

a Reign *of*
Emerald Fire

A YARN SPUN FROM THE LORE OF UPRYNENOS

MATTHEW J TURNER



CHAPTER ONE



A CARAVAN GETAWAY

Awakening with an exaggerated stretch, the sun peeked over the horizon. Its dazzling rays gleamed over the land, glazing the desert sky with a warming glow, announcing the beginning of its glorious ascent.

The new daylight glaring rudely into her eyes, Yilonia gave a rueful sigh, which was lost in the tumultuous racket of hundreds of weary folk making an obnoxious start to their days. She'd awoken in an uncomfortable state. Sweat ran down her back from the stuffy heat, yet her body was shivering from relentless fatigue. Her back screamed in agony from hours of hunching in positions a contortionist would struggle to master. A persistent ache in her neck rendered the typically simple task of lifting her head a significant challenge, leaving her almost as dishevelled as some of her shadier companions on this journey of the damned.

Haggard they might seem, yet together they shared the many trials and tribulations of travelling in a cramped vegetable cart, living through each spine-crunching bump of the road in grudging solidarity. Each traveller selflessly endured the task of finding every splinter with their arses without complaint, which Yilonia believed was a true show of camaraderie. Sadly, life as a human

pincushion wasn't as glamorous as it sounded. Riding in such a rundown old thing, which was still marked by a few stubborn beetroot stains, and emitted a pungent rotten-cabbage smell no amount of scrubbing could get rid of, hardly filled Yilonia with enthusiasm. The prospect of rolling through another long and arduous day – a day that was once again lacking the faintest hint of a breeze – was becoming less appealing by the second.

After a fruitless period of tossing and turning, Yilonia reluctantly abandoned all hope of falling back to sleep. She attempted a series of complex manoeuvres to free her arms and stretch her body. Unhappy with the orange-tinted dawn, she turned the air from amber to blue with a string of harsh curses, cringing as every muscle in her back unknotted itself.

The sun rose early this time of year. Only two of the nine travellers who journeyed with Yilonia in the shoddy little cart were awake; neither of them seemed any happier than her at being so.

Slouching against the opposite corner was a tall, withered old man with dark olive skin. According to rumour, he was the rightful lord of some hovel down south. He now spent his days as a bitter outcast, after his younger brother usurped him of his lands and title.

Sitting across from Yilonia, waving his wide-brimmed hat as a makeshift fan, grumbled a dwarf. Owing to a disastrous combination of scalding heat, bright ginger hair and pasty white skin, he'd been left looking not so much sun-kissed but sun-open-mouth-snogged-with-tongue. To make matters worse, he had one of the strangest accents Yilonia had ever come across. She'd tried to offer him some blight oil to help with his sores, but he'd waved his big fluffy hat and shouted at her in a voice akin to an enraged goat's.

There's just no helping some people, she mused.

Admittedly, dwarfs were not, stereotypically, the most accommodating people at the best of times, and much like Yilonia, he was presumably getting sick of trundling along endlessly, day after day, night after night.

Morning wore on. The caravan rumbled along the ancient road, coarse sand crumpling under its wheels, leaving nothing to show for their long journey but a faint trail. Apt, as no fool traipsed this far out into the desert without hoping to become nothing more than a fading stain on history.

Droughlyke – the perfect spot for anyone desperate to leave their past behind and escape to the edge of the known world. To most, being slowly roasted alive under the scorching desert sun wasn't particularly desirable. Yet safe havens were tough to come by, so enjoying relative safety in exchange for back-breaking, unappreciated and utterly pointless labour in intolerable conditions was as good of a deal as you could get. Thankfully, running away this far north, you would've had to have committed regicide for anyone to bother coming after you.

Coincidentally, Yilonia hadn't broken any real laws. At least not the King's Law. She'd simply indulged in one of those basic human rights that had, once upon a time, attracted the vindictiveness of some fool who'd held wildly fanatical views and wielded far too much power. Through fear of their own persecution, precipitated by an effective regime of hardship, torture, and unrepentant cruelty, the masses had accepted it as just another law. An unwritten one, but a law nonetheless.

