to one of tall rocks.

"Five, take care of the shooter. I'll take care of this one. "

Five pulls out a slightly curved sword and starts running to Jakubos' direction. While I have eyes on five, suddenly I see their leader punching me in the face, striking me down. He pulls his curved sword slowly and behind the mask I can see small eyes.

"People like you always cause trouble. It is better for business to keep you silent. You could have just walked away, and let us do our job. It doesn't make you a hero. It makes you a fool. Well, does it matter now, you'll die, and your friend as well." He finishes pulling his curved sword out and tries to thrust me while I'm on the ground. I punch with the glove the sword to diverge it. With the sound of the metal and the bones hitting each other, the sword gets diverged and makes the man lose his balance. I grab his leg and he falls down next to me. We both get up, but it gives me the time pull out my sword.

"Don't even think about it." Jakubo is standing behind us with his crossbow drawn and ready to shoot.

"Drop your sword and I might keep you alive."

The man takes few steps back so he could look at Jakubo and I. Jakubo starts to aim at him more carefully as he is about to shoot him. He throws his sword down and lifts his hands so we could see them.

"I am neither fool nor hero. You got the upper hand, and I have no other choice but to surrender. You want information, you'll get it. You want location you'll get it, for my life in exchange of course."

"You gave up pretty easily...why should we trust you anyway?"

"Because I know where you friend Franco is."

"Where is he?"

"He is in our hideout, a cave near the mountain. It will take us whole day to get there. I can show you the way, but you'll have to let me go once we are finished."

"Few questions first before we head out. Who are you people?"

"We are the 'Pike Head Company'. Just a group of mercenaries who are trying to make a living, you can see that by our outfit. We control the farms in the areas, this is one of them. I'm just a man who does his job. But if I must die for it, I think I prefer to live than being loyal. Others would do the same."

"Why are you calling yourself by names?"

"It's simpler, and avoids people to get emotional. It helps to forget the past. I'm number thirteen."

"How many of you are out there?"

"Not many, enough to control the whole region, but not enough to control the whole country. You can manage to take care of this and release me from the contract and my duty, if you'll take them by surprise."

"We'll manage. Jakubo tie him up, and let us head out before it'll get too dark."

"Not before he'll tell me what happened to my uncle. He owned this farm."

"He got replaced, which means he is dead."

Jakubo hits him down with his crossbow. "You bastards, he was a good man!"

I rush in before he'll continue hurting him.

"Get yourself together, Jakubo. We will take care of them once we'll reach their hideout. Do not worry."

"Promise me that we will kill them!"

"If we can, we will. Get up thirteen!"

Thirteen gets up and Jakubo ties him up with ropes that he has in his bag. I signal Jakubo to come with to the side and talk privately.

"I have an idea to sneak inside and have a better chance to get them. Let's dress like them, and keep our cloths here in the meantime. The farmers own us anyway, so we can keep it here. We will get inside, they don't show any flesh, and we know the numbers, five and six. They won't see us coming and we can take the all out. What do you say?"

"I like the way you think, I'll change to number five. I left his body by the rock. You go watch over thirteen while I change. Then take number six's cloths and change as well. The blood though, that would be a problem to hide."

"He says their hideout is in a cave, it will be quite dark for them to see this."

Jakubo nods and heads off to change while I watch over our prisoner.

"I have another question for you thirteen."

"Ask away, it's not like I'm going anywhere."

"When you captured Franco, did he carry any special cargo with him?"

"No, he didn't carry anything with him. You better ask him yourself once you're done with it, if you'll come out alive." He starts to laugh as he says so.

Jakubo comes over dressed with their uniform.

"Your turn I'll watch over him."

"Promise you won't kill him."

"We have others to take care for."

Thirteen stands up and starts to nod.

"Impressive, didn't think you were that smart to think about that. You might stand a chance after all."

I take the body that is on the ground since he got shot to the side and change my cloths to his uniform. I change to their uniform with no problems, all quiet and steady at the area. Even the farmers don't seem to act. They have returned to their usual schedule and work. As I finish changing and I notice the owner just standing by his house, just as we first saw him, leaning on the rail. I hold my armor as does Jakubo and we approach Elijah.

"Oh, master, thank you so much! Our farm is in great debt to you. Tell us, what do you wish from us?"

"Take care of our belongings while we will take care of their company. The farms won't be in trouble, no more."

"The farms around the land might find peace finally, and won't fear someone harassing."

"Just take the cloths and stay away from trouble."

