

The Raven's Endgame
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Jeroen Steenbeeke

*For Emile and Margje. For all your care, and for
encouraging me to read*

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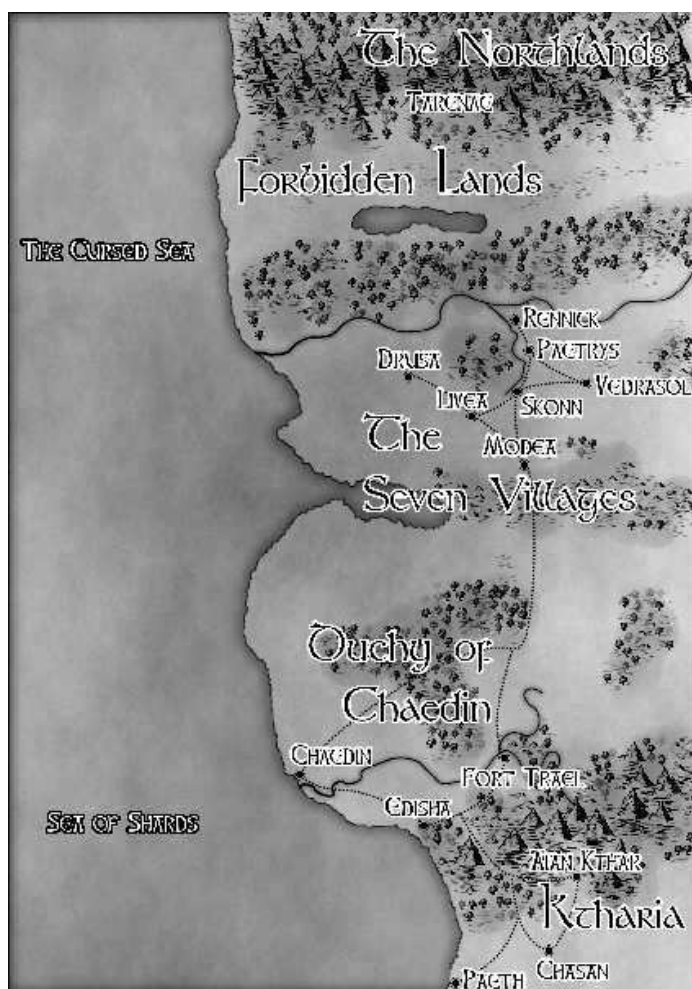
Writing a book is hard enough, but getting it ready for publication is harder still. I could not have pulled it off without the help of others, and I would like to take a moment to thank them.

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CHAPTER 1

MELODY

Waking to the flapping of birds' wings, it took her several moments to shake the illusion that she was still lying in a soft bed somewhere, but the reality of the hard ground underneath her was undeniable. The air felt warm and oppressive. She took a moment to study her surroundings. She was ringed by a variety of buildings, some made of simple wood, others a more elaborate cobbled stone. Judging by the lack of distance between the buildings, she was in an alleyway of sorts. Some distance away, she could hear the din of a great number of people. She took a deep breath, taking in the smells of her surroundings. She grimaced. The entire place smelled of refuse.

Nothing about the scene was familiar. She was certain that she had never been to this alley before, and felt rather disconcerted by the proximity of the buildings. The whole situation was wrong, but she did not yet understand how.

But the more pressing matter was that she did not remember coming here. Had she gone to sleep here of her own volition, or had she been brought here? Where had she been before this?

She knew the answers would not come to her if she remained on the cold ground, so she got to her feet. Looking around, she saw that there were half a dozen exits from the stretch of alley she was in, all of them smaller than the current one.

Try as she might, no memory of how she had gotten here came to her. She checked her head for injuries, but did not find any. Her feet did not feel sore, so it was unlikely that she had walked any great distance; nor did she have any pain in

at once that this was a trained reflex, though for now she could not tell where she had learned it.

“Well well,” another male voice said as three shadows emerged from one of the alleys. “It seems today’s our lucky day.”

The shadows turned out to be men in their early twenties. Judging by their appearance, they were barely more than boys. The men did not seem too bothered by the daggers she held, their hands resting on the hilts of what appeared to be swords. Their youthful appearances contrasted with their sinewy build. These men were no strangers to hard work.

“Our blades are bigger, little girl, and you’re outnumbered three to one,” said the first male voice, which belonged to a blond-haired man with the beginnings of a beard.

“Leave me,” she said, trying to sound fierce. She did not feel afraid, though she knew the odds were against her.