Yilonia huffed then coughed as the rickety cart swayed along in the vast caravan of the Val Company. The dust-filled air turned each breath into a lungful of grit and her underwear into sandpaper. Flies swarmed both ends of the monstrous oxen that'd eaten, sweat and shat their way through the last six hundred miles

or so. For Yilonia, much as for the oxen, sustenance was essential to surviving the scorching bleakness of the north. So why must she suffer dried meat for breakfast again? Dried fucking meat! Her tongue already tasted like it'd licked the arsehole of a sand-serpent.

Against all better judgment, and with much resistance from her jaw, Yilonia forced her portion down. Attempting to ignore the hunger pangs in her stomach, she made her way carefully to the edge of the cart. She slipped off to settle her affairs before her journey's end.

Striding past cart after cart, with the glaring sun on her back, Yilonia struggled to comprehend the sheer magnitude of the landscape spread out before her. The sight always remained the same – the seemingly-endless caravan stretching off into the golden horizon – yet each wagon she passed brought new sensations. The whiff of ox shit, for example, was a fragrance she knew all too well. However, some things would always seem out of place. To Yilonia's ears, the laughter of playing children had become unnerving.

Val's caravan seemed to comprise a whole city, passing through a perpetual blaze of sun and sand, passing from settlement to settlement, making trades for goods or gold before returning to the road. Dozens of families, hundreds of exiles, and countless ordinary folk trying to make an honest living. Never staying, never home. A whole patchwork of people, each striving towards a purpose. Maybe they'd shaken off the shackles of orderly existence and feudal obligation a long time ago. No fields to till or crops to reap... or fathers to please.

Even the lowliest scum here have their fleas to confide in, friends to share a cup with, family to care for, she thought. Such things left her feeling like an outsider, flailing hopelessly in an ocean of unachievable freedom.

She was snapped away from the ravaging jaws of self-pity by a familiar, joyful cry.

‘Loni, Loni!’ she heard from a few carriages behind, followed by the distinctive thud of a small child crashing down from a cart, with the grace only little Lysio Lightfingers could possess.

A thin smile formed on Yilonia’s face. Slowing pace, she pretended not to hear the shouts of the oncoming child until the very last moment, when she swung round, grabbed Lysio under the arms and threw her into the air.

Lysio’s laughter rang through the desert, washing away Yilonia’s doubts and sorrows, as if a calming wave had reached her from the ocean a thousand miles away.

‘Put me down! Put me down!’ Lysio cried, forcing each word through her wheezing laughter. ‘I’ve got something for you. *Please* put me down!’

After throwing and catching Lysio thrice more, Yilonia gave in to the ache in her arms and plonked the girl back down, ruffling her short yet remarkably knotted brown hair.

‘Lysio, never doubt my appreciation of your... talents,’ Yilonia said, ‘but I think you should return whatever you have to its rightful owner, don’t you?’

Lysio looked down to her bare feet. Her toes wiggled, digging a tunnel in the sand, fidgeting with feigned shyness.

‘Whaddya mean?’ She beamed up at Yilonia, with a flutter of her lashes that would’ve melted the caravan’s entire supply of butter, if the desert sun hadn’t done so first.

Yilonia huffed. ‘You know exactly what I mean. I don’t want to be involved in another argument with some Lundinian bastard who says the lovely new veil you gave me belongs to his wife!’

Yilonia hadn’t long recovered from the last embarrassing encounter and wasn’t willing to let herself be drawn into another

any time soon. Little Lysio Lightfingers was sweet as freshly drawn honeycomb and precious as gold leaf, and she damn well knew it. Yet disguised behind her innocent facade was one of the finest pickpockets in all the wide north. Since she'd been old enough to grasp things in her tiny hands, she and her inadequate wretch of a father had travelled together in Val's ever-shifting caravan, selling supplies and trinkets to anyone shady enough to ask no questions. Which was quite a significant percentage of the population.

'Cor, you do something once and get tarred with the same brush for the rest of your life!' Lysio exclaimed, throwing her arms up in the air. She gave Yilonia a crooked smile. 'Didn't turn away the little silver pendant I stole for you, though, did ya?'

'That was different – it was mine to begin with!'

'And I got it back for you, so fair's fair. By the way, you never did say thanks for that,' said Lysio, clearly trying to sound hurt as she plopped down with a pout.

'What? Er... thank you, I guess.'

'You're welcome.' Lysio beamed. 'Anyway, it was a win-win in the end – me and Pa got some coins, and you got your pendant back. I don't see what the problem is.'

Yilonia was about to argue, but she caught sight of Lysio's eyes staring deep into hers and buckled.