We hand over the cloths, and look at each other, Jakubo and I. We nod and head off while thirteen just stands there with his hands tied, but calm. We head of to the mountains. The scenery is so beautiful, the wind blowing and the trees moving so calmly. Everything is so quiet...too quiet.

"Hey, you're hungry?" Jakubo asks me.

"I could use some ground flyer meat right now."

"I packed few chunks. We can set a camp fire before we will continue. You know, to gather our strength."

Thirteen turns to us and lifts his shoulders.

"Will I get one?"

"Of course not, you're a prisoner and far from being our friend." Jakubo answers with a furious voice while waving his arms.

"Don't be too harsh on him. We need his help after all. It is better to keep him strong enough to walk us all the way through. After all, it will take us the whole day to get there."

"You're too kind, too naïve....Fine, I'll give him one piece...but it's the last time you're telling me what to do."

Thirteen starts to laugh.

"Quite a company you have, thank you nevertheless."

"Just keep moving. We are not making a camp just yet."

After walking for few hours, the sunset starts to approach.

"We can stay here and make your campfire. We are very close and you'll need your strength." Says thirteen while spreading his shoulders.

"If you say so, Jakubo go gather woods for the fire."

"What did I tell you few hours ago? You don't tell me what to do. Go fetch them yourself."

I sigh to that respond and roll my eyes. "Fine, I'll go get the wood. Can you at least prepare the meat...please?"

"Alright, at least you asked nicely this time."

I nod and head inside the local woods to gather several tree branches. After few minutes I gathered enough branches and head back. Everything seems to be normal. We gather by the fire and Jakubo cooks the meat. After an hour we ate everything. We are ready to head back as the night is approaching. Everything is getting darker and darker as the time passes by. Suddenly Jakubo lights a torch without saying a word. If looking from afar you can suddenly see a beam of light turning on in the middle of darkness.

"You came ready, didn't you?"

"You have to be prepared for any situation. Most of the time while I'm on my post darkness is my friend but we need our road lighten."

Thirteen just keeps walking up in the hills. We are already by the mountains and we go next to it. He must be seeking the entrance. We reach to what seems to be an entrance but it is blocked by a lot of thick green tree branches and leaves. Thirteen just stands there and waits for few minutes. Jakubo gets impatient.

"What are we waiting for?"

"This is where our paths split, you will go beyond this entrance and I'll go ahead and start a new life. I'm a mercenary not a soldier under oath. I do what is best for me. Be prepared, if they ask where I am. Tell Baltimon that I died or something."

"As you wish, how do we enter though?"

"Take this, stand in front the entrance and whisper: 'Gat, Undezaer, har ein naaman.'"

He hands me a golden handle from a walking stick. On the handle there are strange curves looks like as my tattoo or at least remind me of them, even though I cannot compare the two because every flesh of mine is covered with their uniform.

"Well, take care of yourself."

"After you're done with them, there will be no longer thirteen. Good luck."

"Let's hope we will not meet again."

"I hope so as well, now untie me and I'll be on my way."

I cut the ropes and he runs off. I look at Jakubo and raise the handle. Place it to touch the branches and whisper the words: 'Gat, Undezaer, har ein naaman'. Suddenly the branches start to shrink and get

absorbed into the mountain. That way, the path gets opened and Jakubo and I may enter into their hideout...a cave.

We walk inside, thinking it is just an empty cave it looks like an inner city, so open and even trees are growing inside. As if we have entered a portal into a different world. It is not some filthy cave but actually a living place, few houses made of wood and one central building in front of us as we venture further in. There are few of them on the sides not paying us any attention. We need to find Franco though. It is the main reason why I came here after all. Putting the pike head company out of business is a bonus though. I stop and don't let Jakubo go any further.

"I think we should split up and cover more ground. Once we'll find Franco we can leave."

"I'm not leaving till we are killing everyone here. But we can split out to kill more effectively. I'll take the upper ground and take as much as I can. You might as well search for Franco. You better don't get into trouble."

"Speak for yourself."

