

Lost Blades Sample

Chapters 1 and 2

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Dark Waters Publishing

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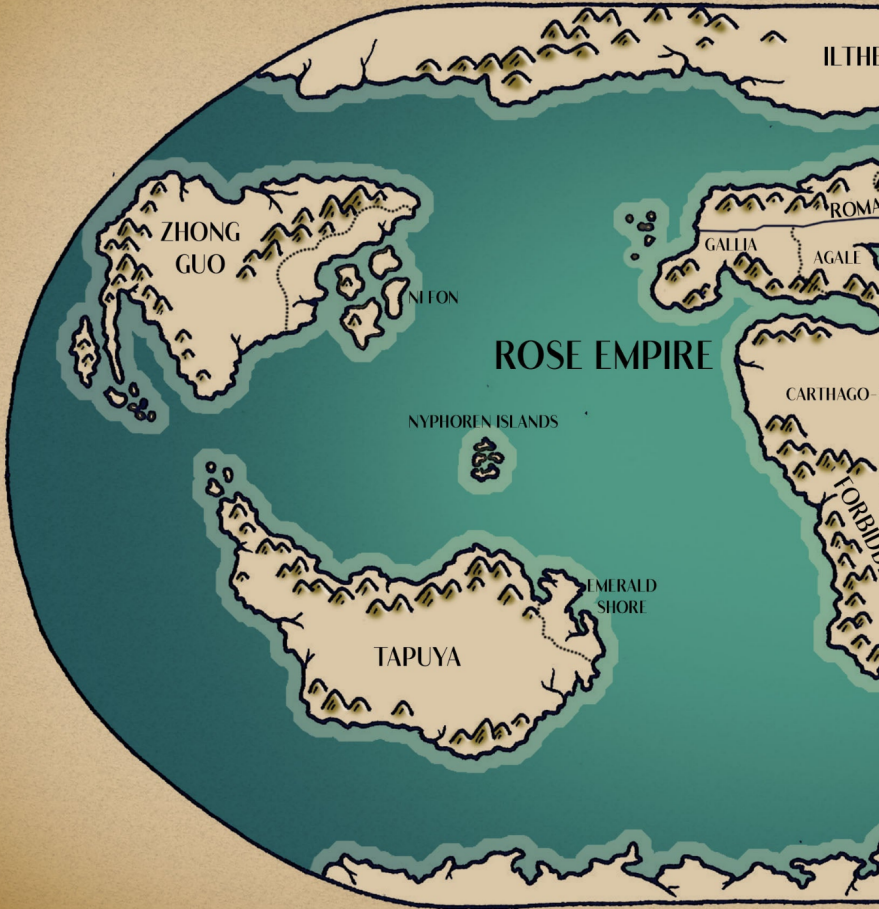
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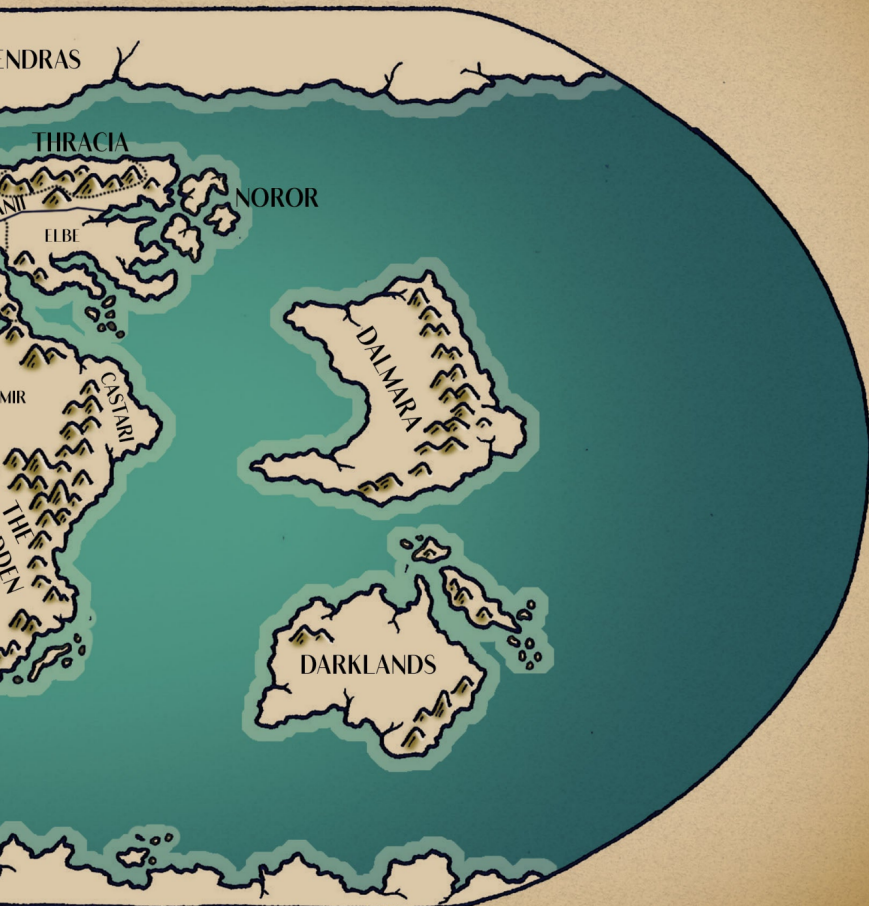


