

THE
TOME
OF
HAREN

DAMIEN FRANCIS

PROLOGUE



Both men stared at one another, unflinching in the dim light of the torch. Neither one made a move, but both rested a tense hand on the hilt of their swords. One of the men, dressed in the haunting armour of the High Court Watchers, kept his composure even as he stared down the infamous assassin, Vardu. Behind the Watcher stood a dozen more just like him, and behind them loomed a crude door to a torture chamber deep below the powerful desert city of Dre Canor. Behind Vardu were two other assassins of differing sizes, with a similarly unpleasant appearance. A long dark hall stretched behind them.

Down here in the bowels of the castle, a nasty, unpleasant odour wafted about their heads, crept into their nostrils, and settled on their tongues. It was the stench of blood, death, and rotten flesh. The screams of tortured victims remained a constant presence alongside the stench.

Vardu pressed a finger to his left nostril and squeezed it, snorting out a great glob of phlegm which landed squarely on the Watcher's boot. The Watcher didn't look down. Instead, a feral grin spread across his face, baring his foul teeth. Only his eyes and mouth were visible from beneath his charcoal helmet.

"Step away from the Watcher!" he bellowed into Vardu's face, his stinking breath a worse smell than the odour around them.

In the same fluid motion, each Watcher drew his sword. A sword, centimetres from Vardu's crooked nose.

"Impressive," he said in a flat voice, his eyes unblinking.

Even as both parties eyed one another, the sound of footsteps from behind Vardu and his companions interrupted their standoff. Vardu turned away to see the new arrivals. A look of disgust touched his cracked lips.

"Who invited them?" he asked no one.

Striding down the long hall came seven figures, all wrapped in red cloth of varying shades. They hardly made a sound with their padded boots, almost as if they were apparitions. Their faces were hidden behind the red cloth. But Vardu could hear them. An interesting arsenal of weapons hung on their belts. Vardu noticed a pair of hooked whips and even a strange circular weapon he had never seen before.

"Blooders," spat one of his allies, a short, squat man, uglier than a misshapen goat born at the wrong time of year.

The approaching Blooders stopped a few metres in front of Vardu and his companions.

"Step aside, we have an appointment with the great King of Lar Brennon," said

the one with the deepest shade of red cloth. A thin black cord was tied around both wrists to indicate his high rank, a Blooder-seether.

“Wait your turn,” growled Vardu in response.

Vardu once more found himself eyeing down another opponent. He knew that they were caught between the two groups should anything happen; he also knew that none of them could wield magic.

“What would a King want with a group of cannibals?” asked his other companion, a taller, thinner man with equally haunting features, as if he had been starved of food his whole life so that his skin barely hung onto the edges of the skull and bones beneath. Despite his appearance, his voice sounded remarkably young.

“What would a King want with assassins that dabble in the forbidden magics?” retorted the Blooder-seether.

“It seems then that we have both been summoned here for a specific purpose.”

“Perhaps, or perhaps for multiple purposes,” responded the Blooder-seether.

Vardu’s eyes scanned the Blooders for any signs of weakness. They bore the mark of Delkar.

“You’re of the Delkar sect?” he inquired.

Several of the Blooders bristled at the name; all but the Blooder-seether scowled.

“You know of us?” asked the Blooder-seether.

“I know enough. Any more, and you would welcome me as a brother.”

“Any more, and we might take your life,” spoke a smaller Blooder with younger eyes in a cold voice. An apprentice, Vardu speculated. He had also brought an apprentice with him, glancing to the taller assassin, although not his own.

A sharp call echoed from behind Vardu, and immediately the dozen High Court Watchers stepped out of the shadows of nearby rooms and halls that adjoined the one in which they stood.

“Enough,” spoke the Watcher, “you have both been summoned to meet with La Mavorce. He is ready for you.”

Vardu turned around, feeling like he had just exposed a weakness to the Blooders. He kept his hand firmly on the hilt of his sword.

“No weapons beyond this point,” said the same Watcher before they could take a step forward.

“None?” questioned the Blooder-seether, his voice lowering in tone.

A signal must have been uttered because, in the next moment, the dozen Watchers stepped in closer, their weapons pointing at everyone, forming a formidable circle of swords around the Blooders and assassins.

“Very well then,” nodded the Blooder-seether.

Both parties began to remove all their weapons, leaving them on a rack nearby.

“What about their magic?” asked a Blooder, gesturing to the assassins.

“They won’t want to use their magic in there,” answered the Watcher. The tiniest hint of a smile touched his mouth. “This way.”

The room still stunk with the fresh scent of blood, sweat and piss. A roaring fire crackled in a hearth to the right-hand side, and standing over it, drenched in sweat

and holding a wicked looking branding iron, was the man they had come to see. Two men were whimpering on the floor in front of La Mavorce, King of Lar Brennon. The third man was panting heavily, and a smell of burnt flesh hung in the air.