“Now why would we do that? You are all alone and surely in need of some company,” spoke the third of the men, who was shorter than the rest, with long brown hair and a chin filled with stubble. The men started to fan out in order to surround her.

“Stay where you are,” she said, the first word coming out as a hiss. The three men paused for a brief moment, but ignored her threat.

“Tell us your name, little girl,” said the first of the men. “It’s always polite to ask a girl’s name before you steal a kiss.”

She wanted to roll her eyes in irritation, but forced herself to keep her eyes on her assailants. She realized two things: first of all, she wasn’t panicking, despite being surrounded, outnumbered, and facing superior weapons; and secondly, even if she had wanted to answer their question, she did not even remember her own name.

“Tell me yours, so I know whose corpses I will be leaving in this alley,” she said, her voice filled with malice. Again the three men paused, this time exchanging glances. They were

her legs or hips that would imply a long distance traveled on horseback. Did that mean that she lived in this city? Then why did it look so unfamiliar?

But the setting wasn't the only thing that looked unfamiliar. Looking down at herself, she saw that she wore clothes suitable for travel, which had been created with ease of movement in mind. The pants and shirt she wore were made of some sort of linen, and covered with leather patches in places where they were likely to fray during travel. Her boots were made of a soft material with a hard exterior. The clothes seemed familiar on a certain level, but why would she be wearing these clothes in the middle of a city if nothing else indicated that she had been traveling recently? Had she been a guest in this city and intended to leave?

The air had a salty tang to it, and she realized this city was likely located near a body of water. Perhaps she had come here by ship? It would explain the lack of sore feet and sore bottom.

She checked her pockets, trying to find a clue that would explain her situation. They were empty aside from a clean piece of cloth in her left pocket, and she kicked against a random pebble in frustration, causing a slight echo in the alley ahead of her. But the movement of her body made her aware of something hard that was pressing against her arms just above her hands, and she crossed her arms in front of her to feel what it was. A shiver went up her spine as she felt the shape of the two blades that rested in the hidden pockets in her sleeves.

"I swear I heard something up ahead," a male voice spoke from the alley just ahead of her.

Without even thinking, she placed her legs in a wider stance, and with a flick of her arms released the blades, catching them as they were ejected from her sleeves. She knew

worried, wondering if they had overestimated their chances. Good, let them be. They drew their blades and pointed them at her.

“Guess we’ll be doing this the hard way,” said the first man, and they ran at her. Despite their run, time seemed to stretch out as they approached. She knew it was more likely her mind working faster, but she knew what to do. Rather than wait for them to come to her, she moved to her left, side-stepping the blade of the left-most assailant, and whirled around him, her blades cutting into his arms and side as she passed. She caught the smell of dried sweat mixed with the scent of blood. A quick kick in the bend of his knees sent the man sprawling, and she was already moving to the man who had been in the middle. His head had followed her as she had knocked down his partner, but his arms were still poised for striking in front of him, and she evaded his weapon with little effort, plunging one of her daggers into his back and with a quick move pulling it back out of him.

The third of her assailants had gone pale, and he had already taken several steps away from her when she turned to face him. The whole encounter had lasted less than a minute, and he knew that he was the one at a clear disadvantage.

“What are you?” he asked, his voice trembling. She wished she knew the answer. He ran back, turning into an alley opposite the one he had used to get there.

“Murder!” he said, his voice raised. “Murder!”

A curse escaped her lips. First they intended to rape her and then they called the guards when things went sour? Bloody cowards. This was not going well. But an encounter with the city guards — whatever city this was — would not be in her best interests. She had no idea who she was, where she was, or how she had come here, and she had just killed one man and wounded another. She turned to check on the downed man and found him lying in a pool of blood. Her slash across his arm had hit a major artery.

Instinctively, she pulled the piece of cloth from her left pocket and used it to clean the blades. She then placed the blades back into her sleeves. Strange, that she knew how to do that, but could not remember her name. She looked around at the various alleys leading from where she stood, but had no idea which one might lead to safety. In the distance she could hear the screams of the last of her assailants, audible above the din of the city.

Her time was limited. It would not take more than a few minutes for the guards to arrive, and if they managed to take her into custody her chances of finding out her identity were non-existent. Even if justice in this city were fair — which was never a certainty — she would not have much of a chance to explain that she was the victim here. She would have to run, but which way?

“Over here,” a male voice called out to her, and her head snapped to her left. A young man with auburn hair peeked around the corner of an alley and motioned for her to follow. “The bloody guards will be here in two minutes. You have to get away!”