We split up, as the cave has so much open space. They even put watchtowers, and stairs to enter these towers. There are four towers spread in total in each corner and they are all connected through bridges. At least Jakubo may be able to navigate from tower to tower and take comfortable position to take them out one by one. I think it is better to search for Franco in the meantime. Might as well check every small house for I fear the main house is where Baltimon lives and where most of his mercenaries are. Go through every house there is no sign of either prison or other people that don't belong to the company. Well it seems no other choice but to enter the main house and see what expects me there. I enter and no one seems to be there, just an empty hall. At the center there's a big armchair and a long desk. On that desk there were several books and a quill next to them. In front the armchair there's an open journal with a list of names on it and numbers next them. Number 1 – Baltimon, Number 2 – Ruben and it goes on and on...Number 11- Leon, that's Jaegers' boy...they are one of them? Number 12 – Elijah...wait what? The farmers are the pike head company? What is that supposed to mean. Number 13 – Franco, are you kidding me? He was in front of me and I didn't get the chance to take him back to the camp. The farmers that took control over the farms, they are all mercenaries. What's the deal with the mercenaries taking the payment by force? Did they see us all coming and made it all an act? It was a trap! I have to get out of here and take Jakubo. I rush outside and suddenly I see four mercenaries with their curved swords drawn. At the center stands a mercenary but with his face exposed. Bald, sharp eyes, pale, clean shaven, clean in general, and very strong build body.

"Who dares to enter my house without my permission? Who are you? State your number!"

"I'm number six, I wanted to check in. I have returned from the farm."

"That's strange, because I was there, and Elijah stated that there were two strangers who killed number five and six. So where is your friend and where is thirteen?"

"Thirteen is dead, and my friend...you'll have to find him first."

"You are no hero, but a fool. You people never learn, in the end your head will be on a pike by the way you act. Unfortunately there's no going out for you...Kill him."

They start rushing and suddenly a bolt is shot hitting one of them down. They all stop rushing and wait for few seconds. They look at Jakubos' direction while he reloads his next bolt.

"Kill the shooter, all of you. I'll take care of this one." Says Baltimon as he draws his curved sword. The others rush to the stairs to kill Jakubo. At least I only have to deal with this one. "What happened to number eleven?" I asked.

“Why do you care? Oh I see, you looked at my journal and saw the names. You know eleven. He is dead, like most of the company. Why you think we go undercover as farmers. The royal troops don’t know where to look or where to hunt us down. And when they try to harass the farmers we protect them and kill them by surprise. Casualties are expected, eleven was one of them. He was a good kid.”

“How can people join such company as yours?”

“Does it matter, people want lotem, and live in peace. We provide it. You won’t get that chance though, and so does your friend.” He starts to rush me and fight. I parry his hit and side step to the side to be out of his sight. I look up for a second to see how Jakubo is doing. He shot successfully another mercenary down. One of them makes it to the top to fight him in close combat. He parries the hit with the crossbow and pulls a dagger and stabs him right at his kidney. The mercenary falls to the side. It gives to Jakubo a chance to reload in the meantime. Only Baltimon is remaining. With another strike I try to parry, but he is swift and manages to punch me in the face. With another strike he push kicks me at the stomach causing me to fall down. As he is about to thrust me a bolt is shot at his right shoulder and Jakubo screams “YEAH!” Baltimon loses his balance and falls a bit down and I raise my sword up making him fall right into it. His heavy body falls on me and the sword pierces further till end of the blade. Baltimon dies after few seconds of breathing and I push his body away while pulling sword out of his body. I look at Jakubo all happy and cheerful but he was careless. The mercenary he stabbed isn’t dead. He gets up and grabs Jakubo from behind by surprise. Even I didn’t have the chance to warn him. There’s nothing I can do about it. They both struggle for few seconds and suddenly the wooden handrail breaks and they both fall down. The height is too high to survive such fall. But it was connected to the walls of the cave. It caused them to slide down the whole way. The rocks were still painful and sliding wasn’t so comfortable. They both make it to the ground separating from each other. With a grunt the mercenary dies. Jakubo on the other hand, starts to struggle to breath. I rush to him to try to help. He starts to spit blood and struggles to be breath.

“Hang in there Jakubo!”

With struggling breath and spits of blood he manages to say few words.

“It was a fun ride. I’m sorry I couldn’t help you...” He dies...with his eyes still open and looking at the emptiness. I try not to cry. He saved my life, and I need to bury his body. I take all the equipment, including his crossbow and put them in our backpack. Moving his body outside, I dig a hole...it is still a night time. I put his body inside, and bury him.

“Thank you...I wouldn’t be here without you.” I leave the burial place, take the backpack and head back to the camp. I need to stop by the farm though. We all look the same so it might be a chance to take vengeance on Elijah who sold us out and maybe Franco may not gone far as well. He doesn’t know who might be behind the mask. Dawn approaches and I reach the farm. Elijah greets me with love.

“Baltimon sent me, the situation is under control.”