Even as they entered the room and waited quietly, separate from the Blooders, Vardu could feel there was something else in the room. A sense of malice and hatred and cunning. His eyes shifted to the far corner, and a coldness gripped his chest. The corner was swathed in deep shadow, and yet, he swore he could make out the vague outline of someone standing there.

“Do not be alarmed, gentleman,” noticing all eyes shift to the corner. “We are joined by... how shall I put this... an overseer,” said La Mavorce, twirling the branding iron in his hands like it was a toy. “I only request you refrain from looking at him for too long.”

Vardu tore his gaze away from the corner and turned to La Mavorce.

La Mavorce turned to greet his guests, still playing with the branding iron. Shadows from the fire danced on his lean physique, highlighting a web of scars over much of his battle-hardened body. A tinge of madness smiled at them from behind his kingly eyes. Stiff hair pierced his scalp, like thousands of tiny spears had been jabbed into his head, cropped short and dripping with sweat and blood.

“Greetings, Vardu, Leader of the Halrom, the renowned assassins,” began La Mavorce. “And greetings to your companions, Kior and Sclurr, a master and apprentice. I trust you are confident in your choice of companions?” he inquired of Vardu.

“I am. Kior is the best assassin we have, after myself, and Sclurr has studied under both of us, nearing perfection, your majesty.”

One of the men whimpered a little louder on the floor, but something caused him to stifle his cry mid-whimper. Vardu couldn't help but feel the tiniest sprinkle of fear creep into his limbs.

“And greetings to you, Blooder-seether of the Delkar Blooders, and to your Blooder crew,” La Mavorce added, turning to the others.

His voice had an odd mixture of both kingly timbre and soft insanity as if it were teetering on a tiny wire over a precipice and could slip either way.

“Greetings, your majesty,” answered the Blooder-seether, bowing low along with the others.

“You are here to accept the contracts we have discussed,” continued La Mavorce in his distinct voice. “I understand that you are all aware of my intent to launch an invasion of Narean soon?”

Vardu and the others nodded.

“Blooder-seether, in my discussions with my ally, we are in agreement that an important relic must be found and returned to us.”

“What would you have us find?”

“Have you ever heard of the fabled Tome of Haren?”

“I have only heard rumours. We do not receive much word from lands beyond ours.”

La Mavorce stuck the branding iron in the fire and watched as it slowly began to heat up.

“The Tome is a mystical item. It is said to contain and store an immeasurable

quantity of magical, spiritual, and mundane knowledge. If anyone were to ask it for information, it must divulge what it knows. As this invasion marks the beginning of a long campaign to conquer and," he looked briefly to the corner where the shadowed figure remained out of sight, "of a process to restore Narean to its former glory, then it is important that we find and retrieve this Tome for ourselves. It is a vital part of our plans."

"We shall locate the Tome for you."

"As agreed then. Half now, half upon completion."

La Mavorce waved a hand. Slowly, one of the men on the floor stood up and shuffled awkwardly over to him.

His feet had been broken, and each step required extra care and effort. He had been shaved, and he wore only a small loincloth. He hardly resembled a man. In his hands was a small bag of valuables, clinking lightly in the silence. Nobody said a word as the man bowed low, holding the bag above his head. The Blooder-seether took the small bag and opened it. The man shuffled back to the feet of La Mavorce, whimpering every step of the way.

"Will that be enough?" asked La Mavorce.

"Definitely."

"Good. Then you must not waste any time. Speed must be your constant companion, for our enemies know of our plan."

"How?"

La Mavorce pointed the branding iron at the three men. The Blooder-seether looked at them; he understood.

"Where should we start looking?"

"We have word that the Tome's location is only known to Cailad of Narean. Find out where he is going and intercept him. If you cannot take him, do not let him escape. Follow him if you must. When you have it, return it to me, and you will be rewarded with the other half of your payment."

"It shall be done."

Then another voice spoke. It set Vardu on edge as if his teeth were being ground together, and his whole body tensed like he had been paralysed.

"Cailad can only take you to its location. You will need a Shan to find where it is hidden."

The Blooder-seether turned to the corner where the hazy outline of the shadowy figure shimmered and vibrated as if it were both there and not there. Only La Mavorce showed no outward sign of disgust.

"Of course."

The Blooder bowed and left the room with the others in tow. The room suddenly felt smaller, and Vardu couldn't help but feel the shadowy presence creep from its corner to all edges of the room.

"Now, Vardu, we come to your assassin colleagues. We have carefully selected twelve people that must be eliminated in a precise order for this first stage of the invasion to work smoothly. Each must be eliminated in the order given. Any deviation shall result in severe consequences."