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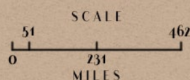
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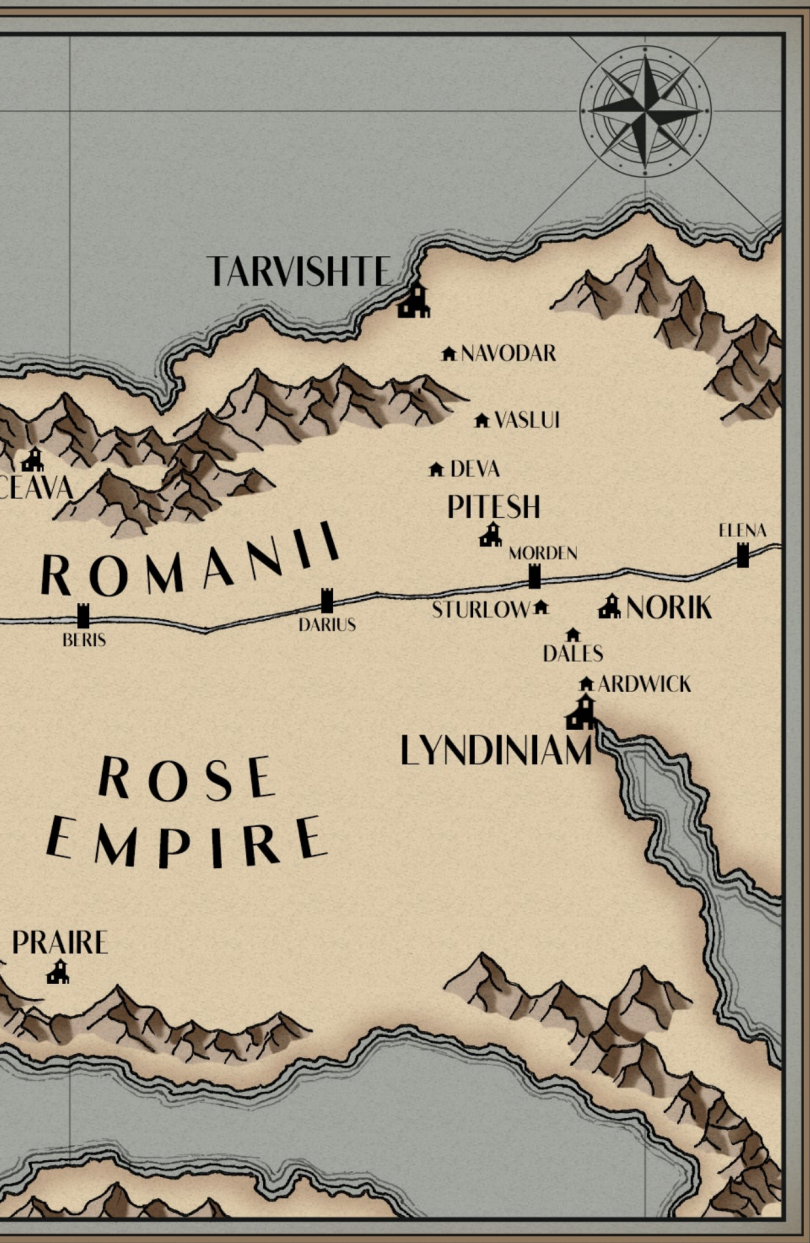
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Chapter One

“Hey! Look at me!”

A voice cut through the surrounding haze where nothing else had. He tried to focus on it.

“Come on. You can do it.”

He was trying, but he couldn't focus on the voice long enough to figure out where the sound was coming from.

“Damn; they hit you pretty badly, huh?”

He couldn't even lift his head from where it rested on his chest, a position he wasn't entirely sure how he had gotten into. He thought he heard a sigh.

“Look at me.”

A musical ring, almost like bells echoing, entered the voice, and he felt compelled to lift his head until he met violet eyes.

“Ah, that's it.”

Immediately his head cleared and most of the pain faded, allowing him to focus on where he was.

He appeared to be in a cage, with dark metal bars and harsh lighting. It was just big enough for him, a small lumpy cot, and a waste disposal unit. The room holding the cage was gray and bare;

it had only one door, with a sophisticated electronic lock, and no windows.

Wonderful. He was in jail.

There were seven other cages in the room, but only the one across from him was occupied. An Avari woman with long white hair tied up in a ponytail and curious violet eyes had somehow hooked her legs through the bars that crossed the top of her cage and was hanging upside-down, long ears twitching happily. Her all-black clothing fit tightly to her body; it looked nothing like any of the local fashions. There were no guards in sight.

Then again, he was in the middle of a security station in the heart of the Empire. Of course they would have only the latest technology to keep lawbreakers in their nice cozy cages. No extra guards were required; every move they made was most likely being monitored and watched carefully for any hint of escape. Probably by more tech programmed to look for such things so no one would have to do such a dull and boring job.

She waved at him.

He stared at the woman blankly, unsure what to make of her. She was looking at him intently, but the effect was somewhat diminished by her position.

She looked ridiculous.

Then she smiled, ears perking up happily as she saw that she had his attention. "Welcome back to the land of the living," she said cheerfully. "It seems like they really don't like you, the way they just threw you in there like a sack of bricks. Are you feeling any better now?"

He ignored her, feeling his own ears drop slightly in annoyance, and brought a hand up to rub his eyes. He was not feeling quite up to speaking yet, and especially not with some weird person hanging upside down in a jail cell.

He felt a sudden spike of panic, and his hand darted down to his ankle. He touched metal and sucked in a breath in relief; his key was still tied there.

The woman seemed to take his movement as an affirmative and began to swing herself from side to side silently for a few minutes as he tried to get the last of his headache to go away. “So... what are you in here for?” she asked finally, interest clear in her voice.

He raised his eyebrows and sighed, shaking his head and letting his gaze sweep over the room again, not that there was much to look at. He didn’t feel up to dealing with eccentric strangers right now. He shivered as a cold draft worked its way by him; his coat was gone. His new, warm, comfy, gray coat. It was probably considered evidence for the stolen chips, he figured glumly. Or they had wanted to make him suffer a little. Either option was a possibility.

He sighed and picked himself up off the floor to sit on the cot. It felt even lumpier than it looked, but it was better than the floor. At least everything was dry and looked clean – that was even an improvement over his normal living arrangements, where filth was practically a method of interior decorating and the weather affected the inside of structures only marginally less than the outside. Even the fabric covering the cot was of a higher quality than he was used to.

“Well?”

He looked over at his chatty neighbor in annoyance, realizing that she was still waiting for an answer. Part of him wondered absently if she just didn't like silence. "Do you really want to know?" His voice was a little rough, but at least it didn't waver or slur. Better than he had hoped for after such a hit to the head. For that matter, he was surprised that his short ponytail was still mostly in place, just a few ruby-colored strands escaping their tie.

Her eyes widened, violet meeting silver, and she nodded earnestly at him.

He sighed again and cast his thoughts back to earlier in the day, before everything had gone to hell.



"Watch it!"

"My apologies, Miss."

The young waiter side-stepped out of the woman's way, barely missing the embroidered hem of her floor-length red gown. He took a moment to steady the drinks on his tray before continuing to thread his way through the crowd of gamblers and eye-candy a little more carefully, pausing every so often to allow one of the patrons to take a full glass or place down an empty one before moving on.

There were many men and women here like the one in the red dress. Only the truly rich and influential were invited to the annual party at the Silver Ring Casino, and the truly rich of the Empire were generally also the truly snobbish. It did not matter that he had not actually made contact with the woman in any way, only that she had

perceived the possibility; that something that was supposed to be a background object had intruded on her personal space and impeded her graceful movements. Or perhaps it had been his dark-red hair that had alarmed her, just a few shades too red to be Human, or the pointed ears that marked him as Avari. He didn't think she'd gotten a good look at his eyes, but the silver definitely would have given him away. Humans were always wary around the Avari these days, and such interactions were common between the two races.

He supposed it was possible that she simply hadn't expected to see an Avari at such a high-class party, but the kitchen had been understaffed for the event. A few Avari had been hired to help the regular Human workers take care of the guests, and he had joined the unfamiliar faces tonight so that he could carry out his plan.

When his tray was filled with empty glasses he made his way back to the kitchen, nodding to the security guard on the way in and ignoring the beep. Dropping the tray on a nearby counter, he quickly moved through the noise and activity until he came to a door in the back. He glanced around to make sure no one was watching as he entered the deserted room where the help changed into the provided uniforms. Approaching the place where he'd left his regular clothing, he pulled a handful of casino chips out from his pocket and hid them with the small stash that he had previously gathered. He made sure they were out of sight again before he returned to the kitchen to pick up another tray of glasses and return to the party.