“Thank the world beyond and the all mighty father that you took care of the hostiles. We will continue our procedure as usual.”

“I’m glad to hear that, but there’s a little missing detail that Baltimon wanted me to tell you, shall we go in?”

“Sure, come on in.”

We enter the house and I see someone is wearing my armor. A bald headed man with a goatee, paled skin and body shape similar to thirteen...I mean Franco.

“What is it?” Asks me Elijah with joy on his face.

I pull Jakubos’ dagger and stab him straight through his ribs to his heart while ‘hugging’ him.

“He’ll meet you in the world beyond with the rest of you.” I pull out the dagger and he falls down and with shock on his face dies like the dog he is.

“Franco, don’t you think about moving...you traitor! Where is the cargo?!”

“Please, I didn’t mean for this to happen, I had no choice. I kept it in a safe place. Where there are tall rocks there is a buried casket. Take it and bring it to Arnold, that’s what he is looking for. I wanted to bring it, but they had a better deal. Please don’t kill me, you have few choices.”

“We’ll see what you got to offer me.”

“I will give you 100 lotem just for you to look away for few minutes and I’ll disappear forever.”

“You are wearing my armor, the design of Jaeger and the remains of a dead stalker that I killed. I want it back.”

“Of course you can have it. I’ll just wear Elijah cloths and disappear. You can tell everyone I’m dead, nobody will care.”

“You know, Jakubo is dead because of you and Elijah. It was all a trap and you let that happen. What did you plan to do with my armor? Get inside the camp, be a spy or something for the pike head company? I don’t think so. Now I think between two options, you’ll give me the lotem and I might keep you alive while turning you in to the camp and see what justice awaits you.”

“I’m not going back, not without a fight.” He takes a kitchen knife and tries to strike me. He falls down for his reckless attack. I take the dagger and slit his throat. Of course the bastard dies, and I know the location of the casket, the cargo. I strip his body down to change back to my armor and head to the location to dig up the casket. An open wooden casket it appears to be. I open to see what is inside and there appears to be an amulet with a strange symbol on it. Looks like roots of trees rising from the ground in this small circle amulet. The chain that holds the amulet is soft and comfortable as it is made of wool. No more reason to stay in this place anymore. I head back to the camp to deliver the news to Arnold.

## Chapter 6: The Temple

Upon my arrival back to the camp, I go immediately to see Arnold and deliver him the news. He sits on his spot as usual with no joy on his face. When I approach he seems to be disappointed. After all I arrived alone.

“You’re back....did you find Franco?”

“I have, he is dead....Jakubo didn’t make it as well.”

“That’s a shame, he was a good kid. What about the cargo?”

“He had this casket with him, it contains the cargo, the amulet, you wanted me to bring.”

“I’m impressed. You managed to retrieve a lost artifact from the old days before our birth.”

“I hope it was worth it.”

“It was. You got my support in your joining. All you have to do now is to get the approval of the one who is taking care of you...Arlen.”

“Well, let us not waste any more time. Let me see Arlen and we’ll be done with it.”

“Wait here, I’ll call him.”

After some time of waiting for their arrival, Arlen approaches me alone.

“You’re back, and people around the camp speak highly of you. Now that you have the support of the people, you need to take the ‘Test of Freedom’. It will prove that you are loyal to the cause and it will impress me for sure.”

“What you want me to do?”

“Straight to business, I like it. Remember I told you Marian was taking care of a special mission.”

“I do. What about it?”

“Well, there’s something I should tell you. We are working with the volunteers. They are both against the king. It is better to have allies than enemies. They gave us an assignment: few months ago they discovered an ancient temple. Inside that temple there are powerful hidden artifacts and ancient history within. They asked us to excavate the temple and retrieve special artifacts from within.”

“Like the amulet that I retrieved for Arnold.”

“Indeed, it is part of our payment due to our work with them. Arnold was in debt to someone, so that was his way to pay his debt. Anyway, back to the main point. Our excavation team discovered the artifact they wanted us to retrieve, some sort of a mask. I can’t remember the name of it though. But this was their last report, I didn’t hear from the team since then, and I’m worried. I sent Marian with few other fighters to deal with this, but nothing was heard of them. I want you to take Gorack with you and deal with the situation, and as well retrieve the mask. Once you’ll be done with this, I’ll take you to our leader and you will become one of us.”

“Anything I should expect there?”

“According to the last report the diggers started to hear voices inside the walls. I don’t know what they exactly heard, but if it happens to be the reason of their disappearance I would watch my back.”

“Understood, where I can find Gorack?”