That's my argument soundly defeated, she thought.

'Come on. If you're just going to get up to no good, you can help me find Mascal,' she said, hoping the girl would be humble in victory.

Lysio's face, however, soon bore the sly yet enchanting smile of a child relishing in one-upping an elder. She sprung up, hugged Yilonia's legs, then shot off, kicking up a storm of sand as she went.

'Let's go, slowcoach! Catch me if you can!'

Rubbing the grit from her eyes, Yilonia watched Lysio run off along the caravan, sighed at the whimsy of youth, then shouted and chased after her.

By the time Yilonia had caught up, she was wheezing uncontrollably, feeling as if a white-hot gauntlet had seized her lungs and clawed searing nails deep into her soft pink flesh. She hadn't ever considered herself out of shape. However, kneeling there, gasping for each precious lungful of air as Lysio frolicked around her, Yilonia conceded how decrepit she must look.

Eventually, she regained enough strength to stand and continue on. *Must be all this time riding in the back of that sodding cart*, she thought, panting like a dog. She resolved to put more effort into keeping herself fit. *I've never heard of an exile being 'on the brisk walk' before. If I can't go twenty feet without coughing up a lung, I've got no chance.*

'Hurry up. It'll be supper by the time we find Mascall at this rate!'

Lysio took Yilonia's hand, dragging her along. For a while, Yilonia carried the young girl on her shoulders to save her legs. However, before too long, Lysio jumped down and zoomed off like a crossbow bolt, leaving Yilonia wondering why she'd bothered carrying her in the first place. She smiled at Lysio's antics all the same.

After being delayed by some distractions, including wolf-whistles from a few scumbags in a passing cart – one of whom earned himself a black eye from a good shot with an apple core – and an elderly elven couple who needed help fitting a new wheel to their broken carriage, they came upon Val Mascall.

In an age gone by, Val Mascall had been a strong but elegant tower of a man. A man gifted with a silver tongue, whose words had been honest as the reflection in a mirror. Sadly, as the decades passed, those words had become tarnished, the silver tongue

pawned off for wine. Years of trailing the caravan, watching the world change around him and failing to evolve with the times had left Mascal lonely and pitiful but undoubtedly rich.

When Yilonia and Lysio approached, he was arguing with a frail elven woman, in a cart bearing a tattered sign: *Heleaif's Antique Trinkets of Mystical Magic and Wondrous Witchcraft*. Peering at the wares, Yilonia noticed all sorts of odds and sods, some of which looked quite dangerous, especially since the cull of magic.

Unsurprisingly, there appeared to be some disagreement over money that the old woman, who must've been Heleaif, owed Mascal. Her eyes were awash with tears, as she pleaded that the small pouch of coins she held in her trembling hands was all she could afford to pay him.

Val Mascal sat shirtless. His bulbous belly dripped with sweat as he stroked his chin with one heavily ringed hand. He may have been more imposing if he'd had a beard, rather than flaps of loose skin hanging from his cheekbones. To Heleaif, however, he must've cut a forcible figure. He barked a string of insults, wagging a large sausage of a finger in her face, before snatching the pouch of coins and jumping down from the cart.

'Ah, if it isn't my favourite little puppy!' he boomed, with enough volume that the arse-end of the caravan probably rocked from the shockwave. With all the grace of a disorientated lamb strolling onto an icy lake, he'd landed only an inch or two from Yilonia's face. 'Maybe puppy isn't a strong enough term – I think *bitch* might be more fitting. Anyway, come to pay your debts, have you? Don't think old Mascal has forgotten about your imminent departure!'

Lysio's ears perked up.

'Oh, and what do we have here?' he said. 'Blimey, she's a little one, isn't she? You surprise even me, Yilonia.' He knelt to whisper to Lysio, loud enough for everyone within arrowshot to hear. 'I'd

be careful around this one, if I were you. She's been known to get up to *all sorts*.'

Yilonia couldn't resist imagining gelding him with a blunt cheese knife.

'How could I forget?' she said curtly. 'I've been religiously counting down the days.'

'Well, I'm glad to hear you haven't totally disowned the old ways. We faithful followers know every sinner shall face punishment within the cleansing Flame once the Eternal Shuffler comes to claim their souls, and I think we can all agree *your* sins, my dear, are wholly certain.' Mascal smiled, baring a mix of gold and rotten teeth.