Casinos such as the Silver Ring still used a chip system on the floor instead of the universal credit system that reigned outside. While credit provided the government with a clear record of purchases

and sales, the chips themselves were untraceable and worth a lot of money – and thus could be sold for untraceable paper cash on the black market. Cash could only be used on the black market, but having the resources to get food for a few months was worth the risk to get it.

And there was risk. Though the chips were untraceable in an attempt to keep them as vintage as possible, the casinos did have security measures in place to keep them within their buildings. All doors leading from the floor had sensors that would beep and flash red if chips passed through them. Guards were stationed next to each sensor, and any offender was quickly escorted back to the exchange terminal.

However, though there was a sensor and a guard next to the door to the kitchen, the rules were a little different for the servers. Since they got tipped for making special trips for guests, the sensor went off nearly every time they went through. The management did not want their employees to waste time exchanging their chips every single time they got tipped, so as long as the sensor didn't flash red on their way through at the end of their shift it was ignored. He was using this to his advantage, carefully relieving the patrons of a few chips here and there and leaving them with his clothing. He was careful to bring a few back with him so the sensor would trigger on his way onto the floor, ensuring the guard wouldn't know he was leaving them in the back. This surprisingly simple plan would allow him to sell the chips on the black market later. He already had a dealer in mind who would more than appreciate the chips and pay him well.

The last few years had been difficult, and he'd been barely scraping by. He just wanted to be able to buy food. He didn't want to have to steal, or to worry about where his next meal was coming from, or if it was even coming at all. All he had to do was put up with a few rich, snobby, bigoted Humans for a few hours.

He had noticed the event two years ago as he had been wandering through the city. He hadn't paid it any mind at the time, but it wasn't long before he began to wonder how hard it would be to steal from the casino guests. They were very wealthy; surely they could stand to lose a little money that would go to a better cause. Over the course of the next few days the idea had kept coming back, until he finally considered looking into it. He began researching both the casino and the event, eventually deciding to observe the next party the casino held and hit the one after that. It had been a lot of work and a long buildup requiring patience and dedication, but now it was all paying off. He could not have hoped for things to be going any more smoothly.

He skillfully weaved through the crowd with his tray, offering drinks as he went. Most of the conversation around him concerned the sentencing of Lady Hotaru's murderer, which was scheduled to happen within the next few days in the Ni Fon province. People seemed pretty split on whether the punishment would be death or banishment. Would the Emperor himself do the sentencing? Lady Hotaru had been the daughter of one of the seven provincial dukes, but Ni Fon was far and the Emperor rarely left the Agale. He had heard a wide variety of stories surrounding the lady's death over the past eight months, and even the Avari found themselves gossiping

about it. He himself did not overly care about the court drama of the Human nobles who ran the Empire, but there were many others who did. He did find it interesting that the killer had been a Human, and Hotaru's fiancé. But at least that made it not an Avari problem.

He had already amassed quite a few chips, and he was planning on making two or three more runs before leaving. He had slowed his intake to decrease the chances of getting caught, and now he was gearing up for the final part of the plan – escape.

“Excuse me?”

He blinked, ears perking up, surprised anyone would directly address him in a non-negative fashion, and turned around to see a blonde Human in a sparkly, skimpy white dress blinking large blue eyes at him. He immediately offered her the tray, thinking that she might simply want a drink, but she didn't so much as glance at it. Her eyes gained a predatory gleam and her smile widened.

Something about that set off an alarm in his head. He suddenly felt very uncomfortable, his ears dropping.

She moved closer, then followed him when he took a hasty step back. “I'm thirsty for something else, lovely. Oh, your eyes! So pretty. Silver is such a lovely color. And it goes so well with your hair! What's your name?” she cooed, reaching out as though to touch him.

He was sure that under other circumstances this would be funny, considering she looked to be about four years younger than him, maybe seventeen or eighteen, but he couldn't find it in himself to be amused. Instead he felt vaguely sick and took another step back. He tried not to think about how Avari often disappeared when they gained these sorts of attentions from Humans. It was illegal, but

such trafficking did occur, especially among the rich. Why was this happening now?

“Umm...”

“Waiter.”

The girl’s smile slipped from her face as she looked at something over his shoulder. He stepped to the side to keep her in his line of sight and immediately saw the issue. A tall Human woman with intricately pinned-up white hair – or was it a pale blonde? She looked too young to have naturally white hair – stood a few feet behind him. Her gown was such a dark green that it was nearly black and had what looked like diamonds sparkling at the edges. A net veil covered the top half of her face, but he could still make out the sharp green eyes pinning him in place. Everything about her screamed power and wealth. “I would like a Turmoi Martini,” she continued, seeing that she had his attention. “Fetch one for me.”

He bowed immediately, hiding his relief as he sensed an escape from the blonde. “Of course, Miss,” he murmured, careful to speak at a proper volume. “It will be a moment.” He started to move away.

But before he was able to take more than a step, the blonde grabbed his arm. “Go find another one,” she snapped, just barely civil. “This one’s busy.”

The pale-haired woman tilted her head ever so slightly to the side, taking in the situation. “Indeed; he is busy getting me my drink. I would appreciate it if you would allow him to do so.” She leveled a pointed gaze at the blonde’s grip on his arm.

“No he is not! I asked for his help, and he was just about to come with me.” She looked at the now petrified thief and managed

a sweet smile. “Were you not?” she asked almost kindly, looking at him hopefully. It was disturbing, and the sick feeling intensified as his stomach dropped.

“This is not an auction or a store for you to shop at, Ms. Kirsin. Do I have to remind you that he works here? He is not here for your entertainment, but to get the rest of us what we ask for.”

The smile disappeared as the blonde snapped her gaze back to the woman. “He’s mine!” she hissed, refusing to give up. “When I tell my father—”

“Yes, let us tell your father,” the pale-haired woman interrupted. “You are making a scene, which I’m sure he will appreciate, and I also think that he’ll be very interested in the Gallian apples, don’t you?”

The woman’s voice was cold as she gazed at the girl, who paled, then flushed, then paled again. She opened her mouth to speak, but nothing came out, leaving her looking rather like a fish searching for food. Her shock was palpable, and he could see it warring with the livid anger on her face.

The woman’s dark-red lips turned up ever so slightly into a smile. “I didn’t think so.”

It was pretty clear to the thief who had won this battle. The blonde managed to pull herself together long enough to shoot a vicious glare at the woman. She snatched her hand away from him, turned on her heel, and stormed away without looking back.

He barely managed to refrain from a sigh of relief. Saved!

But then the woman turned her sharp gaze on him, pinning the thief in place before he could escape to the safety of the kitchen. She surprised him, though, when her gaze softened by a fraction.