“I told him to wait you by the entrance. Now if you’ll manage to bring back Marian as well, I would be grateful...she is my sister after all.”

“I won’t let you down.”

“I’m glad. Now go before it may be too late.”

I head off back to the entrance. Gorack awaits me there, with his battle axe on his back and the uniform of the fighters, with an addition of a metal plate on his arm, from shoulder till the fist.

“Arlen notified me about the situation you ready to head out lad?”

“I am, lead the way Gorack.”

The journey takes place the whole day, going deep into the forest, back to the main road and even beyond. The scenery changes with every few hours. Once you see the great mountains where I came from just yesterday, then seeing a great waterfall right next to the main road. At the sunset we arrive to a strange place. The ground looks like a graveyard, dead plants and no animals nearby, even the smallest bugs. In front of us there’s an ancient temple with an unpleasant look, with stairs leading to an entrance without doors. There are two pillars next to the entrance that holds a sunroof. The pillars are clean and no symbols to describe the place...assuming they could in the first place. The whole general look of the place looks pretty dull even though the size of the temple is about around six – eight humans, both width and height. We enter inside the temple, Gorack and I. We see a group of fighters studying an image on the wall. Marian is among them. On the walls there are carves of images...looks like a history, of whom though? On the image there’s a chair, but no one is seems to sit on it, yet there are humans who are worshipping it. What is it supposed to mean? What kind of civilization lived here and worshiped an empty chair? The chair is for some reason bigger than the size of a human, a lot bigger. It may be a throne. I need to further investigate this temple to maybe understand it. The whole place looks like an empty big hall with over a dozen columns holding the whole place. The ground is stable and clean, even though it all looks ancient. With the corner of Marian’s eye, she notices us. With a smile from ear to ear she runs towards us with arms spread ready to greet.

“What are you doing here? I didn’t think Arlen would send help.”

“Gorack and I are here to help. What is the situation in here?”

“Bad...very bad, we were attacked and were forced to retreat back to the entrance.”

“Attacked? What attacked you?”

“I have no idea. I haven’t seen them in my life. They sound like snakes, but are about the size of a human, their skin is as green as the trees, some of them are colored as the ancient walls here, but they all act the same. They speak our language as well, but with a snake characteristic way of speaking. In addition they don’t walk like us. For some reason they bend their knees and run while crouched. The most terrifying part is their necks...are twisted. I don’t know how they strike for we retreated once we got ambushed. The whole temple is filled with the excavation team bodies and some of our fighters as well. No wonder we didn’t get any reports when they said they heard voices inside the walls. I’m glad you are here now. We can work together and get to the latest artifact. In one of the reports it was said they build a gate to seal the inner part of the temple since they started to hear the voice. Once we are done with this place we will have to seal it to keep the Zaurac safe from those creatures.”

“So what is your plan?”

“In this temple there are two sections: there is the upper section through the entrance from the right. A small group of people can sneak through by taking the stairs and might make through. Most of these creatures are in the lower section. We need a group that would distract them while the small group sneak through. It means we will have to split up. Gorack you’re the muscles of the group, and you led before. Take the fighters and go the lower section of the temple. Both sections in the end lead to one entrance, to the holy hall where most of the artifacts are, and there is the mask as well. Stranger, you and I will sneak through the upper section. We cooperated pretty well during our escape from ‘Magenhild keep’. Just tell me whenever you are ready.”

"Sounds like a plan to me. What do you think Gorack?"

"Here I thought it would be boring today, I'm ready to fight. Just say the word."

"Alright, Marian, lead the way."

"Stay close to me, don't want you to do anything stupid and attract unnecessary attention."

"Don't worry about me."

We head to the right entrance to the upper section. It leads to the roof of the temple. A flat roof, but once we reach them we are not alone. ON the roof there are a couple of dead bodies, diggers and on those diggers there are few of these creatures feasting on their bodies, five of them to be specific. They seem to eat their necks and twisting it at the same time. They notice us and turn to us. Marian forgot to mention their mouths open to the sides and not like humans up and down. In addition, they have teeth on every part of the month.

"Look brotherssss, new ssssstraight neckssss." Says one of the creatures as he points his finger at us.

"Yesss, twissst his neck brother!" Says another of those creatures.