Once more, the men on the floor whimpered. One of the men clutched at his head and started rocking back and forth on his heels, his eyes wide and white, sweat running down his body. The flicker from the fire cast a light over the branding marks across his skin.

“We’ll get it done.”

“Good. Take the list and begin.”

The two Halrom stepped forward. Kior took the paper, and together they bowed low. He then unfurled it and glanced at the list. He knew the first name on the list.

“Of course, you will have payment for your services,” said La Mavorce.

Another one of the men shuffled forward with a bag in his hand. His feet weren’t broken, but his toes were missing, and he nearly fell with every step. The end of his nose, fingers and ears had also been severed. Vardu remained stony-faced, even as a growing concern tormented his stomach. The thing in the corner hadn’t moved, and yet he felt as though it was right behind him. He resisted the urge to turn around, yet his body remained tense.

Kior and Sclurr eagerly glanced into the bag, and Kior flashed a wicked smile.

“My lord,” he said in a slick oily voice. Together they left the room and disappeared. Then Vardu was alone in the room with La Mavorce, the shadow figure and the three whimpering men.

“Vardu, we have another mission for you. You might be renowned as an assassin, leader of the Halrom and such, but my ally here has uncovered something else. Not so long ago, you were a great warrior of Narean, were you not?”

“I was,” he said, trying not to let his voice betray his concern.

“Tell me about that.”

“I am Narean born and bred, as is my brother. My sisters too.”

“Yes, we are familiar with your family.”

Vardu wondered what they meant, but continued.

“I was found by a famous champion and then later trained in the High Order of Ganathon my entire life until I left and joined the Halrom.”

“Tell me. What was your purpose within the order?” La Mavorce continued, pulling the hot brand from the fire. “They are well known as exemplary warriors, some say the best.”

“I was an infiltrator. Schooled in subversion and destabilisation. Trained in all manner of combat, both with a blade, and with magic.”

The other voice in the corner spoke this time.

“*Precisely what we need.*”

“What exactly are you looking for?”

“We want someone to bring Narean down from the inside.”

“How?”

“We have a contact in place. He can assist you upon arrival,” he said, handing Vardu a piece of paper.

Vardu read the name, recognising it instantly.

“He has already begun the work and, while he is continuing the next phase of his mission, we expect you to continue where he left off.”

Vardu glanced between La Mavorce and the corner of the room, his eyes sliding over the three men.

“It shall be done.”

La Mavorce nodded.

“Oh, and one last thing. On your way out, try not to leave a mess.”

“Your Majesty?”

“I know all about the job you took recently. I hear it pays well, too; she took everything she had saved to hire you, I believe. He wasn’t a particularly good general, and I am truly thankful I am not the one who had to get rid of him.”

Vardu didn’t even want to question how La Mavorce knew about his most recent contract. He had only accepted it yesterday while he had been waiting for his companions to arrive.

The third man shuffled forward with a similar bag. Vardu noticed for the first time that this man was missing both of his arms, and he carried the bag in his teeth. His eyes, too, were missing, and when he released the bag into Vardu’s hands, he could see that his tongue was also gone. The bag contained a hundred violet diamonds, one of the rarest jewels.

Vardu bowed low as the man shuffled back to his place in the corner.

“Now leave us while we attend to this... mess,” said La Mavorce, declaring an end to their meeting. Vardu turned and left and, upon shutting the door behind him, heard the unmistakable sound of the three men screaming once more.

1

AEIDOR



The pungent stench of the street outside his window wafted through into his room, burning his nose and lacing itself onto his tongue. Aeidor flinched and sat up in his bed with a start. He hated the smell from the street. He felt like a corpse brought back to life, all stiff and sore. The usual mop of chestnut brown hair, now afflicted with night hair, stuck up in odd angles giving him a wild appearance. He glanced about the room, his soft brown eyes looking over the others asleep in the small space they shared. Four boys all slept in the cramped space, each with just a fraction of the room as their own ‘personal’ space. Tal, his long-time best friend since they were young, was awake and staring at the ceiling. He was so tall that his feet and shins hung over the edge of the small mattress he slept on. He was running his hand over his recently shaved head, examining every inch of his now clean head. Despite his young age, the first formations of stubble had already appeared on his dark face. The other two boys remained in the blissful embrace of sleep.

“Mornin,” Tal said without breaking eye contact with the ceiling.

Aeidor grunted a reply.

“Street wake you?” he asked.

“Yep.”

“Mmph.”

“Busy day today?”

“Yeah. Got another meeting with a lieutenant today. You?”

Aeidor tried to pat his hair down.

“More pageboy duties,” Aeidor said, trying to make it sound convincing.

“Yeah, well soon we’ll both get to be in the military, maybe even the same company! Then we can get out of here.”

