

CHAPTER ONE

405 A.A. Thirty-second holding, Averalaaan

Rath considered himself a businessman.

Besides being something of an expert in the finer arts of item relocation, he also considered himself a linguist, a writer of some renown in the lower parts of town, and, in the same fashion, a scholar.

He did not consider himself a swordsman, although he had been considered promising in a youth that he was well quit of now. Swords were cumbersome, expensive, and an instant magnet for the eye of wary guards, and for that reason, he seldom carried his. The fact that he had not seen fit to *sell* it said something about him; what, he was not inclined to examine more closely.

His hair was still a dark brown although with the passage of time it grayed; he took care not to notice just how much. He himself allowed no stoop of age to threaten his posture, and if the line of his nose, once patrician perfection, was now broken, he fancied that it added some character to his face.

So did the scars, and they were a less fortunate character, especially when he chose to make excursions to the more expensive parts of the Commons. But it was in the more expensive arena of the commons that merchants fought their weaponless, almost clandestine duels, and it was in those brick and stone buildings, with their expensive windows and deplorably inexpensive guards, that he did most of his trade these days.

He had therefore learned a bit of the subtle art of make-up, a fashion he had once despised in his youth. His rooms -- he had two at the moment, although that would no doubt change, as he moved frequently to avoid the lingering resentment of some of his clientele -- were littered with clothing from all walks of life. Even the highest, although that clothing was also the oldest, and the one he chose most seldom to don.

It held some part of his memory, evidence of the truth of a past he had long since forgotten. Or, if he were honest, tried to forget. Drinking helped, and he drank seasonally for that reason. That, and to dull the Winter pain of old wounds and the breakage of old bones. Empty bottles stood in a neat row in the bedroom's easternmost corner.

Here, too, he had wigs, and face paint that would make a carnival proud;

he had fine rings, silver at base, but plated with gold and the occasional real gem; he had heavy necklaces, the wearing of which made him appear to be one of the pretentious people who dreamed of wealth without ever comprehending the social subtleties that truly denoted it.

And he had names, although these were not so disorderly, existing as they did in inventory contained by memory. One of them was real, if that word had meaning here, in the life he had chosen. He had letters, complete with wax seals, that designated him a courier of choice for any number of well-known merchant houses; he had letters that designated him the negotiator of choice in the same way. They were written variously in spidery hand, in bold hand, in feminine perfection, and in words that were barely Weston; his inventory in this regard was large.

What he did not have -- what he frequently promised himself he would never have -- was a companion. He disliked anything that was beyond his control, and always had. He liked privacy, isolation, and the ability to let go of all his many faces the moment he closed the door behind his back. Home, as it was always meant to be.

No, he thought, unusually honest on this bright and warm day, not always. There had been a time when home had meant something different. A time, later, when it had come to stand for everything he despised.

Now? Contempt took energy.

He marshalled that precious energy, choosing clothing with care. Or with as much care as he usually did, in seclusion; he swept through the piles that were more or less orderly, if wrinkled and somewhat less than perfectly clean, and then deposited a handful of cloth across his bed.

His door came with three locks; his windows were barred. He could afford both, and they were usually the first alteration he made in any place he called home now. All of the things that could be locked, were.

He chose, of all things, worn velvet; he chose a leather satchel that hung across his shoulder, an open display of wealth in the poorer holdings in which he chose to live much of the time, and he chose an obvious long knife. It wasn't a sword; that was hidden in the bowels of his collection of paraphernalia. But in as much as his presence could evoke threat, this would have to do. He also whitened the lines of his scars with an appropriate mixture of grease and powder, and darkened the circles under his eyes. His hair, he plaited. It wasn't long, but long enough to suggest a warrior gone soft.

After another few minutes, in which he glanced through his forged credentials, he shrugged and set them all aside. Here, charm -- or what

passed for charm when dealing with Radell, would have to do.

After he had finished, he glanced at the silvered mirror -- it was a vanity he could afford, and in fact, one of the few he could not afford to be without -- and then he made his way to the door, unlocking each bolt carefully and precisely. He made sure he had keys; he could pick the locks with relative ease, but it was a chore, and likely to be noticed by his inquisitive neighbours. Neighbours were getting to be a bit of a bother; it was almost time to move again.

He closed the door at his back, made sure it was solidly locked, and drew breath. Smoke lingered in the air, seeping from beneath the large cracks of poorly-fitted doors. Some of it was cooking; most of it was pipe. None of it was his.