His slow, drawling accent did not hide the sense of urgency in his voice, and she walked towards him. It surprised her that she was able to approach this stranger without feeling the least bit wary. After all, she had just fought off three other men, all of whom had been intent on having their way with her. But there was nothing threatening about the young man in front of her; he was unarmed and did not look very strong. She guessed him to be about her own age, even though she couldn't remember her exact age, along with so many other things. Also, having just killed two men and with the city guards on her heels, she couldn't be picky about friends now could she?

He smiled as she approached, though his eyes went back and forth between the various alleys, looking for any sign of the approaching city guard. As soon as she reached him he

“You’re welcome,” he said. “I don’t usually help people, but the guards would have bloody hanged you when all you did was defend yourself. But what in the bleeding Light were you doing in that alley?”

She hesitated. She was grateful for his help and eager to talk with someone who could tell her more about who she was, but she did not quite know if she could trust this young man. On the other hand, he had risked his life for someone he did not know.

“I don’t know how I got there,” she said, admitting the truth. “And I don’t know where I came from, or even who I am.”

“Really?” he asked. “Not even your name?”

“No. I think it has something to do with a melody, though,” she said, after giving it a minute’s consideration.

“Sounds like a good enough name to me. How about we call you ‘Melody’ until you figure out your real name?” he said, and extended his hand in greeting. “I am Tobin by the way.”

“I guess that makes me Melody, then,” she said as she took his hand and shook it.

She studied him for a minute, noticing for the first time that his simple woolen clothes were frayed in many places. His face was tanned from exposure to the sun, and there were layers of dirt on both his clothes and his hands. Despite his unkempt appearance, he did not smell of sweat or dirt, but rather like the sea. She also thought about the way he spoke, and while they shared the same language, there was something peculiar about his pronunciation. His speech drawled, while hers sang. Thinking back, her assailants in the alley had spoken in the same way as him. Another hint that she was not from this place? She would have to ask Tobin later, as he was already stretching out, preparing to move again.

“We’ll head over to my place. Once we’re there we can start figuring out what to do next,” Tobin said, and darted

darted into an alley and again motioned for her to follow.

“Follow me,” he said, and reached for a rope that was hanging from one of the buildings. Using various knots along the rope he scaled the side of the building in a heartbeat, and turned around to look at her from the roof. Hearing the shuffle of footsteps behind her, she took hold of the rope and climbed up, using the knots to support her feet. The young man smiled again, pleased with her performance. Not wasting more than a moment, he turned around and dashed across the rooftops, jumping the gap from one building to the next in a fluid motion. She followed as best she could, the sloped rooftops hindering her progress.

They continued to jump from one rooftop to the next for several minutes, and she studied the city around her between jumps. The city was situated in a small valley surrounded by hills, with a natural harbor at the lowest point. They were located somewhere near the center, which was dominated by many of the wooden and cobble buildings she had also seen in the alleyway. Most of the city’s larger structures were located closer to the water, on the northern edge of the harbor. Resting on top of a cliff overlooking the harbor was a castle, a great lumbering structure recognizable by its battlements and towers. A large gate located at its eastern end allowed access from the city proper. At the base of the cliff, closer to the water, was a square building, also lined with battlements. Judging by its reinforced gates and barred windows, it was either a prison or a fortress of sorts. None of these buildings looked familiar however. Then again, nothing had so far.

After half an hour of moving across the city’s rooftops, they finally paused. Her body felt warm after the exertion, but she was not panting or out of breath, which could not be said for her companion. The young man with auburn hair was hunched over with his hands on his knees, his forehead glistening with sweat.

“Thank you,” she said.

away.

“Alright,” Melody agreed, even though she did not feel comfortable about it. Three unknown men had cornered her in an alley in order to rape her less than half an hour earlier, and now she was following another man she knew nothing about to his own place? Of course, Tobin was alone, and she still had her weapons.

They entered another neighborhood, and their pace slowed. At first glance, the buildings were similar to the ones they had just crossed, but the differences were there. Many of the buildings in this part of the city were in disrepair, and a lot of them were abandoned.

“What is this place?” Melody asked when she came within speaking distance of Tobin.

“They used to call it the ‘Soldiers’ District’. Many of the families of the Army of the North lived here before the Battle of the Baron’s Teeth. They call it ‘Visan’s Folly’ now,” Tobin said in an attempt to explain.

Melody was confused by the various names. Army of the North? Battle of the Baron’s Teeth? And why would they rename the neighborhood to ‘Visan’s Folly’?