'Let me worry about my sins, and you can worry about yours,' Yilonia said, with a smile just as scornful. 'And yes, as a matter of fact, that's why I'm here.' She tossed a small pouch at Mascal, which he snapped out of the air with a reflex belying his age and size. 'There's my full payment for a one-way trip from Stunheath to Droughlyke.'

Mascal looked up from the gold coins he'd poured out from the pouch.

'You're short,' he said.

'Well, that's a miraculous observation, Val. I blame my mother. She was one-eighth dwarf.'

'That's not what I meant, and you know it!' he thundered.

'It's the amount we agreed on,' Yilonia said. She'd expected some form of extortion and prepared for it appropriately.

'That was for Stunheath to Droughlyke in six months. It's been eight and half!'

'That's your fault, not mine.'

'You still need to pay for the extra resources you've used.'

'I'll pay you what we agreed, and nothing else,' snapped Yilonia.

He's damn lucky to be getting what he is! she raged. The conditions were significantly worse than Mascal had led her to believe. Besides, she'd looked after herself for most of the journey, so his talk of 'extra resources' was utter bullshit.

'You bloody cunt-muncher!' Mascal exclaimed. 'It's all your type ever do! Play up to the strings of good, honest men, such as me, just to turn around once you've got what you want and screw us over – and not even in the way we like! I've always said you can't trust women, especially ones who...' Mascal paused to gaze around him. 'Hey, why aren't the carts moving?' he shouted to no one in particular.

'Don't know, Val Mal,' a dishevelled dwarf called from the nearest cart. 'Looks like something up front is blocking the way.'

'Why aren't they going around it, then? Flame and ashes, I suppose I'll have to go and fix everything, like sodding normal! And for the love of the gods above, put some blight oil on, man. I've seen healthier things in the privy bucket!'

Mascal threw one last spiteful look over to Yilonia, then made his way towards the head of the caravan. With nothing better to do, Yilonia and Lysio followed.

'Oh! Fatty just reminded me,' Lysio said. 'I was meant to give you something!' She dived into her ratty brown satchel and pulled out a small dagger.

'Wow, I hadn't realised you'd moved up to that kind of theft.'

'What? No, no, no. It's a gift.' Lysio beamed. 'I bought it for you.'

'You bought it?' Yilonia asked, both astonished and relieved. 'Why? I mean, I'm touched, but...'

'Well, I know you're leaving soon, and I know what kinda place you're walking into.' Lysio took Yilonia's hand. 'You're the closest thing to a big sister I've ever had, and it'll be two or three long years before we're back up this way, so I just wanted to say thank you.'

‘Aww, Lysio.’ Yilonia scooped her up and gave her a spinning hug. ‘You’ve brought me so much joy on this journey. Thank you so much – I promise to keep it with me always.’

‘And the hilt’s engraved with two rings linked together. That’s us. Friends forever!’

‘It’s beautiful, little one. Just like you.’ Yilonia hugged her again, before putting her down and tucking the dagger away.

‘That’s not all. Look,’ Lysio said, as she held up an ornate gold ring. ‘It’s Fatty’s.’

Yilonia burst out laughing, grabbed the young girl and ruffled her hair wildly.

‘Oh, Lightfingers, you’re a wonder to behold!’

* * *

The head of the great caravan was tremendously crowded. Everyone from the first mile of carriages must’ve come to see what was causing the ruckus, and every one of them was fighting their way forward, attempting to get a better glimpse of the action. Yilonia could see Val Mascal in the centre of the crowd, bellowing orders from his camel, glancing down at something on the ground. Whatever it was, it’d spooked him.

Yilonia picked Lysio up and tried to work her way through the braying mob. As she shoved her way forward, various mutterings of what had happened spread through the crowd. Most stories she heard were as crazy as they were different, but all were worrisome.

Yilonia could hear the wailing of an old woman close to the front, and occasional shouts of fear, yet she needed to see with her own eyes what had stopped the never-ending journey of the Val Company caravan. When she finally fought her way through, she struggled to understand what lay before her.

A crumbled mess of cinders slumped on the parched earth. A whiff of stale smoke drifted through the air.

What creature from above – or, more likely, from the abyss below – could've done this?

A whole host of possibilities ran through her mind, as she stood gazing down at the scorched, blackened bones of a horse and rider, fused together in a twisted wreck.