Aeidor didn’t answer. He didn’t want Tal to know the truth, and it would do no good to dwell on the problems of the day before it had even begun. He stared at the dirt under his fingernails and sighed inwardly to himself, his shoulders drooping a little.

Finding a little bit of energy, Aeidor hauled himself from his bed and tiptoed between his roommates to the door. He glanced at the small mirror hung up next to the door, and the same uninteresting face stared back. A pale, semi-freckled boy and floppy hair returned the stare, almost as if there was a question he needed to ask. Why was his life like this?

He shrugged, answering his own question and left the room. Tal followed behind, practically towering over his friend. The two boys quietly walked down the hall past

the countless other doors with similar numbers of boys or girls living in cramped spaces. The orphanage had been his home ever since he could remember, and the only things that had changed were his age and his size. Everything else got smaller.

The eldest orphans lived on the top floor of the orphanage, once a thriving inn and now in need of desperate repair with creaking floorboards, cramped spaces and dirt and bugs as company. The paint had peeled off long ago, and the wooden beams underneath could be seen crawling with mould. The newborns and tiniest children lived on the bottom floor where the rooms were cleanest and were closest to the resident carers, including Mimmi, the matriarch of the house.

Aeidor and Tal worked their way down several flights of stairs before they reached the hall. It was an equally cramped space, with a few long tables and an assortment of chairs and benches for the children to sit on. The remnants of the inn, still slightly visible with the design of the room built to accommodate a packed house of guests with flowing beer, now had become their main meal hall. They were early and knew that the eldest would eat last, so the room was full of children and babies eating and whining and crying when they entered the room. Mimmi was trying to spoon-feed a particularly difficult child who found it enjoyable to twist his face away from the food in a half act of defiance and half act of play.

Some of the other caretakers were busy scrambling between tables and trying desperately to feed the children. No one noticed Aeidor and Tal. Tal gestured with his head over to the far side of the room, where there was still some food left in the pots. Scooping up a bowlful each (which looked to be mostly gloopy rice sprinkled with some pieces of spare fruit), they avoided most of the other carers and found a spot outside on the front porch, watching the people slowly begin to open up their shops. The food was cold and bland, but it filled their bellies. They ate in silence, the smell of the street their only companion.

“You’re both up early this morning,” said a familiar sweet voice behind them.

Aeidor half-turned, his oldest friend Hessa stood in the doorway. The sun had just risen over the crest of the buildings opposite the orphanage, and its glow touched Hessa like a divine signal. Her golden hair sparkled in the sun, and she looked dazzling as always with her comforting semi-smile.

“Got work,” said Tal, shovelling more of the food into his mouth. A fact Aeidor could always count on when Tal was eating.

“You eat like a pig,” teased Hessa.

“I eat just fine, thanks,” he growled back.

Aeidor stifled a laugh.

“What are your plans?” he asked her.

“The infirmary later in the evening. I’m on a night watch, it’s my first one, and I’m a little nervous. For now, I think I’ll try to buy myself a new apron. The one the infirmary provided has worn down, and I need a new one if I want to keep working there in clean clothes.”

“Where’s Lylla?” asked Tal, trying to make it sound casual, but Aeidor could detect the slight interest in his question from his change in tone.

Almost on cue, Lylla burst out of the entrance, like she was pursued by something

hunting her. Her sleek midnight hair looking windswept, her hands frantically tying it into a tight ponytail.

“Where are you off to in such a hurry?” asked Aeidor.

“Classes are about to start. I’m already late,” Lylla answered in her gentle husky voice, like the thick purr of a cat living in comfortable luxury. She flashed the trio a casual smile, its warmth touching her twinkling hazel eyes.

“When will you be back?” asked Tal.

“Later. I’ll see you all later,” she called out over her shoulder, hurrying down the street. Tal watched her curvy frame disappear down the street, her hair bobbing behind her with every step. Aeidor jabbed Tal in the ribs quickly, waking him out of his stupor.

“She’s right. We’ve got to go too,” said Aeidor. He hurried through the rest of his breakfast. Tal grunted.

“Leave those with me. I don’t have to start my shift for a while. I’ll clean them for you.”

“Thanks, Hessa,” Aeidor said, giving her a quick kiss on her cheek to show his appreciation.

Hessa blushed, and both boys rushed upstairs to get dressed.

“Are you going to talk to her?” asked Aeidor as the boys headed up the stairs.

“Not yet; she’s clearly busy. I’m busy too. It’s not the right time.”

“I’ll be honest, you might never find the right time if you wait too long.”

Aeidor wiped the sweat from his brow and sat back on his haunches. He hated scrubbing down Lord Rairn’s house. It wasn’t his favourite task as he much preferred to work in the kitchen or serve the Lord and his Lady their meals. Not even his friends knew that he wasn’t a pageboy as he claimed to be but a servant in the house. Aeidor returned to scrubbing the floor, trying to get every piece of muck out from between the tiles.