“I’m afraid none of those names mean anything to me,” Melody said.

“Oh, right, you probably don’t know our history,” Tobin said. “It takes a while to explain though, so it’s probably better if we wait until we reach my place.”

As they walked, Melody looked towards the sea, watching the sun set on the horizon. The daylight was already fading, and soon they would have difficulty seeing where they walked.

“Not far now,” Tobin said, as if sensing her concern.

Five minutes later they had reached an abandoned wooden warehouse. They climbed onto the flat roof of another building, where Tobin had hidden a wooden ladder. He placed the ladder between the two rooftops and walked from one roof

to the other as if he were crossing the street, beckoning to Melody to follow.

“Why don’t you just use the front door?” Melody whispered across the gap.

“Because the Light-blasted stairway has collapsed,” he said.

Melody shrugged and decided to brave the ladder, using both her hands and feet to scramble across, rather than walking as Tobin had.

“Easy right?” Tobin said as Melody reached the other side, and removed the ladder. He moved to the back of the roof where a two-foot-wide hole was situated and produced a knotted rope similar to the one they had used to exit the alleyways.

“Down here,” he said, then dropped the rope into the hole, and proceeded to climb down into the warehouse.

Melody hesitated again, not at all comfortable with the idea of following Tobin down into a place of which she knew nothing. She was confident she could overpower him after what had happened in the alleyway, but only if he was alone. But Tobin took away her doubt at once, lighting a candle that cast light on the chamber below, clearly showing he was the only person in there. She shrugged again, and lowered herself using the rope.

“Well, this is my place,” Tobin said. “I’m afraid it isn’t much to look at, but I usually only come here to sleep and stash my food.”

Tobin was right, the place did not have much to offer in the way of looks. She looked around the wooden room, noticing its lack of windows, and took a peek out the only door, finding the collapsed staircase Tobin had mentioned, leading down into a large and mostly empty hall. The room itself had little decoration, a single desk and four mattresses. The room smelled stale, which was understandable as any dust that came in would not have that many ways of leaving the building.

“Doesn’t ring a bell,” she said.

“It means ‘bastard’,” he said, beaming. “It’s the only Northlandic word I remember from watching a Northlandic crew at work. Their first mates swear a lot.”

Melody found that remark rather comical, as Tobin’s own speech wasn’t exactly refined. “But if I’m not from Chaedin or any of those other places, then where am I from?”

“Either a Nomad from the Eastern Plains — which would explain your black hair and olive skin — or the Seven Villages, which is the only place aside from the Duchy where they speak our language, though I have no idea what their dialect sounds like. But if that’s where you’re from then you’re not safe here,” Tobin said, looking worried.

“Why would I be in danger?” Melody asked.

“Because of the Battle of the Baron’s Teeth,” Tobin said. “I mentioned it earlier when we entered Visan’s Folly. Thirty years ago, people were starving here. For some reason nobody has figured out yet, a lot more children were being born than usual. We had enough farmland, but too few people capable of working it. So the Duke decided it was time to conquer the Seven Villages. We figured they were an easy target and we knew they had plenty of food. So the Duke sent his cousin, General Visan, with an army of three thousand men. The Army of the North.”

“But they call this place Visan’s Folly now, so I’m guessing he failed?” Melody asked.

“Only a third of his army returned, with Visan himself wounded as well. They were slaughtered by Destroyers in The Baron’s Teeth — a bunch of hills that separates the Duchy from the Seven Villages,” Tobin said. “Ever since that happened, relations between Chaedin and the Villages have gone to the Void.”

“You said ‘Destroyers’. What are they?” Melody asked.

“People who can control the air, summon fire, and make the bloody earth tremble,” Tobin said, his voice filled with

“So, Melody, are you sure you don’t remember anything?” Tobin asked as he lowered himself to the mattress.

“Only simple things. I know these floors are wood; I know you are sitting on a mattress, and I know your speech sounds peculiar. But aside from that? Nothing. I don’t even know what city this is,” Melody said.

“Well, then, let me be the first to welcome you to Chaedin,” Tobin said, his voice taking on a grand tone, as if he were a Herald. “Shining capital of the great Duchy of Chaedin.”

“Chaedin,” Melody repeated, the name not sounding strange to her ears.

“Yes, and I can tell you’re not from here by the way you speak,” Tobin said.

“You know where I’m from?” Melody asked, her voice filled with hope.

“Well, no. But your accent is strange, and you don’t sound as if you’re from Edisha or Fort Trael,” Tobin said.