“Now would be a good time for you to leave,” she suggested coolly. “That girl is very possessive, and you do not want to end up as one of her playthings. Forget about the drink.” Her gaze lingered on him for just a moment more, then she stepped back into the crowd and was gone almost immediately.

The thief stood there, frozen in shock for several long moments. Saved by a Human! But whatever her reason, she had given sound advice. He didn’t trust the blonde to continue to leave him alone once she noticed that the other woman had left. It was definitely time to go; he had stolen more than enough to last him for quite some time anyway.

He quickly moved off to the side of the room, and after checking to make sure no one was looking, he dropped all the chips he had on him into the massively leafy branches of a convenient potted plant. He then put the last two drinks on his tray onto a nearby end table and headed back towards the kitchen.

When he reached the guard, he stopped. “This was my last trip,” he informed the man, who nodded silently as he passed through the sensor. The light flashed green, and the guard waved him towards the kitchen. He dropped his tray on the nearest counter and headed back to the changing room. Luckily no one else was there, and within a few minutes he had changed back into his normal clothing with his precious cargo stowed in various pockets throughout his coat. He stuffed the uniform in a nearby locker and darted out the

door towards freedom. He smiled as the back door to the Silver Ring closed behind him, leaving him in a side alley.

He had actually done it! He had succeeded in stealing from one of the most prestigious casinos in the entire city of Lyndiniam – no, the entire province of Agale, the very heart of the Empire!

He was going to be rich.

His mood improving considerably from the nauseating encounter with the blonde girl, he strolled out of the alley onto the main street and emerged into the bustling nightlife.

Buildings made of white lester and glass climbed in clean, straight lines all around him. Here in the center of the Empire, everything was made to be sleek, ageless, and modern. Greenery was carefully controlled. The streets were smooth, paved with a modified silvery-gray lester. The casino was the one building that stood out – in another attempt to be more traditional, the giant doors were framed in a dark gray stone, with flourishes and decorations etched into it. Despite the late hour, the streets were crowded with people as they went along to their destinations, talking and laughing to one another as they went. Officers of the City Guard stood at attention at their posts in sharp black-and-gray uniforms, keeping a watchful eye on the populace, ready to act at the first sign of trouble.

It was nothing like the part of the city he hailed from, where Avari had to make do with whatever scraps they could get and crime ran rampant.

The cool autumn wind blew by him as he started down the street. The weather had only just started to change, but it would be cold soon enough. Winter was always difficult when you lived

in buildings that were open to the elements and didn't retain heat, but this year he now had enough money to spend the cold season comfortably. His winter coat was another new thing this year; it was plain, but warm. A good steal. All in all he was looking forward to a good winter.

As he approached the front of the Silver Ring, he could hear what sounded like crying coming from within the building. The giant doors were open, and as he passed by he glanced into the lobby. He blinked in surprise as he saw the blonde girl from earlier with her white dress torn and her hair a mess. She was sobbing as she talked to several guard officers, one of which had a digital pad and stylus in hand and looked to be taking notes. Then she looked past the officer and locked eyes with him.

She screamed, backing up and pointing one damning finger at him.

The thief didn't know what exactly she had told them, but he could bet it wasn't good, and there was absolutely no one who would take an Avari's word over that of a rich, young, female Human. They wouldn't even bother asking questions. He would have no chance.

So he turned and ran.

Straight into two members of the Guard.

Luck was with him; they seemed surprised to have the blonde screaming and pointing in their direction. He dropped and spun, kicking his leg out to sweep the closer officer's legs out from beneath him. In the background, he heard a voice yell "Stop him!" and knew he had no time to get into a brawl. The other officer didn't react

quickly enough, and a strong elbow to the stomach cleared an escape route, but that was when his luck ran out. The other officers had gotten close enough to join the fight, and one flying tackle landed him on the ground with the breath knocked out of him and an officer on top of him. He tried to twist and kick free but couldn't break the officer's grip. Sudden pain blossomed in his head and stars appeared as the officer slammed his head down into the ground, momentarily stunning him. This was all the opportunity the officers needed to subdue him long enough to cuff his hands behind him.

He was roughly hauled up off the ground and slammed against the hood of a nearby guard vehicle. His cheek was pressed against the hard material, and he moved just a little to rest his aching head against the cool surface. He could still hear the girl screaming in the background. "It was him!" she shrieked, over and over again. He wished she would stop as he tried to focus on what was going on around the pounding in his head. He was already being arrested; what more did she want? He felt the officer's hands begin to search him, then freeze when they encountered one of the many pockets full of stolen casino chips.

Not only was Luck no longer helping him, but she seemed to be cheering for the other side as the officer pulled out a handful of black-and-silver chips. The thief heard the officer's sharp intake of breath. Briefly he entertained the idea that the guard would let go of him in shock, but if anything the hold on him tightened. "An assailant and a thief," the guard spat in disgust.

That really didn't seem quite right to him as he tried to fight the disorientation that was steadily getting worse. He hadn't attacked

any... oh. Oh. He should have figured that the blonde bitch would have told them something like that.

“What else did you expect from an Avari?” he heard another officer snort. “It’s not like they know how to behave.”

He reflected in a somewhat detached fashion that he was never going to see the light of day again as he felt himself being manhandled into the vehicle. He was starting to feel increasingly dizzy as he watched the lights of the city pass by in an incomprehensible blur as they drove to one of the security stations located in the city.

By the time they arrived, he had to be pulled from the vehicle and dragged into the building, as the dizziness and disorientation had increased to the point where he had to focus completely on staying awake. If he fell asleep now, he had a feeling he wouldn’t be waking up again. He couldn’t pay any attention to what was going on around him, where he was going, or what was happening to him. Distantly, he felt himself hit a hard surface, which knocked the breath out of him again.

“Hey! Look at me!”



Well, why not?

“I assaulted someone and stole millions from a casino.”

The woman blinked, looking almost confused and a little disappointed as her ears drooped a bit. She eyed him for a moment, then raised an eyebrow skeptically.

He shrugged and decided not to explain any further. “How did you get in here, then?” he asked.

She smiled, ears perking up. “I walked.”

He opened his mouth to clarify, then shut it. He wondered if she was insane, and if he should be questioning his own sanity for expecting a straight answer out of someone who had been hanging upside down for an indeterminate period of time.

“This isn’t the main jail,” he said instead, changing the subject and giving the room another look.

“No, it’s not. You were arrested after admissions closed for the night, so we’re just in Officer HQ Security Station until the morning.” She began to swing herself slightly from side to side again.

Then he realized that his headache was not just better, but gone. Completely. Which was strange, as he was pretty sure that he had had a concussion. His memory was still rather fuzzy, but he could remember seeing violet eyes, and there was only one other person around.

“What did you do?” he asked suddenly, shifting to look at her.

She gave him a puzzled look. “I walked?”

“I had a concussion,” he clarified. “But now I feel a lot better, and that doesn’t seem possible unless you did something. What?”

She smiled and shrugged, which looked odd, given her position. “Oh, that. Magic.”