Lord Rairn’s house was situated in the middling level of Demres City, or the Might as it was more widely known, just rich enough to enjoy some luxuries. Most of the military barracks were placed here for ease of access to all sections of the city. Aeidor lived in the Havens, where much of the people lived, all crammed together in tight houses. It looked nothing like the Might.

“Very nice,” said an all too familiar voice commenting on his cleaning, “you really do make a fine servant.”

Aeidor remained quiet. It would do him no good to speak back to Ren, Lord Rairn’s favourite pageboy.

“Although honestly, I’m surprised Lord Rairn has decided to keep a mute like you on as long as he had. If it were me, I would have released you long ago.”

“I think he’s deaf too,” said the much deeper voice of Urip, Ren’s friend and another of Rairn’s page boys. He was halfway between boyhood and adulthood, with large arms and a thick torso but a young child-like face.

“I’m not deaf,” Aeidor said quietly.

“The mute speaks!” Ren said, clasping his hands together. “It must be a miracle!” Aeidor stopped scrubbing and turned to look at Ren, remaining on the ground.

The taller boy leant against the wall, a casual smirk across his face and his dirty boots absently tapping against the floor, distributing new dirt marks for Aeidor to clean. Aeidor often thought that he looked like a mason had been blindfolded while trying to chisel his facial features, making them look out of shape or off-centre.

“What do you want, Ren?” asked Aeidor, keeping his voice low.

“Good, I see you haven’t forgotten about what happened last time. Now, about what I want,” Ren said, his voice holding an air of both command and derision over Aeidor, “I assume you’ve heard that there will be some very important people visiting tomorrow to decide if they want to apprentice us.”

“I know of it.”

“Then you must have heard of the change in plans?”

“What changes?”

“It seems Narean is under the impression that war is creeping onto our doorstep, and they’re looking for more boys to join the military. They want to train some of us up as officers, probably make myself and the others here Lieutenants. Won’t be long before we’ll be Captains.”

Aeidor swallowed. If the military were looking for officers, then he might stand a chance of moving from a servant to a pageboy.

“I know what you’re thinking. You’re hoping that if they pick us as officers, which they undoubtedly will, then you might be able to become a pageboy.”

Aeidor kept his eyes on Ren; it was uncanny how Ren knew what he was thinking.

“I can’t read minds, Aeidor. But I know you. You’re common. I see hundreds if not thousands of commoners like you every day. You all think the same, and so it’s easy to read you. But I came here to tell you that you won’t be moving from servant to pageboy.”

“What makes you so sure?” Aeidor asked.

“Well, for starters, my younger brother also wants to serve under Rairn as a pageboy. But there are others, boys much better than you, who deserve the position. I have come to a dilemma, you see,” Aeidor hadn’t noticed that Urip had crept closer to Aeidor from behind, as had another of Ren’s friends, Habien.

“I have to admit you actually look like a viable candidate to be a pageboy. You’ve worked here nearly your whole life, you’re of age, and you, as much as I hate to say this, work hard, although nobody else but the two of us knows this. In anyone’s eyes, you’d be a good pick. Except that I don’t want to see you picked. I want to see you stay exactly where you are.”

“I have just as much-” Aeidor started to say.

“But you don’t!” countered Ren.

Aeidor didn’t say anything.

“This brings me, reluctantly, to have to deal with you before you can present yourself before Rairn tomorrow.”

Two pairs of hands grabbed Aeidor’s shoulders and pulled him down, flat onto his back. He struggled against the two boys pinning him down. It was in vain. He opened his mouth to scream for help when Ren’s large boot hit him hard in the face, busting his lip and smacking his head onto the ground. The world shifted in and out of focus. The

next hit struck his nose, causing blood to splatter over his face. It was over in seconds.

“I think you’ve hurt yourself, Aeidor,” said Ren feigning mock concern. “You’d better clean that up and take a few days off to rest and recover. I’m sure Rairn will understand.”

The three boys gave him one last look of disgust and then walked off back to the small yard where they had been practising earlier.

Aeidor waited until the pain in his head had dulled to a low throb and then carefully peeled himself off the floor. His teeth felt funny in his mouth, and he wondered if something else had happened to them. The ache between his eyebrows was the worst. It continued to pound from the inside of his head, like something trying to get out. He didn’t bother to seek anyone. Like he had done countless times before, he slipped out of the house unnoticed and made his way slowly home, avoiding main streets, his head hung low, his feet dragging with each step. If he had been paying attention, he might have seen the hooded man following him from a distance.