“These are also places in the Duchy?” Melody asked.

“Yes, cities. Farther inland,” Tobin said.

“But you can’t tell where I’m from by the way I speak then?” Melody asked, eager for his opinion.

Tobin gave it some thought.

“You’re not from Chaedin, but there are a number of other places that trade with us. There are ships here from the Northlands and Averron across the sea. There are also many traders from Ktharia — at least when those bastards aren’t busy harassing our borders,” Tobin said, studying her. “But you’re not from any of those.”

“How can you be sure?” Melody asked.

“Well your skin isn’t black, so you’re not from Averron. The bloody Ktharians have trouble pronouncing the letters ‘V’ and ‘H’, and tend to be pale as snow, which you’re also not. Northlanders have a tendency to put words in the wrong order, and unless you know the word *’graeseni’* you’re not from there either,” Tobin said.

awe. "Against that, our army never had a chance."

"So why do they call this place 'Visan's Folly', if it was the Duke's idea?" Melody asked.

"Because Visan ordered a nighttime attack after the Destroyers gave him the chance to retreat without losses," Tobin said. "Two thirds of the people who lived here never saw their sons or husbands again."

"So if they think I'm from the Seven Villages, they might see me as an enemy?" Melody asked.

"That, or they might turn you over to the Duke if they suspect you have a Gift, like the Gift of the Destroyer," Tobin said. "The reward is said to be enormous."

Melody gave him a look of suspicion.

"You'd better not be thinking of doing that to me," she said, as her hands moved into a ready position.

He stifled a laugh and said, "They'd arrest me along with you. I'm not exactly a hard-working citizen."

"You wouldn't be sleeping in an abandoned warehouse if you were, but I'm not judging," Melody said.

"Good, I'd hate to see you go hungry because you would refuse to eat stolen food," Tobin said.

"I just killed two men," she said, a feeling of regret washing over her. "I have no reason to think myself better than a thief."

"Tell you what. Tomorrow we can look around the city to see if we can figure out where you're from. Maybe you weren't traveling alone, but right now it's probably better if we get some sleep," Tobin said, stifling a yawn. He walked over to the desk and blew out the candle he had lit earlier, plunging the room into darkness. A faint glimmer of moonlight was still visible from the hole in the roof, and she could see his silhouette move in the darkness. He walked back to the mattress farthest away from her, and lay down on his back. She picked the mattress closest to her, sat down, and studied him. Could she trust Tobin? For that matter, could she trust

CHAPTER 2

THE CRONE

Turiel paced the Duke's study in an attempt to calm his frayed nerves, but he only became more anxious with each passing minute. A summons by the Duke wasn't necessarily bad, but the circumstances were rather unusual. For one, the Duke usually didn't receive visitors during the evenings unless he was hosting a ball. In addition, he never summoned any soldiers below the rank of General, and Turiel was only a Captain.

His pacing produced little sound, as the lavish red carpets dampened the sound of his boots. Red and white were the Duke's colors, and the various red decorations were present throughout the castle. Turiel took a deep breath in an attempt to calm his nerves, the smell of books and paper filling his nostrils as he moved from one end of the room to the other.

Turiel wondered if his grandfather had felt the same way when he came to report his defeat in the Battle of the Baron's Teeth. Visan had stood in this same room to face the Duke. This Duke! But Turiel's grandfather had been dead for almost a decade, while the Duke still lived.

People never spoke of the Duke's advanced age except indirectly or in whispers, but the fact remained that for a man who had already been in his sixties when he ordered the conquest of the Seven Villages, the Duke was still in remarkable health. There were many theories about this of course, ranging from the improbable to the ridiculous. Whatever the cause, the fact remained that the Duke had outlived all of his children and even some of his grandchildren.

The door opened to Turiel's left, and the Duke of Chaedin entered. Turiel immediately knelt and lowered his head in

herself? She had killed two men by reflex, and had barely remembered it afterwards. They had wanted to rape her, but shouldn't she feel at least some remorse? It took a long time for her to fall asleep.

respect.

“Rise, Captain,” the Duke said, his voice vigorous and healthy. The Duke smiled, causing his large mustache to lift. The Duke wore a red coat over a pristine white shirt, not unlike the dress uniform Turiel wore.

“I have come as ordered, Your Grace,” Turiel said, trying his best to remember the proper honorifics and court manners. While he was a distant cousin of the Duke, his grandfather’s defeat had hampered the welfare of his family, and his knowledge of proper etiquette was fragmentary, at best. Also, having served at the front for several years, Turiel knew his speech to be somewhat less than sophisticated.