I pull my sword while Marian pulls her daggers. They all start charging while crouched. Suddenly my arm feels to burn again...that is a bad timing for that to happen. But just like during the ambush of Shrike I didn't lose control over the body. My body felt lighter than usual as every time I have this burn effect my body learns something new. One of them gets close to me and I put my left arm on his head as he is about to bite me I cartwheel over his body. As I finish the move I strike the other creature that is right behind him, thrusting him right through his forehead till it goes all the through his body. Their skin is weak and easy to cut through, almost no resistance at all. The creature I jumped over turns to me. Before it gets the chance to finish the turn I cut through its neck and decapitate the head. Another of these bastards tries to strike me from behind. I switch to half sword technique and grab with my left hand the blade. I maneuver quickly to the side to let it miss me. After it misses me I thrust quickly through the chest. After it falls down I hold the body with my foot to let my sword up. Marian on the other hand seems to be more in trouble than I did and doesn't manage to handle these creatures. I rush quickly to help her as the remaining two are jumping all over her. I grab one of them and throw him away and thrust through the other. It falls down soulless. I help Marian to get up, but I did forget about the other one that I threw off. It jumps over me by surprise forcing me to fall on the ground helpless, but Marian with her swiftness strikes the creature as it is about to twist my neck. Marian helps me to get up by grabbing me from behind. Marian with a smile on her face as always quite excited.

"Looks like we are even, where did you learn all those moves?"

"If I knew that I would have told you already."

"How is your arm? Didn't summon any more Creators?"

"No, I don't think so...I hope."

"I'm just messing with you, nice armor I have to say."

"It is a gift from Jaeger."

"That's awesome. Alright, the other side of this roof leads to the main hall. We may help Gorack and the others from the other side and then regroup at the main hall. We can just rush ahead and draw less attention and get the artifact. What do you suggest?"

"Do you think they would survive if we won't help them?"

"They are tough enough to handle them, besides last time we didn't expect for such threat. After I saw how you managed to deal with them, I assume they may do the same as well. I would suggest continuing further in. It would keep most of the heat away from us as they are busy with the group, but if you think we need to help them so be it."

"I thought we agreed to regroup together on the main hall was your plan...but, it may be best to attract less attention and that way we can seal the gates with the distraction still going."

"Alright so it is settled, let us go deeper to the temple."

We enter the other entrance, within the entrance there's a circled stairs that lead downstairs. We reach downstairs and we see a hallway. One way leads back to the main hall where we came from, but the lower section instead. There we hear a fighting going on, I assume Gorack and the others are still taking care of the distraction. On the other side there's another hallway, dirtier and older than the main entrance. Must be discovered only recently and the diggers didn't take care of the cleaning. At this past there's a metallic gate that can seal the entrance to the undiscovered hall. Might keep all the creatures inside when we are done...I hope. Marian and I enter the great hall, but I suddenly step into a pressure plate on the ground. Arrows are shot from the sides of the walls. Marian hears the pressure plate being pressed and jumps over me to dodge the arrows. The arrows fly off all over us while we are one the ground. After few seconds of silence I open my eyes and still notice that Marian is over me...She starts to laugh as always.

"Well, knew it was too easy, temples and their traps."

We get up and cleaning ourselves from the dust.

"You don't say? First those neck twisters, and now traps, why can't there be a place of happiness and relaxing?"

"It wouldn't be fun without excitement. Neck twisters...I like that name, quite fitting to those creatures."

"Once they want to twist your neck and say it without shame, that's the first name that comes in mind."

"Let us hope this is the only trap that may be triggered."

We march further into the temple, watching our steps from unusual pressure plates or ropes that can trigger any other trap. Suddenly we hear more voice...of those neck twisters.

"The Neck Twisters... twist his neck!"

They come crawling from the walls using their hands and legs. And try to jump over us. A battle cry is heard, it is Gorack charging with the other fighters to help us. We destroy all of the threat that is accrued.

"I thought we agreed to meet at the entrance..." Gorack seems to be mad at us for not waiting or helping.

"We got here pretty quickly, didn't want to waste time. You seem to have managed pretty well without our help."

"These creatures were pretty easy to handle, I don't understand what the fuss was all about."

"They are probably better in ambushing than fighting a prepared troop, beside it is more fun to call them neck twisters."

Gorack starts to laugh as the other fighters when Marian finishes talking.

"Neck twisters? That's quite a name, I like it."

"You all better to be careful for there are traps in this part of the temple. Every step can be the last one."

"We will be careful. After all you will lead the way."