He stared at her. “Crazy” was sounding like a better and better explanation. “Magic doesn’t exist anymore,” he reminded her slowly, wondering at the same time why he was even bothering.

“Do your concussions often heal themselves?” she asked curiously.

“What? No—”

She cut him off with a happy grin. “Of course not! Concussions don’t do that. So the answer is obviously magic. Unless you have a better explanation?”

He was flabbergasted. Why was magic more likely than a self-healing concussion? He shrugged, groping for a better answer. “New technology?”

She gave him an amused look. “If you say so.”

Silence fell between them for a minute or two. Maybe he had actually guessed right, since she hadn’t tried to argue the point. It certainly made more sense than magic. Still, he wondered what type of tech could fix a concussion from over ten feet away.

“So... what is your name?” she asked suddenly.

He paused. “Jamirh,” he finally offered.

Her eyes narrowed, and for a moment he thought he saw something dark flash in them, but it was gone so quickly he wasn’t sure he had seen it at all. “I did not ask what you are called; I asked what your name is.” Something in her voice changed, echoed.

He stared at her, bemused.

She stared back.

“My name is Jamirh,” he finally said, ears lowering slightly. He didn’t know what she was going on about, but this was ridiculous. He’d answered her; did she have to pry further?

She frowned slightly, her own ears drooping unhappily. “Stronger, this time, but whatever. I suppose you can call me Hel, then.”

She was an all-around strange, annoying, invasive, insane person, and he tried to stop himself, but in the end he had to ask. “What kind of name is Hel?”

She smiled. “A very, very old one. Now, I strongly suggest you try to get some sleep. We have a big day tomorrow.”

“What—”

He was cut off by a dull buzzing sound emanating from the other side of the door as the lights went out, leaving them in total darkness. Not even the emergency lights remained lit.

“Well, would you look at that.” He couldn’t see her, but he just knew from the tone of her voice that she had a feral grin on her face. “It’s tomorrow already!”

Chapter Two

“Well, I’m sorry you didn’t get any sleep, but it’s time to go.” Hel sounded like she could barely contain her glee.

Jamirh was trying very hard to control his temper. “What are you talking about? In case you haven’t noticed, we are locked in metal cages.”

“No we’re not.” He could hear the cheer in her voice. “Try the door.”

“I can’t see the door,” he snapped, rapidly losing ground in his internal battle to stay calm.

A small ball of white light suddenly appeared over one of her hands, illuminating the room. Hel was grinning almost manically as she reached up to grab the bars she was hanging from so she could swing down. The little ball of light stayed where it was, hovering in place. “Can you see now?” she asked smugly as she calmly pushed open the door to her cage. Then she wobbled a bit, putting a hand to her head. “Oh, okay, that feels weird. New feeling. Not good.”

He blinked and winced at the sudden brightness. Then he stared in surprise at the small flare, trying to reconcile it with logic and sense.

Perhaps she was one of those experimental bionics that the government was supposedly producing? He didn't know what the cybernetic implants were and all that they entailed, but it could explain the mental instability if her mind had been unable to cope. It was possible that she had convinced herself that she could do magic if that were the case; he had seen similar delusions in others living on the streets who had suffered traumatizing events.

He stood and walked the two steps to the door and pushed it, watching with some surprise as it opened. "More of your 'magic'?" he asked dryly, deciding to humor her.

She smiled at him. "The light, yes. The general power outage and other problems this building is suffering, no. We had outside help with that." She all but skipped over to the door, but then paused to eye Jamirh, who hadn't moved. "Aren't you coming?" she asked pleasantly. "Surely you don't want to stay arrested?"

Jamirh briefly considered his options. On the one hand, he hadn't been conscious enough to take note of how to get out of the building by himself. Also, if Hel was bionic, as he had begun to suspect, she could prove useful in escape. On the other hand, Hel was clearly unhinged, and that unstable element could land them right back behind bars. Wander around by himself and risk recapture trying to find an exit, or rely on a crazy chick. He was so stuck between a rock and a hard place.

And it was... strange, that the building had lost literally all power. Shouldn't buildings like security stations have a generator or something in the event of a power outage like this? And weren't

emergency lights and systems made to be able to function despite power loss?

“Fine,” he agreed. “But once we’re outside, we go our separate ways.”

Hel grinned triumphantly. “Stay close!” She brought the little light close to her lips as she reached out with her other hand to grab his. The woman hummed a few short, sorrowful notes, and the light flickered and died. “Remember to be quiet or they’ll find us,” she whispered in a sing-song tone as she squeezed his hand. “And don’t let go!”

And then they were moving. Avari needed less light to see than Humans, but they did need some light. He had no idea how Hel planned to find her way in the dark, but after the first few turns were made without crashing into the walls, it was pretty clear that the lack of light was not going to be an issue. He considered as they traveled and decided that night vision was probably a pretty basic artificial enhancement.

But nothing explained what Hel was doing in an overnight cell in Officer HQ.

Suddenly Jamirh tensed as he was yanked to one side and pressed against a wall. A hand covered his mouth, stifling his instinctive grunt of surprise. “Shh,” he heard Hel breathe in his ear. He nodded once to show he understood, and she removed her hand from his mouth as they both waited, listening.

After a moment, he heard the sounds of someone farther down the corridor stumbling around in the dark over the continued buzzing of the alarm, which had been getting louder as they pro-

gressed. Whoever it was did not seem to care about being heard; he was swearing and clearly having a difficult time in the dark.

“Mavin, report!” A sharp voice crackled over a transmitter, easily audible over the droning.

“It’s pitch black down here, Captain. I’m about halfway to the cells. I think,” he added quietly. “Whoever misplaced the glowlights is in for it.”

There was a slight pause, during which Jamirh heard the guard stumble and crash to the floor amid much more cursing. Jamirh could feel the amusement pouring off Hel as she began to quietly inch them away down the hall. “Just make sure the cells are still locked.” The woman’s voice sounded oddly strained. “Out.”

“This is ridiculous,” Mavin snarled as they got farther away. “Where would he go?”

Where indeed, Jamirh thought as they moved away.

Soon they could no longer hear the unfortunate officer and were back to their original speed. Hel led him down several more hallways before a turn revealed a little pinprick of blue light indicating active tech of some sort a few feet away, barely revealing the fuzzy outline of a door. The lock was still active. Hel stopped short, allowing Jamirh to catch a glance at her face and the puzzled expression on it. Suddenly her eyes narrowed as she strode forward to the door, steps just shy of stomps, and made several short, angry clicking sounds.

The light cheerfully ignored her.

Hel dropped to one knee so she was eye level with the light, still gripping his hand. Her hiss had just as little effect as the clicks, and her expression turned just short of livid. Jamirh had just enough

time to wonder what she thought she was doing before she abruptly stood and dragged him several paces away from the door.

The sound she made then was nothing like the clicks or the hiss. It was somewhere between a roar and a shriek. It was loud and piercing, and Jamirh swore at her as he tried to jerk away to cover his ears. Three things then happened all at the same time.

The door exploded.