“Aeidor! What happened?” cried out Hessa when he returned to the orphanage. She was standing at the top of the stairs leading to the top level. Without waiting for an answer, she flew down the stairs, her golden hair flying out behind her like a kite, and threw her arms around him, holding him tightly as if she was trying to drain all the pain from his body into hers. A fragrant aroma of peaches and sweet fruit graced his nostrils, and he closed his eyes and hugged her back. It felt good to be held by her, the only one he had ever loved.

“Did they do this to you?” she whispered softly.

“Yeah,” he croaked back, trying to sound brave but failing.

“What for?”

“Ren wanted to make his younger brother look good for Lord Rairn tomorrow, and he needed me to look...”

“What did they do?”

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

She squeezed him a little tighter, and he felt his body gradually relax. He felt her take a deep breath, and instinctively he knew what she was going to talk about next.

“We should talk to somebody.”

He froze in her embrace, and she released the hug.

“I’m not telling anyone.”

“Why it won’t hurt...”

“It does hurt, though,” he said, cutting her off, “It hurt every time I told someone before. You know this.”

It was an old discussion they’d had. Yet, for all her hope that things would change, it only made things temporarily worse. Ren and the boys would pretend to prove their innocence, suggesting Aeidor was a liar, suggesting that he was manipulating them and other things. Never once did anyone listen to Aeidor’s side of the story, not even Lord Rairn. Ren had somehow convinced them all that only his side should be heard. The beatings after were always worse. They usually involved small wooden clubs.

“No, I’m not telling anyone about this. I... I just need some time to myself.”

Her wide azure blue eyes stared back at him with a familiar look of concern. She stood on her tiptoe and kissed his cheek, making sure to avoid his bleeding and bruised lip. With a heavy sigh, he walked past her up the stairs, leaving her watching him, her concern etched across her face for the remainder of the evening.

The sunlight outside had begun its regular descent towards sunset while Aeidor lay on his bed, groaning. His head was still throbbing, and his swollen lip puffed out like he had been stung by a bee. He didn't need to check himself in the mirror; he knew he looked a wreck. Voices began to filter from below up to his room, and he knew it would be nearly time for dinner. The walk down the stairs sent his head spinning again, and he had to brace himself on the wall.

Downstairs, Tal and Lylla were back, and they were talking excitedly with one another until Tal spotted Aeidor from across the room. Aeidor made a beeline for them, weaving between the packed tables in the small mess hall. A few people glanced at him as he passed, but most didn't pay him any attention. It wasn't uncommon for people at the orphanage to walk in with injuries or sometimes disappear altogether.

Aeidor sat down opposite Tal, squeezing into the tiny space between Lylla and another orphan who lived on the floor under his.

"What happened?" asked Lylla.

"C'mon Lylla, you know what happened," said Tal.

"I don't want to talk about it," Aeidor said gruffly.

"One of these days, I think I might have another private talk with Ren."

"Let's just talk about something else, alright," Aeidor said, exasperated. He tried covering his face with his arm and turned away from the person beside him who was trying to get a look at his injury.

A frequent look of concern passed between Tal and Lylla, but neither of them said anything more.

"I was just telling Tal that I've finally arranged a visit with Ilme Heners soon."

"Remind me who she is again," said Aeidor, eyeing the food counter.

"She's the one who knew my parents when they served," she leaned in close to whisper it, "as Blue Guard soldiers," she said.

Aeidor nodded his head, pretending to remember her telling them this before, even though he had no memory of the matter. Perhaps it was his recent injury that had made his memories foggier, he reasoned. He took a deep breath, taking in the hot aroma of cooked meat. He asked her to wait and then dashed up and grabbed some food before returning to the table to eat. It didn't hurt to eat, and he ate with gusto.

"What did you talk about?"

"You know I've wanted to join the Blue Guard for a while now. Well, I think she might help set up a meeting with their captain to discuss the matter soon," she said with increasing enthusiasm. She was so excited she was practically bouncing out of her chair.

"You're a bit short to join the Blue Guard," teased Tal. She gave him a withering stare.

"Bite me," she retorted.

"And a bit too young," Aeidor said, agreeing with Tal, "Besides, I thought the Blue Guard were in service until they died?" asked Aeidor, wolfing down the gravy-

smothered beef at the same time.

“Or seriously injured,” chimed in Tal.

“What happened to Heners then?”

“They say she lost her left hand, right eye and has severe scarring down her back and legs which hobbled her.”

“Damn,” whistled Aeidor in astonishment.

“And you want to join them?” asked Tal, a little concerned.

“Yeah, why wouldn’t I? My parents were Blue Guards; why can’t I be one too?”

“No offence Lylla, but your parents also died in the service.”

She bristled at the reminder.

“I am aware, Aeidor,” Lylla said tensely, her husky voice taking on a disapproving tone, “I didn’t decide to move here for the fun of it.”