Marian nods and we all start marching further into the great hall. There are more images on the wall, more history of the place and the old civilization. Another image that shows a creature bigger than a human standing in front of a crowd, from its belly comes out roots that pierce few smaller humans. There's another image next to it. It shows that the human that got pierced from the root changed his form and became like the creature. What kind of history does it show? What kind of creature does that? As we go further into the temple we reach to a dead end. There's a great wall that in front of it there's another image, the same creature that was shown before stands with its arms spread and looks at us, with the roots spreading around the whole image covering most of the wall from its belly. The creature has a no face, but glowing eyes and two horns on the head. The horns are twisted and go to the sides. One horn is on where should

the forehead and goes to the right. The other horn goes from where the chin should be, and goes down and twists to the left. The horns look like they meant to make a circle even though they are not long enough to complete it. Both horns stop at the location between the eyes or the nose. We all look at the image and don't know what to do, even though it is fascinating to look at. Everyone is clueless on what we should do. "That is strange this wall wasn't here before." Marian points out while investigates the wall.

"What do you mean wasn't here before?" I ask.

"Behind this wall there's the artifact, but since the attack of the neck twisters we weren't in the part of the temple. The neck twisters might have sealed it with this wall. How can we open it though?"

I look around and there's no option to open the wall, looks like we are in a difficult situation to handle. Suddenly I notice something shining in one of the broken holes inside the walls. I go to check it out. I don't know what is inside there but I reach my hand and it feels like a button. I press it and suddenly there is a small earthquake. The great wall starts to open from the center as it is a door. Splitting in half and opening a path for us to enter. The entrance leads to another room, empty and contains nothing but something that looks like an altar. On that altar there's the mask that everyone were talking about. The mask looks exactly as the one on the creature. It is no face, but a mask that was covering the mysterious creature. But the creature was bigger than ordinary human yet the mask is the same size. Gorack, Marian and I look at the mask while the fighters just spread around and watch the area.

Gorack taps me and a shoulder with a pleased voice says:

"Nice work kid, take the mask and let us get out of here."

I grab the mask, and another earthquake happens. I hear whispers coming from the mask, but I choose to ignore them. From that earthquake suddenly blades coming through the walls cutting every single fighter, and from the sand rise more neck twisters. They are different though, unlike the previous ones, they wield strange swords and wear cloths, ancient cloths. Gorack, Marian and I run to the exit to seal the gate. The evolved neck twisters chase after us. Due to the fact they were busier with the other fighters we had a head start. We reach to the metal gate that the excavation team built. There's a lever that controls the gate. Gorack and I rush to close it. With the strength of both Gorack and I we manage to close the gates before the neck twisters manage to break through. After such quick sprint we try to gather our strength back. I hold the mask, and no more whispers were heard.

"Well that one was exciting." Marian points out with joy.

"Yeah, too bad we lost all the fighters inside and all the excavation team as well..." Gorack points out with less joy, while tries to gather his breath back.

"Oh don't you worry, people die every day. We are alive, we can enjoy it."

We all head to the exit of the temple. Everything is so calm, but one difference that the ground doesn't look so dead anymore. Flowers and bushes start to grow as if we brought the place back to life after we took the mask.

"I think I'll go home." Gorack says with sadness.

"What do you mean home?" Marian asks with a worried voice.

"My home, Paradise, I'll travel there, and stay there for a while. We might meet again. I need to be with my people. You go ahead and get your title among the freedom fighters. I...well I will just take a break from the whole war and find peace. This is not a goodbye, but it was nice working with you....both of you."

"It was a pleasure, take care of yourself."

"Let us hope this travel wasn't for nothing. Kid, good luck, may your service would be useful."

"I hope so as well."

Marian with a single tear on her face hugs Gorack farewell. Gorack shakes my hand and heads off to the direction of the great mountains. Marian and I head back to the camp to bring the mask to Arlen. The time is a nighttime, but by the time we reach back to the camp it is a sunrise again. I have to say, I am quite hungry after the whole journey. Might as well eat something from the camp fire, I approach to grab my daily chunk of meat. After a good delicious meal I head to see Arlen, but he is not in the area, might as well speak to the guards of the cave.

"You may not enter, not without permission." Says one of the guards stopping me from taking another step. "I did my 'Test of Freedom' I need to speak to Arlen."

"Arlen said someone like you would come. You may enter, but watch your behavior. Go to the end of the cave, he is with our leader."

I go inside the cave. It doesn't seem as deep as I thought. There is nothing special in there. At the end of the cave there are few book stands, torches lighten, and a long wooden desk with few books on it, a wooden chair and of course several beds. I guess the people inside the cave don't sleep with the other fighters...higher rank require better conditions. There are several people wearing the same uniform as Arlen, must be the same rank as him and someone with more fancy and heavier armor than theirs. Heavy plated armor covering every bit of flesh. The only exposed part is his face. He is bald head man, quite tanned, and a bushy beard. He seems to be not so old, but not so young as well. Arlen notices my approach and greets me with joy.