All the lights came back on.

Alarms started to scream through the building.

Jamirh felt partially deafened by the echo of the sound ringing in his ears as Hel looked at him sheepishly, her ears lowered slightly in embarrassment.

“This may be time for speed rather than stealth. They’ll have probably heard that and be on their way,” she offered.

He gaped at her, his ears practically flattening in rage. “The whole *city* probably heard that! And now they have power!”

She paused for a moment, considering. “I don’t think I had anything to do with the power, and I do doubt that anyone outside the building heard me. Can we go now?” The question was hopeful as her ears perked up again.

He stared at her.

“Good!” She began to pull him down the hallway. “This way!”

He reluctantly followed, having huge misgivings about going with her, but not having a choice in the matter. He consoled himself with the thought that they would be separating soon, whether or not they actually escaped.

They began to run, but as they spun around a corner chaos ensued as they crashed into a very surprised squad of officers who had been running in their direction. Shouts erupted all around. Jamirh slammed hard into one of them, then felt his arm scream in pain as Hel continued moving without releasing the vice-like grip on it. He stumbled after her as best he could through the confused tangle, breaking into a run when they somehow reached the other side. He could hear the officers shouting for backup on transmitters as they dashed away.

They slid around another corner and burst through a door into the main lobby. Both officers and civilians were ignored as Jamirh and Hel jumped over a nearby desk, heading for the double glass doors. Suddenly Hel pulled him sharply to the left and down, just before Jamirh heard shots ring out behind them. The little light to the right of the doors blinked from green to blue.

Jamirh cringed, realizing that they were going to slam into reactive glass, but their momentum carried them through the first set before the chemical process could begin. Unfortunately, the second set was already turning from clear glass to a dull gray metal. Jamirh tried to stop, but Hel made that awful shrieking sound once more and pulled them through the resulting shards of what had been the door.

Freedom!

Hel paused, and Jamirh used the hesitation to break free from her grip before sprinting to the right through startled citizens and darting into the first alley he came across. He vaulted over a low wall and dashed across the next street and into another alley. Quickly scrambling up a pile of boxes leaning against the building to the roof,

he glanced behind him – no Hel. Pursuit did not sound far behind, and he could see officers in the street below, but they did not seem to have noticed him ascend to the roofs and were pushing their way through the crowded street.

Strange. He hadn't thought it would be that easy. Why hadn't they seen him enter the alley? They hadn't been that far behind. Perhaps they had followed Hel?

He decided he wouldn't look a gift horse in the mouth.

He crossed several roofs before dropping into yet another alley. He entered the adjoining street at a brisk walk and was instantly hidden in the crowd, just one more in a sea of faces.

He shivered in the crisp air, again mourning the loss of his coat. He swiped a steaming hot beverage off a café table as he passed, its previous owner too busy digging around in her purse to notice. He took a sip: coffee, black. Acceptable, though he would have preferred it a little sweeter. Well, a lot sweeter, but this was fine. He savored the warmth as he made his way back to the Blackfields district.

Here, the buildings were far, far older, and made of stone, brick, and steel instead of the safer and more uniform lester. Often they were falling apart due to their great age. The only thing that kept them standing was that the government didn't have the money or time to tear them down and replace them with new buildings for "legitimate homes and businesses". This made them perfect for the "illegitimate" homes and businesses of the dregs of society, the vast majority of which were Avari. Whores, drug dealers, assassins, and thieves like himself all lived and worked in this neglected section of Lyndiniam, the smear on the jewel of the Empire. It was one of the

few areas in the entire city where most Avari could afford to live, but everyone knew the government would wipe it out if they could. At least his ruby-colored hair and silver eyes actually blended in more here.

A group of four Avari were lurking near the entrance to one of the more central squares in this section of Blackfields. An Avari with dark-blue hair and green eyes whistled as Jamirh passed, elbowing one of his friends. “Hey, look who it is! How’s it go—”

“Shut up,” Jamirh snapped, not in the mood to deal with their bullshit. He knew where this was going. He continued walking, avoiding the square itself.

“Aw, come on,” another Avari laughed. “Surely, the great—”

“Nope,” Jamirh cut her off. “Go find someone else’s night to ruin.” Gods, but he missed Aether. He’d always known how to stop the badgering, had known when Jamirh just could not deal with it.

He heard their laughter fade into the distance as he continued home. He refused to let himself dwell on it as he walked through the crumbling streets. Some of the houses on the edges of the district were still structurally sound, and some were even kind of nice and well-kept, even if they were small and simple. But as Jamirh traveled deeper into Blackfields, the buildings became less sound, more decrepit. The lighting was hit or miss, but Jamirh had grown up here, and he knew his way around even in the dark. Some Avari called out to him as he passed, but he just answered with a wave and kept going. He continued through dim and narrow streets, avoiding trash, debris, and the occasional grasping hand. He wanted to collapse.

He turned down another alley, hopping the wall of almost-filled trashcans in the way and dropping the now-empty coffee cup into one. Carefully picking his way to the back of the alley and avoiding the few traps he'd set up, he shifted the large, heavy board that covered the entrance to his little hole-in-the-wall home and slipped inside. He replaced the board and took two steps to the rope ladder hanging from a hole in the ceiling. He climbed up with the ease of long practice and pulled the ladder up behind him before sealing it up with another board. He turned on the glow lamp, glancing around to make sure everything was as it should be.

The room was small and cramped, but mostly weatherproofed with the help of a number of blankets and boards Jamirh had acquired since finding this place. A pile of blankets made up his bed in one corner, and he had a small, cracked table and wobbly chair in the other. Three beat-up paperbacks lay in a neat pile on the table, a recent find he'd been very excited to stumble across. He didn't dare keep food in here, but there were a few bottles of water stashed under the table. A few other personal items and clothes were scattered about. The space was as clean as he could manage, but stains and dirt were visible on every surface.

Home.

He flopped down on his bed, taking a moment to relish the feeling of no longer being vertical and the slightly scratchy feel of his blankets. Then he reached down and untied his key from around his ankle, rubbing the worn, smooth metal between his fingers. The familiar action was soothing, and he turned the glow lamp off. He

closed his eyes, feeling the cord the key hung on drape across his knuckles.

Then he slammed his fist down on the bed next to him. “Damn it,” he snarled. “Damn it, damn it, damn it!” He felt sick to his stomach. Everything about tonight had turned out terribly. He was now in a worse spot than where he had started. He had lost the chips and his new coat, wasting nearly two years of planning. This winter would be just as difficult as the last few. Maybe even more difficult; he had just escaped prison. Would they come looking for him?

“Hey, it’s not that bad!”

He startled, eyes snapping open at the sound of the familiar voice to see Hel looking down at him, her white hair giving her away even in the dark room.

“Holy— How the *hell* did you get in here?” He clutched the key tightly as he flung himself away from her, back pressing against the wall as his heart hammered in his chest. The worn metal pressed into his palm, grounding him.