He made his way down the narrow hall, and down steps that made the hall feel wide; navigated yet another long hall and a set of open doors and found himself, at last, upon the streets.

At this time of day, they were crowded. The thirty-second holding was one of the poorest of the hundred, and magisterial guards were encountered seldom; because they were absent, assorted would-be thugs gathered near the buildings or the alleys that occurred between them.

But they seldom preyed on children, and children gathered in the streets, avoiding wagon wheels by a miracle of dexterity and attention that never failed to amaze. They had sticks, hoops, leather balls, and a great deal of noisy energy.

Rath smiled, fake indulgence in the expression, as he met the eyes of some of those urchins, in their poor-fitted, over-worn clothing. They were wary of him almost instantly -- friendliness from a stranger often had that effect. But they made way for him, which had been his intent, and he passed them by without another thought.

No, his thoughts were on Radell, on the next possible mission, and the next bag of coins that would make a move more smooth.

Perhaps because he was so occupied, he didn't notice that this was the day in which his self-imposed exile would come to an end.

He didn't notice that one of the older children had broken away from a group by the far building; she skirted the alleys, giving them wide berth, and made her way toward the common, her hands in her pockets.

But when she passed by him, he did notice the dull glint of an equally dull knife. His was out of his sheath before he spoke or moved; she was on his right, and the knife, in his left hand. He had always used either hand

with equal grace.

Had he been in the Commons proper, he might not have spared her another glance; children of her kind were numerous there. But in the streets of the thirty-second? Rare enough. The consequences were higher, here.

She went, with clumsy and obvious movements, for the straps of the satchel that hung by his side. He brought his knife in, to cut the top side of her hand -- a warning, and one that didn't require long explanations.

But she brought her dull knife up at the last moment, and his blade skittered off its negligible edge; she kicked him, hard, in the knee, and yanked the satchel off his shoulder as he doubled over.

This was an inconvenience; it was not yet a crisis.

But it became one -- a subtle one -- when he met her eyes. Brown eyes, dark skin, unruly hair -- things that he expected to see on these streets. But her expression was one of shame, of regret, of things that hinted at conscience, even though it was absolutely clear from the prominence of her cheek bones and her pointed jaw that she needed the money to eat.

The expression slowed him, somewhat. Age, perhaps, slowed him more. But neither of these slowed him enough to aid the young thief.

She ran, and he had already covered half her shadow when she suddenly banked right. As if, he thought, she knew exactly what he would do next, and hoped to evade him.

He could outrun her; her legs were short, and she was spindly, exhausted. But he kept pace with her, to see where she would go. The curiosity was out of place, and he hadn't time for it -- but he surprised himself. He made the time.

She didn't -- quite -- surprise him. She didn't head for a building; she didn't head into the holdings. No home, then.

Instead, she turned on her heel and spinning, she ran toward the busiest street in the thirty-second -- the one he himself had intended to take.

This, he thought, *is interesting*. And he followed. It was one of his skills. Hunting.

#

He picked up his empty satchel about fifty yards away from where he'd lost it. He didn't bother to open it and check its contents; he could tell by its weight and silence that whatever it had contained -- and it hadn't been much -- was gone. The girl was gone with it; the few coins were probably clutched in her hands, and if she weren't careful, she'd lose them to thieves just like her.

Which would serve her right. But wouldn't, in fact, do him any good at all. He stopped for a moment under the paltry shade of the ancient trees that girded the Common, smiled at a market guard, tipped his hat just a touch, and then thought.

With a distinct rolling of eyes, he made his way to the poorest section of the Common: the farmer's market. It was late enough in the day that the food there would be thoroughly picked over; what was left could be had for a fraction of its original asking price, if the child was both hungry and smart.

Having seen her, he didn't doubt the hungry.

And having lost her, his pride wouldn't let him doubt the smart. He made his way through the crowd in silence, regretting the obvious emphasis he'd placed on the scars that adorned his face. It did mean people made room for him -- but that room was a hint and a warning if the girl was being at all cautious.

He prowled through the vendors that remained, and they watched him carefully. Some tried to garner his attention by shouting out praises of what was obviously not deserving of praise; the others let him be. They'd seen him, in one guise or another, and perhaps they even recognized this particular choice. It didn't matter; he wasn't thinking about them.

He was thinking, instead, about the girl.