Aeidor ignored her comment. Everyone in the orphanage had lost parents, and it was fairly common for them to discuss what happened to each other’s families.

“Look, I think Aeidor is trying to say that it’s a dangerous profession, and perhaps it’s something you might be rushing into without…” started Tal.

“Thinking of all the consequences?” finished Lylla, turning her withering stare to him. Her hazel eyes were no longer twinkling. Tal held up both hands as if he were surrendering.

“You want to join the military. How is that any different?”

“She’s got a point,” said Aeidor.

“And you’re a pageboy who’ll join the military too,” Lylla said, rounding on Aeidor. Aeidor didn’t correct her.

“Yes, and both of those positions are not in danger all the time. But the Blue Guard is protecting the royals of Narean and the palace at all hours of the day and night.”

“You think I can’t do it,” Lylla said, missing the point. Aeidor rolled his eyes.

“I think you’re not thinking this through. How old were your parents when they died in service? Thirty-four, thirty-five?”

“Thirty-six,” she said.

“Exactly. How old is Heners?”

“Thirty-nine.”

“How old was she when she was injured?”

“Twenty-three.”

Aeidor stopped eating and looked at her.

“All I’m saying is, the Blue Guard are notorious for churning out soldiers in the protection of the royals. Neither of us wants to see you dead in a few years for doing your job.”

“It would be an honour to die in the service of the Blue Guard!” she said hotly.

“Dead is dead, though,” said Aeidor.

The silence between them was palpable, and Aeidor could tell Lylla was scrutinising his answer. A stare from Lylla would usually cower Tal into submission, but Aeidor wasn’t afraid of her. It was one of the things that made their friendship interesting. They were more than prepared to speak their mind. Sometimes with drastic consequences.

“I’m so glad you think my parent’s death was for nothing,” she said.

“Now that’s deliberately unfair, you know that’s not what I was…” Aeidor started to say.

“Ugh, don’t even start with excuses,” she cut in. “All I want to hear is a ‘Wow, that’s awesome Lylla, I hope it goes well,’ not this whole ‘hey, your parents are dead, so don’t do what they did’ crap. You get to be a pageboy; he gets to be a soldier, and I’m stuck here watching you all live your lives while I have to scribe for some bastard in a dark room underground. Next time just keep your thoughts to yourself,” her fiery spirit lashing out. She stalked out of the mess hall, cursing them under her breath. The hall hadn’t even noticed her reaction, the babble continuing over the top.

Aeidor looked back at Tal, trying to see if his best friend had anything to add.

“Don’t look at me,” Tal said.

“You know I’m right, though. We’ve talked about her recklessness before. She’s got a death wish.”

“I mean…” Tal started.

“Hessa thinks so too. Lylla’s always had a death wish ever since she got here. When you were sick for weeks, Lylla went looking for a herb to help you get better. You remember what she did?”

Tal scratched the back of his head, pulling a pained face as if he couldn’t remember but clearly knew what Aeidor was talking about.

“Rather than buying it with money like a sensible person would do, she tried to steal it from a group of bandits. Nearly lost her hand for it. Or perhaps you remember just two months ago she thought she could climb rooftops and sneak around at night like a thief. She was lucky a Shan with healing abilities found her the next morning after she fell two stories into an alleyway.”

“C’mon, Aeidor. Her parent’s death is still fresh for her.”

“Exactly. And if she doesn’t stop, she might actually get herself killed.”

Tal sighed. Aeidor took a deep breath. He knew why Lylla had been like this since she had first joined them. She was still sixteen when her parents had died, and she had been brought here to finish her education. He had seen it in other orphans who joined them when they were older. They never lasted long. It was a pattern he had seen repeated over and over again, one that usually ended in death or some form of permanent injury. Lylla was his friend, and if he could break the cycle, maybe it would turn out for the best.

He didn’t know her specific pain. He had only been a baby when he was brought to the orphanage. A young man with a beard like a thicket, covered in blood, but not his as he claimed, left him, wrapped in a blood-smear cloth, in the arms of the orphanages’ matriarch, Mimmi, before he disappeared into the night. Mimmi had called the Patrollers, but they were unable to find anyone matching the description, and he was never seen again. Mimmi put out posters seeking his parents for several years, but nobody showed up, and nobody was willing to take him in.

Finally, Tal broke the silence between them. He cleared his throat, snapping Aeidor out of his thoughts.

“I got into the Vanguard today,” he said, trying to sound as casual as possible.

“Fan… tastic!” Aeidor replied, trying to sound as enthusiastic as he could, despite

the argument. Aeidor had seen a patrol of Vanguard the other day. They were the elite horsemen of Narean's military. Tall riders in fierce armour with their long lances towering over everyone else as they rode by. Never had Aeidor seen such an impressive group of warriors before.