"You're back, did you retrieve the mask?"

"I have, even though we lost all the excavation team and the fighters you sent."

"What about Marian?"

"She rests at the camp. We had a long night to walk through and a long day to deal with this situation."

"What about Gorack?"

"He left the camp to travel. He may not come back I fear."

"It is a shame. Do you remember the journal with the list of names that you found?"

"What about it?"

"It is a list of people from Paradise. Gorack is among those names...he was a spy."

"He must have known that and disappeared before we managed to catch him."

"Precisely....it may raise a conflict between the freedom fighters and the Paradise. It would be unwise to go to war, but Kaden wants to do so. He hated them so much and Paradise contains a lot of valuable treasures."

"Why are you telling me this?"

"You have passed the 'Test of Freedom' with it. You are welcomed to our troops and can meet our leader. Meet 'Joseph the Swift'. From now on you will have to answer to him, and not to us. Speak to him. He will give you your orange scarf to carry."

"I don't have to wear your uniform?"

"No, the scarf is what symbols us, besides your armor is more effective than ours, and it defines your character. Good luck to you."

"Thank you."

I go to speak to Joseph the Swift when he sits on the wooden chair in front of the desk and writes a letter. For whom he writes, I don't know...and it is not my business to ask.

"You are the one who made so much impression on the whole camp with such short arrival. Impressed the hunters by slaying a stalker, and gathered enough food for the camp to hold us for weeks. Impressed the raiders by showing a cunning tactic and took out the previous leader to a more reasonable leader. You

impressed our merchant by paying his debt. You completed the test of freedom by getting a precious artifact and survived the horrors of the temple. You showed you can take care of yourself and I welcome you to be among us, if you wish of course.”

“I didn’t come so far without the will to join you.”

“Then I welcome you with joy to the freedom fighters. Wear the scarf with honor. Due to your last activities you showed you are more capable than the others for this special task.”

“What do you want me to do?”

“You know why Arlen sent you after the mask right?”

“It is due to your agreement with the ‘volunteers’.”

“Precisely, I want you to head to their city. Where they train their young ones and where most of the sorceresses live. Bring the mask to their leader as he wants it. Give him this sealed letter as well...don’t open it though. Ask for Vanous, their leader. Someone will lead you to him. They are planning something big, and I want you to investigate. Work for them if it requires so...do whatever Vanous ask you to, and if it helps we may find out more what they are planning. We are allies, but I don’t trust their vague plans and their need of this mask. Good luck and may the path be clear to you.”

“How will reach the city?”

“There’s a map under the book on the desk. Our camp is on the center, it will give you a general direction of their camp. I marked it with an X for you.”

“I could use some equipment, or lotem.”

“Talk to Arnold, he will take care of that.”

“Will I go alone?”

“Yes, this is a one man job, and I cannot provide any spare man due to our heavy loses lately. You are the only one I can trust on this one. With the recommendations from the people of the camp, you would do just fine. Is there anything else or you are good.”

“I think I got the general idea, thank you. I will try not to let you down on this one.”

“I’m sure you’ll succeed.”

I head out of the cave and go to see Arnold to grab my equipment. He sits as usual on his bench like nothing has changed.

“Joseph sent me. I’m supposed to get equipment from you.”

“So you’re the one who gets to travel around the land of Zaurac and work personally for Joseph.

Congratulation, I was notified about the equipment. 1000 lotem to buy ingredients, food or any other stuff that will help you to survive, a couple of sharpening stones to keep your blade sharp. After all, you blade starts to look crude, you have to take care of it in order to keep it functional and effective. Last but not least, these are very special equipment, these are potions given to me by the volunteers themselves, and it may save your life. Use them only in urgent need, for I don’t really know what they do...you might as well ask about it in the camp. That’s all, good luck to you.”

“Thank you.”

I head off outside the camp, but first I go to visit Marian to see how she is before I leave.

After a quick farewell to her I head off the camp and by the look of the map I have to head north east, beyond the great lakes and waterfalls of Mira. The city stands on a great lake of Laaben. And the city is called Freyvilikar. That’s where the journey takes me. I don’t know what expects me there, but it may grant me the option to find out more about the marks on my hand and the recent unknown abilities I get for no reason.