If she was bothered by his reaction, she didn’t show it, calmly turning the glow lamp back on. “I followed you,” she admitted easily from where she knelt next to the bed.

“Why?!” he all but wailed, pressing his fist to his chest, trying to calm his heartbeat. “How?”

She blinked, taken aback. “I... I wanted to help you? Look, maybe just take a minute to breathe, okay? I’m sorry I scared you. I swear I didn’t mean to.” Her ears sank. “I forget, sometimes...” She trailed off.

He sucked in a couple of breaths before glaring at her with all the venom he could muster. “Why?” he repeated.

“Well, you helped me escape.”

There was no way she’d needed him for that. But still. “No; why would I need your help?”

She shrugged. “Just because? Also, that girl you supposedly attacked has put up quite a fuss. While I was enjoying the hospitality of the nice officers currently searching for us, they were discussing how her father has proclaimed that he will not rest until justice has been served.”

“So?” He raised an eyebrow, but his stomach sank. Her words echoed the direction his thoughts had been going right before she’d scared the living daylights out of him. He rubbed at his key again.

“Well, he’s sort of a very powerful noble with the time, money, and connections to ensure that you are eventually tracked down.”

“Who—”

“The Duke of Agale, Stefan Belian.”

Jamirh paled. “Shit.” His night just kept getting worse. It figured that he would piss off one of the most important and powerful men in the country. Duke Belian governed the province of Agale, the wealthiest and most important province in the Empire, as it was the original country that the Empire had been born from. As the duke of that province, Belian would have everything and anything he needed to hunt down one escaped Avari prisoner.

Jamirh was also very lucky, however. Though he hadn’t recognized her first name, both Kirsin Belian and her father were rumored to be cruel and sadistic to any Avari unlucky enough to fall into their

clutches. With a shudder, he steered his thoughts away from what he had escaped earlier that night when the pale woman had saved him from Kirsin. Still...

“Why did you follow me, then? Seems to me it would be better to get away,” he pointed out, slowly uncurling from his defensive position.

She shrugged. “I try not to abandon the unjustly accused. Also, like I said before, I can help you.”

“Why?” he asked bitterly. “How? There won’t be anywhere safe for me in the whole Empire.”

Hel nodded. “Exactly. So you should leave the Empire.”

Jamirh stared at her. “Are you crazy? Leave the Empire? And go where, exactly? Somehow book passage off this continent when they control all the ports?”

“Well, you wouldn’t need to leave the continent, per se. Technically the true northern boundary of the Empire is the Warcross Wall,” she corrected.

He wondered just how deep her mental instability ran. “You’re suggesting I live in a desolate wasteland? There’s nothing north of the Wall. Nothing alive, anyway.”

“Wrong.” She grinned. “Though that mindset does work to our advantage.” She sat back on her heels. “In reality, there is an entire country north of the Wall. One that the Empire can’t assimilate, so you’ll be safe. I have family up there. There are some of our people down here who help people in danger cross the Wall.” She paused, considering. “You definitely qualify, if you were wondering.”

Clearly, the instability ran very deep. “How can the Empire – a government that controls nearly all of the world’s population – have missed an entire country that shares one of their borders?”

She smiled, not unkindly. “Oh, they know about it, at the highest levels. It’s just that it’s easier to pretend it doesn’t exist, since they can’t interact with it. And as for how Romanii keeps itself separate, the answer is, of course, magic.”

Jamirh opened his mouth to reply, stopped, and shut it again. He took a deep breath and counted to ten. Then he counted to ten again, and continued on to twenty for good measure. Why was he prolonging this conversation? Oh, right. Because she was in his home. Somehow. “The Empire built the Wall to keep the plague that wiped out the Gini from traveling south and wiping out the Humans and Avari. Though I suppose there was the added benefit of keeping the remaining Vampires out.”

She blinked. “Where did you hear that?”

“School.”

“You went to school?” She looked surprised.

“It’s mandatory for all children ages five to fifteen to attend school in the mornings.” He winced at the memory. “The Empire wants to be able to say that everyone has at least basic schooling, so the public schools are all free.”

“Well, yes, but you actually went?”

“Free breakfast.”

“Fascinating.” She thought about that for a moment. “We didn’t know about the free food. But I guess it’s too much to ask that they

would actually teach you real history and feed you. I suppose we should just be thankful that they teach reading and writing.”

Taken aback, Jamirh stared at her. “What does that mean?”

“One, the Gini have not been wiped out by a plague, nor has that ever even been a worry. Two, a wall is a bad choice of barrier when the Gini are concerned, considering they have six wings and can fly. They just don’t want anything to do with the Empire. And three, the Empire did not build the Wall. The short version is that when Romanii saw how the Empire was consuming everything around it, nine of their mages offered their lives to their mother-goddess, and She shaped their power into the Wall. That’s what keeps Romanii safe and hidden from prying eyes.” She shrugged. “More or less, anyway.”

“You are not a Gini,” he stated flatly.

Hel laughed. “No, no! The Gini live in the mountains. Romanii is between them and the Wall. Well, kind of around them, actually.”

Jamirh shook his head. “You are so crazy.”

“Well, you don’t know me,” she agreed. “But your choices right now are either to wait to become a Human’s plaything, or trust the crazy lady and maybe have a chance of getting out of this in one piece.” She looked around at the room. “They’ll find this place, eventually. There’s nowhere in Lyndiniam that will be safe.”

He didn’t respond, knowing and hating the fact that she was right. But... this was all he had ever known. Leave? How could he?

How could he not?

“I’m sorry,” she said quietly. “I know I ask a lot from you. But you aren’t safe here. And no one here is safe while you remain.”

That point was unfortunately good; the police wouldn't hesitate to ransack Avari areas if they felt like they had a good enough reason. Raids did happen in Blackfields.

He considered her. It was still far more likely that she was a rogue bionic with a dangerous mental instability than a... something from an invisible country. That idea was ridiculous. But where did that leave him? Was it better to follow her than not, if only because he had seen that she had abilities that could come in handy later?

Then again, that could work to his advantage. If she put all her abilities towards getting him out of the Empire, did it really matter where they went, or what she thought about where they were going, or why she was doing it? As long as he was safely away, who cared that she had created a whole country and alternate history in her mind? Once he was out of Belian's reach, he could figure out what he was going to do from there. He just had to find a way to avoid the danger of her delusions.

But that meant leaving his home. His fist tightened around the key.

He could become a hermit. Actually, that was looking like a really good idea right about now. Though if Hel's insanity was catching he was going to be a crazy hermit.

That was still preferable to being dead. Or worse.

He thought back to the other Avari he had passed on the way back. Without Aether to be a buffer, the callouts and harassment had been getting worse. Maybe he should leave. Start over again somewhere else. It would be hard, sure, but would it be any worse than where he was now?

“Jamirh?”

Yeah, that was what he wanted. He closed his eyes, hugging the key tightly to his chest for a moment before pulling the cord over his head. He slid the key under his shirt to rest against his chest. He glanced around regretfully, but he really didn't have anything else worth taking. He'd lost everything he might've wanted two years ago.