"I mean, I'll be in training with them for the next three years before they even decide if I'm good enough to join them, but it's the first step right," Tal said, shrugging his shoulders.

"What will they get you to do?"

"I honestly don't know. They've given me two days to pack my bags and meet them at the barracks."

"Does this mean you're leaving us?"

Tal took a deep breath.

"Yeah, I think it does."

A moment of silence passed between them. On the one hand, Aeidor was thrilled for his best friend. On the other, he couldn't believe that he was about to leave the orphanage. A small part of Aeidor felt jealous, but he buried the emotion deep as he congratulated him, clapping him on the back and sneaking away to steal some of the sweeter drinks from the back stock to celebrate together.

They talked long into the night of their times having fun together, hassling the merchants and market stalls. Aeidor forgot all about his own troubles, preferring to talk about what life for Tal would be like in the Vanguard.

"Maybe I could put in a recommendation for you in a few years?" suggested Tal.

"Yeah," Aeidor said, remembering how Ren was out to make sure he couldn't become a pageboy tomorrow, "maybe you could."

It was past midnight when they both crept back to their beds, avoiding all the creaking planks on the ground. Tal drifted off to sleep with ease as he did every night. But Aeidor remained awake, his thoughts still swirling around.

'This might be my one chance,' he thought to himself, *'I won't let Ren ruin it. Not anymore.'*

"I'm sorry, Aeidor, I can't accept you," Lord Rairn said the next day during the presentations.

It was a gut punch. He thought even if he could just turn up, Lord Rairn would see his determination.

"Might I ask why sir?"

"I like you, Aeidor. But you've been lagging behind, and frankly, I can't take a pageboy who can't even finish the simplest of tasks."

"Sir, I can explain about the cleaning yesterday."

Lord Rairn gave him a look like he had heard this excuse before, but he generously allowed him to say something.

"Sir, I was in the process of cleaning the floors as requested. Ren and his friends appeared soon after and attacked me. I still have the injuries from the other day."

"I was told about this. I have it on good authority that Ren and his friends, as you call them, were outside practising their drills at the time."

Aeidor couldn't believe it. Someone had already told him about the incident, suggesting it was untrue.

"Sir, I can assure you that I acquired these injuries from Ren."

Lord Rairn stood up, his tone shifting.

"And I can assure you that they were outside at the time."

"Who told you?"

"That is not your concern."

"Sir. If someone is saying something different, I would like to know who it is."

"You may not."

"But sir!"

"That is enough!" shouted Lord Rairn, "You will no longer slander some of my best pupils."

"I'm sorry-"

"I've had enough, Aeidor. It's not worth it to employ you any longer. You frequently leave without completing tasks, you turn up to work in either torn or incorrect clothing, you sport multiple injuries daily with the same excuse."

"IT'S TRUE!" Aeidor shouted, desperate for Lord Rairn to understand his plight. He knew where this was headed, and he needed to prove to Lord Rairn that he was telling the truth.

"Get out. I don't want to see your face around here anymore. You are no longer in my employ."

Aeidor tried to explain to him that he had been misinformed, that he would work harder than ever, that he would take less pay, anything to convince him to let him stay on. Rairn simply walked past him, leaving him alone in the hall, his world crumbling around him.

His walk home was a quiet affair. He hardly paid attention to the people around him, several times almost running into someone. The last person he bumped into was a tall man in a cloak and hood who had been leaning on a wall around the corner.

"Sorry, sir," Aeidor mumbled, unaware that the man hadn't said anything in response and was watching him as he walked down the alley. His head hung low, and his shoulders slumped forward. If he had turned around, he would have seen the man start walking after him.

The orphanage was abuzz when Aeidor returned. They were setting up a party to celebrate Tal's acceptance into the Vanguard program. It was always a special event when someone was adopted or were able to leave and head out into the world. Mimmi didn't even see him as he trudged up the stairs to his room. Tal wouldn't be home yet, and Hessa would have left for the markets nearby to pick up the items for the party. Lylla was most likely at her classes or meeting with someone important. She had all sorts of contacts she met with regularly since her parent's death. He suspected she was trying to convince that lady she should join the Blue Guard. He didn't care. Everything seemed so grey. He turned the handle of his door and slipped inside, thankful that the other boys weren't inside. He flopped onto his small bed, feeling every familiar dip and divot he had come to know over the years. He lay face

down on his bed for a couple of minutes, his mind slowly catching up as he began to process something he had seen as he had entered the room.

With a jolt, his eyes widened, and he sat up in bed instantly, turning around to look at the corner of the room. Sitting on a lonely chair in the only darkened corner of the room sat a hooded man with a large cloak. A long steel sword sat across his lap, and his face was obscured by the cowl of the hood, hiding it in shadow.

“Hello, Aeidor,” said the man in a low tone, his voice strong and salty. “We need to talk.”