“So you have,” the Duke said, smiling at him. “It must feel strange to you, Captain, to stand in the same spot your grandfather did when he came bearing dire news.”

“The thought had crossed my mind, Your Grace,” Turiel said, not daring to lie.

“It is to be expected, but you need not worry,” the Duke said. “Your record as a soldier is commendable, Captain. Your stand at the Pass of Broken Knees is well known, and I’m sure the Ktharians you defeated still speak of the humiliating defeat you caused them. Even so, while your superiors are pleased with your record, they feel that you may be overly cautious.”

“Your Grace?” Turiel asked, not quite sure what the Duke meant.

“You are too cautious, Captain. Your superiors know that you are a capable soldier and a capable commander, yet you often show restraint when boldness is called for. You have done much to clear your family’s name after your grandfather lost the Battle of the Baron’s Teeth, but your superiors worry that you fear repeating his mistakes,” the Duke said, raising an eyebrow at Turiel, looking for his response.

“There may be some truth to their worries, Your Grace,” Turiel said, not daring to meet the Duke’s eye.

The Duke smiled, pleased by Turiel’s admission.

“I appreciate your honesty, Captain,” the Duke said. “It is a trait that some of my heirs lack entirely. But enough dallying. I have a mission for you.”

“I am yours to command, Your Grace,” Turiel said.

“Yes, and normally I would have passed the orders on to my generals and let it flow down the chain of command, but this matter requires a bit more subtlety,” the Duke said. “I need an honest man who can keep a secret.”

“Of course, Your Grace,” Turiel said.

“Have you ever wondered how I came to be this old?” the Duke asked.

“I have, Your Grace,” Turiel said, unable to prevent an eager smile from spreading across his face. He studied the Duke for a moment, taking note of the various wrinkles in his face. Shouldn’t a man in his nineties have more? In fact, the Duke looked younger than some of his own generals, and even his grandsons looked to have aged more than he, though none of them had grown bald.

“You and many others,” the Duke said. “Many years ago, on the eve of your grandfather’s departure to the Seven Villages, an old woman came to my castle requesting an audience. My guards swear they refused her, but somehow she managed to get past them. She came to me in my study. Intrigued by her ability to bypass my guards I let her speak. She said: *‘For every three men who pass through the Baron’s Teeth only one will return’*, and urged me to reconsider sending the Army of the North.”

“This woman knew the outcome?” Turiel asked, so astonished that he forgot to address the Duke by his honorific title.

“She did,” the Duke said, either not noticing or overlooking Turiel’s error. “When your grandfather returned from that disastrous campaign, I ordered the city guard to find this woman and bring her to me.”

asked.

"I've suffered some minor burns, Your Grace," Turiel said.

"Then imagine every vein in your body being on fire. I screamed while her hand touched my chest, and within moments my guards were inside dragging her away," the Duke said. "I did not sleep that night, and the next morning I felt more alive than ever. For the first time in ten years I was able to run without getting winded. My servants spoke of my health in hushed voices, but I could hear every word of praise as if they had been talking loudly. I walked straight to the dungeons and confronted the old woman, demanding to know what she had done to me."

"She healed you," Turiel said.

"No, not healed. Changed. She called it the Gift of the Unraveler," the Duke said. "She explained that it allowed her to change the nature of living creatures; to take away life, to change it, and to bestow it. She had taken some of her own life and given it to me, and changed me in the process, made me stronger. After this, I offered her to serve me in a more permanent capacity, and gave her a more suitable accommodation in one of the towers."

"Hold on, Your Grace. She changed you, at the cost of her own life?" Turiel asked, dumbfounded.

"Yes, but she told me that, too, could be remedied, provided she had a steady source of energy to sustain her and myself," the Duke said, looking uncomfortable.

"A steady source of energy? You mean people?" Turiel asked, not quite believing what he was hearing.

"Yes, I mean people. Surely you must have noticed the decline in public executions in the past twenty years?" the Duke asked.

Turiel remained silent, his feelings a mixture of horror and fascination. The rational part of him accepted this, the executions replaced by something more useful. Yet the emotional part of him felt sick at the thought of using people

“Did they find her?” Turiel asked.

“No, she came to find me,” the Duke said. “After Visan’s defeat, I intended to send assassins north to take out the Seven Villages’ Destroyers. She came to tell me such a move would be disastrous. And I hadn’t mentioned to anyone my idea of sending assassins! My first impulse was to have her seized, and then interrogated until she told me everything she knew about the Seven Villages and how she was able to predict our defeat, but something about the way she looked at me made me stop. She hadn’t come to gloat. She was worried for me, and there was something urgent she needed to tell me.”