“All right,” he agreed. “Let's go.”

Her face lit up as her ears twitched happily.

He glanced at the still-covered hole to the exit. “How did you get in here, though?”

She followed his gaze and shrugged. “Magic.”

“How convenient.” He frowned, but then he decided this was also some sort of bionic enhancement, even if he didn't understand what it could even be.

They descended quickly, and Jamirh disabled the traps just outside. Someone else would find this place, and maybe they'd be better off for it.

“Hmm... this way!” Hel declared, and off they went.

They passed through the decrepit streets of his home quietly, avoiding people wherever possible. It was late enough now that most people were hidden away in their homes, or what passed for them. As they passed through an old market square, one that he normally would have avoided, Hel stopped to look at a pile of stones on the ground. “Is this marble?” she asked, poking at it with her foot.

Jamirh shrugged. “The old palace used to be somewhere around here, I think. From when the Empire was still called the Rose Empire.”

Hel frowned. “Didn’t there used to be some very impressive statues of Ebryn Stormlight nearby?” Her eyes travelled to an old plinth that had been shoved off to the side, engraved words made illegible by weather and age.

He shrugged again, looking away. “I have no idea. For all I know you’re looking at one right now.” He waved a hand at the stones at her feet. “Why would you want to see a statue of him, anyway?” he asked bitterly.

She looked at him, confused. “Because he was the Hero.”

“The Hero,” he spat, “who brought the Empire to power so that Avari could become second-class citizens.”

Hel favored him with a dry look. “He was Avari. The queen he served was Avari. The Empire was still ruled by Avari several hundred years after his death.”

“Without him the Empire would not have existed and Avari would be free from Humans. Everything we suffer is because of him,” he snapped back.

Hel’s look turned troubled. “That’s not necessarily true. Is that something you learned in school?”

Jamirh snorted. “Nope. Personal opinion.”

“But then—”

He was getting fed up with the whole conversation. “It’s obvious that—”

Sirens suddenly split the air, cutting Jamirh off and sounding an awful lot closer than he was perfectly comfortable with.

Shit. They had locked down the city.

“At the very least, I would suggest getting out of Lyndiniam,” Hel offered. “Soon.”

“Fine,” he snapped again. “Every road in and out of the city is blocked off by now, so how are we going to do that?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know.”

Jamirh couldn’t stop himself from gaping at her. “You don’t know? How were you planning on getting out in the first place?”

“I didn’t exactly have an escape plan,” she admitted, giving him a lopsided grin.

Jamirh took a deep breath to keep from strangling her. Then he had an idea. “This way!”

He took off at a run, Hel sprinting after him. He led her deeper into the maze of Blackfields. As they ran, he noticed that the few inhabitants who had been out were now nowhere to be seen, having already fled for safer places. As they wound through the streets, Jamirh tried to pick routes that would lead them farther from the alarms. Finally they came to a small building that was partially caved in with two gaping holes in its walls. Hel followed him closely as he moved to a small grate near the back.

“They haven’t filled in the old sewer system yet?” Hel asked curiously, ears twitching.

“They tried,” Jamirh replied, kneeling down to start work on the grate. “Most of the tunnels are filled in, but a few were overlooked.”

He wrenched the grate off and then turned to Hel. "It'll be a tight fit."

She nodded. "Let's go."

He motioned for her to go first. "It's a bit of a drop, and you'll need to angle a bit to the right to land on the ledge," he warned, sweeping his eyes out over the street. The sirens were getting closer. He waited a moment for her to squeeze herself through and drop to the ledge before beginning the process himself, holding on to the grate. As he fell through, the grate caught back in its original position, and he swung himself over to the ledge. He carefully felt around for the electric glow he had hidden here previously and switched it on to see Hel just a few feet away, shielding her eyes from the sudden brightness. He held his finger to his lips to indicate silence, then grabbed her wrist as he shut off the glow and started to head down the sewer. He had noted before that both light and sound carried in these tunnels, and he had no wish to be found.

They walked for several hours, Jamirh turning on the glow every so often to check where they were. Every once in a while they could hear the sounds of sirens from up above echoing through the tunnels, but that was the only sign of pursuit. They moved silently and quickly until they started to see pale but natural light filtering in from a turn up ahead. They hurried towards it and rounded the bend, immediately seeing the large opening to the outside blocked off by thick, vertical iron bars. He realized it was just before dawn.

Jamirh pulled on the bars, but though they were rusted they were firmly embedded in the old concrete and did not budge. "Can you screech at them?" he asked Hel, who had stopped a few feet back.

“Not if I want to avoid coughing up blood for the next week or so. I’m pushing it doing it twice in one day. But don’t worry, we won’t need that.” She stared at the bars for a few moments before gesturing one hand in a small circle just in front of the iron. Violet light followed, forming some sort of complicated circular symbol as she touched the bars carefully. The light from the symbol shattered into bright motes of glitter-like light, which disappeared when they touched the bars. Hel stared at it critically for another moment before turning to Jamirh. “Kick it really, really hard, please.”

He shook his head, trying to figure out if whatever she had just done was the same as the light from the cell or something different. “I’d rather not break my foot if it’s all the same to you.”

She smiled. “You won’t, I promise.”

He thought about it, but only for a moment. A breeze drifted into the tunnel, causing the leaves to rustle invitingly on the other side of the bars. He had never much thought about what was beyond Lyndiniam, but suddenly he wanted nothing more than to find out. He placed a hand over his key. Maybe it was time.

His foot slammed through the metal as though it were made of brittle glass. Hel eyed the destruction approvingly as she began to move the foliage aside.

“What did you do to the bars?” Jamirh asked in confusion. He had not truly expected anything to happen; he had kicked out more on a whim than anything else.

She hesitated. “It’s hard to explain. The metal was already old, past its intended period of use. It was rusted and not maintained. It probably would have fallen apart on its own in about fifty years or

so. Inevitable, really. So I sort of hastened the inevitable by removing what life remained in the metal, which made it brittle. So it was like you kicked metal that was much, much older than it actually was. Does that make sense?”

He just sighed. Back to the magic delusions. “Metal doesn’t have life.”

The look she gave him was almost affronted. “Of course it does. Everything has life of some sort.”

He shook his head. “Metal is metal. It doesn’t think, it doesn’t live. Though just out of curiosity, when you say ‘magic’, do you actually mean ‘very sophisticated tech that I don’t want to explain to you because you won’t understand’?”

Hel cocked her head to the side. “Magic is magic, tech is tech. I can’t work tech. It tends to end badly. Sort of like that first door we ran into in the security station.” She shuddered. “Yeah... let’s never mention that again, actually.”

What was wrong with this woman? She actually seemed to believe this. He still didn’t. He just shrugged, giving up. “Fine, whatever.”

Hel smiled a little sadly at him and turned away. “We should get moving, we have a lot of ground to cover in a short period of time.” She grinned back at him wryly. “And I can’t wait to see how you handle Romanii.”