The Duke paused, staring at his desk for a few seconds before turning his eyes back to Turiel. “Tell me, Captain, how much do you know of Gifts?” he asked.

“Gifts, Your Grace? Tokens of appreciation, or abilities?” Turiel asked.

“Abilities, Captain. Things that no ordinary man or woman can do. You know of Destroyers of course, but there are other Gifts,” the Duke explained. “This woman possessed two such Gifts. The first was the Gift of the Seer.”

“She could see the future,” Turiel said, and the Duke nodded.

“Which is why she urged me not to send my assassins. She explained to me that her Gift came in bits and pieces, showing her flashes of how events would unfold. But of one thing she was certain: no assassin sent by me would ever reach the Seven Villages,” the Duke explained.

“Just as she had known about my grandfather’s failure,” Turiel said.

“Exactly. Though, despite her knowledge of plans I hadn’t shared with anyone, I was still skeptical. She then said she could prove it, but would have to place her hand on my chest. Seeing no harm in it, I allowed it,” the Duke said.

“What happened?” Turiel asked.

“Do you know what it feels like to get burned?” the Duke

as a source of fuel.

“I trust that this knowledge will not become known to the public, Captain?” the Duke asked.

“Of course not, Your Grace,” Turiel said, though he was reluctant.

“Good, because if you do intend to tell anyone, she will know,” the Duke said, moving to the door. “If you will follow me, Captain, she is expecting us.”

Turiel’s anticipation rose as they moved from corridor to corridor into the older parts of the castle, traveling upwards. Several servants passed them by as they walked, each of them pausing and curtsying upon seeing the Duke. The corridors were varied in appearance. At first there were many tapestries adorning the walls, and one corridor had a collection of paintings of men in expensive clothes. Turiel guessed these were pictures of previous Dukes, whose faces he had never seen. Of course, with the Duke’s advanced age there couldn’t be many people left who had been alive during the reign of his predecessor. Soon there were no more servants to be seen, and the carpets that decorated these halls looked frayed with age. Turiel felt a tickle in his nose, and the occasional light flowing in through the windows showed vast clouds of dust swirling through the halls.

“I am told these chambers were once used by visiting nobles, back when the Duchy was more populous,” the Duke said. “We have little use of them these days.”

“More’ populous, Your Grace?” Turiel asked, knowing that the population had vastly increased over the past few decades.

“Two hundred years ago or so,” the Duke added. “Back when we had twice the number of cities. We’ve recovered somewhat in the past four decades, but we have nowhere near the numbers we had in the days of my ancestors.”

“Visan’s grandson,” the Duke spoke, pointing to Turiel.

“Come closer,” the Crone said, her voice a croak. She motioned for him to approach, her thin fingers having an eerily similar to those of a skeleton. Taking a moment to gather his courage, Turiel took a deep breath and stepped forward, sitting down in front of her.

“You are frightened,” the Crone said, a hint of surprise in her voice, but not a question. “I assure you, Captain, you will come to no harm at my hands.”

“Why am I here?” Turiel asked, requiring some effort to keep his voice from shaking.

“Dreams, Captain,” the Crone said. “What do you dream of?”

“Glory, honor, the things all soldiers dream of,” Turiel said, not seeing the significance.

“Good dreams then?” the Crone asked. “If only we could trade dreams, I would gladly take yours. Because, in my dreams, Chaedin burns in a great inferno.”

“You dream of Chaedin’s destruction — like you dreamed of grandfather’s defeat?” Turiel asked.

“Yes,” the Crone said. “And no, at the same time. My dream of your grandfather was clear, determined, and not open for interpretation. The dreams I have of Chaedin burning are clouded, as if looking into a muddy pool. You know you are looking at water, and you know it has a bottom somewhere, but you do not know how deep it is, nor if there is anything in the water. But I am certain that unless we act, Chaedin will burn.”

“Have you seen what causes it?” Turiel asked.

“The future reeks of the Seven Villages,” the Crone said, sending shivers down Turiel’s spine. “Yet I never see them in my dreams. But I have seen you, the only man in Chaedin facing the fire.”

Turiel raised an eyebrow in surprise. The woman had seen him as the only man standing to face the flames?

Turiel nodded, remembering his history lessons and the various abandoned cities in the Duchy. They continued along the corridors until they finally reached a winding staircase. The Duke took the lead, climbing the stairs with surprising agility.

“She prefers solitude. Only a small number of maids are allowed here to bring her food, but none ever see her. In fact, aside from those prisoners she uses to sustain us, I am the only person she sees,” the Duke said. “That is, until she asked for you to be brought to her.”

Turiel went cold at this, but kept following the Duke. The old woman had asked for him by name? The Duke had already mentioned his need of an honest commander who could handle a subtle issue. But this was a woman who was capable of seeing the future, as well as keeping the Duke alive well beyond his natural lifespan. And this woman needed him. The thought alone was terrifying. The Duke stopped in front of him, and Turiel only just managed to avoid bumping into him. They stood in front of a heavy wooden door, and the Duke knocked.

“Come,” a hoarse voice — which sounded only vaguely feminine — called from the other side, and the Duke opened the door.

The room beyond smelled stale and dusty, as if there hadn’t been so much as a whiff of fresh air inside for months. It was spacious, and the walls were covered with tapestries. There was a large bed, a writing desk and a table with a number of chairs. Several bookcases adorned the walls. There were several windows, but all of them were nailed shut.

Sitting on one of the chairs in the corner was a woman who looked nothing short of ancient. Her face was covered in wrinkles, and her skin was gray to the point of resembling ash. Her body looked emaciated, as if she had been starved. Yet her movements were not that of a frail old woman, and her eyes radiated command. This old woman, this Crone, felt unnatural to Turiel. And perhaps she was.

“Captain, give me your hand,” the Crone said, her voice wavering. Was she afraid? Turiel complied, extending his hand across the table.

The Crone took his hand, and closed her eyes. She steadied her breathing and concentrated. Then, her body convulsed, and her grip tightened. A cry escaped from her lips but her grip did not lessen. She started shaking, and her eyes snapped open revealing only the whites of her eyes. The whole ordeal lasted no more than ten seconds. She let go of Turiel’s hand and jumped from her seat. She placed her hands on her chair and stood there panting for several minutes.

“I have not had a vision so vivid in decades,” she said, looking at the Duke, and then back to Turiel. “You must leave Chaedin tomorrow. Take a small number of men, no more than fifty, and head for the Seven Villages. Look for three signs to lead your way. When you cross the echoes of the past, you will find five unlikely companions — marked by flame, blood and steel — and you will turn east. When a pact is broken by a fiery voice cast to the wind, you will turn north. And finally, when your strength falters and your blood disappears in the sand, you will turn northeast.”

“You want me to send soldiers to the Seven Villages?” the Duke asked, his voice filled with astonishment.

“There is no other way. Turiel must go, or Chaedin will burn,” the Crone said.

“So be it,” the Duke said, not at all pleased. “We will leave you be, then.”

As the Duke moved out of the room, the Crone spoke one final time, “Succeed in this, Turiel, and your family’s honor will be restored.”

“She has grown mad,” the Duke exclaimed when they entered his study again. “She wants me to send soldiers to the Seven Villages, led by the grandson of the last commander

I sent their way.”

Turiel remained silent as the Duke’s rage continued. After all, Turiel agreed with him. Sending soldiers to the Seven Villages was madness. Even if the people of the Seven Villages were responsible for a fire that would consume Chaedin, an armed envoy was not going to deter them. They had effortlessly incinerated two thirds of Visan’s army. A group of fifty men would be far from anything they considered a threat.

Still, the Crone’s words nagged at him. She had spoken of a chance to restore his family’s honor, and he did not want to dismiss the possibility out of hand. Turiel knew that his grandfather’s defeat was a shadow upon his career, and despite the many chances his superiors had given him, he already had a reputation of being more cautious than necessary. Even if his record remained spotless for the next twenty years, he knew he would never rise beyond the rank of Captain.

“Your Grace, I would like to take this mission,” Turiel said. “Sending soldiers to the Seven Villages wouldn’t be in your best interest from a logical point of view, but on the other hand, when was the last time that old woman’s advice failed you?”

“When I decided to act against it,” the Duke said, his face relaxing and taking on a ponderous look. “Captain, it is good to have a man honestly speak his mind rather than agree with everything I say.”

“Of course, Your Grace,” Turiel said. “Though I must also admit that the thought of going to the Seven Villages makes me uncomfortable.”

“Understandable. Take comfort in the fact that your grandfather lived to tell the tale then. Also, remember that she said you would have three signs, the first of which will take you east,” the Duke said. “That may lead away from the Seven Villages.”

“And right into the Eastern Plains,” Turiel said. Reluctant