She was nine, he thought. Ten. No older. He wondered if she had a family. Many of the street thieves did -- if you considered a prostitute and an absent father family. But most of those children would have made their way home with their earnings; this one hadn't.

Ah.

He could see her back. Could see her talking with a farmer. To his great surprise, the farmer seemed friendly. Not cloying, and not argumentative, the way farmers in the Commons market usually were -- but genuinely happy to see her. He held carrots in one hand, and something that had probably seen better days -- two of them, if Rath was any judge -- in another, but it was the carrots he was offering.

So. She had friends, of a sort, in the Commons.

He hesitated, and then stepped back. There were no real shadows here, no convenient way of disappearing. But anonymity had its advantage, and there were enough people in the Commons that anonymity was all but guaranteed. He watched the girl pay for the food, and then she surprised him again; she offered the farmer more of the precious coin that she held.

He couldn't see her face; he could see the farmer's. The large man's brows

rose slightly in surprise, and then lowered in mimicry of annoyance. It was poor mimicry; it might convince a child of ten, but it would fall flat with any other audience.

Rath waited until the farmer refused whatever she had offered for a third time; waited a little bit longer, to see the girl slowly make her way from the wagon stall, her head bent, her arms cradling the bundle she carried as if it were life itself, which, given her weight and the obvious shape of her bones, was fair enough. She dwindled, dwarfed easily by the adults that were still set on conducting business, until she was out of sight.

Only then did he approach the farmer, and raise his hat.

The farmer's face stiffened in instant suspicion.

"That girl," Rath said quietly. He was a good judge of character, and had intended to open up discussion with some sort of friendly, idle chatter -- but the farmer's face made it clear how effective that would be, and Rath hated to waste time.

"What girl?"

"The one you just sold the carrots."

"I've sold a lot of carrots today," the farmer answered. "And I'm about done." He started to close the wagon's back flap.

Rath caught the man's wrist so quickly the man didn't have time to draw back. "Don't," he said softly, "play games with me. The child that just left."

"What of her?"

"You know her."

The farmer shrugged. "I see her from time to time."

"How often?"

"Why do you want to know?"

He almost told the farmer the truth. Almost. Couldn't be certain later why he hadn't. "I was a friend of her mother's," he said at last. It seemed safe.

But it produced another frown. "Her family won't be happy if you don't leave her alone."

"Judging from the state of her clothing," Rath replied, choosing his words with care, "I'd guess her family won't care one way or the other."

The farmer hesitated again, and started to raise his free hand.

"Don't," Rath told the man, lowering his voice. "Don't even think it. I've no interest in the girl in that particular fashion. But I'm curious. She seems ... different."

"Different how?"

"She hasn't been on the streets for long enough."

At that, the farmer seemed to deflate. "Aye," he said, half-bitter. "Not for long enough. She won't go to the Mother's temple -- any of 'em. She's still got some pride in her, and she's honest."

As she'd just stolen his satchel, or at least its contents, Rath was justifiably dubious. He kept this to himself.

"Where does she live?"

The farmer shrugged. "I don't know," he said. "She says she's living with a friend of her father's."

"And?"

He shrugged. "I told you, she's still got some fierce pride. If I had to guess, I'd say she's living under a bridge across the river."

"Why?"

"She's not dirty enough," the farmer said with a shrug. "Look, it's none of my business. But she's alone here, and she looks like one of my daughters. She's polite enough, and she never takes more than she needs. Doesn't take enough," he added, "even when I offer." He shook his head. "She tried to pay me for the last time. When I gave her more than she'd paid for; she didn't check until after I'd gone."

"Thank you." Rath paused, and then added, "Do you know her name?"

"Name's Jay, as far as I know. Jay Markess."

Markess was not a common name. The fact that she had a family name at all was unusual. Radell forgotten, Rath stood in the open sun of the Commons, thinking.

#

Lies are a tricky thing.

And when you tell them to yourself? You can almost believe them. Rath didn't pride himself on honesty. Honesty was for the rich or the lucky. He therefore had no difficulty telling himself that he was now crawling along the banks of the river that wound its way through the hundred holdings beneath rickety bridges and old stone causeways that had been built in better days and still bore the weight of wagons with dignity, in a simple search for the money she'd stolen.

There were men and women on the banks, some cleaning clothing, some cleaning themselves, the latter with vastly less success. There were children here as well, many of them *in* the water. They made a lot of noise, half of it

glee and joy, the other half recrimination and tears. None of these children were the one he sought, although he paused to gaze at them all before he continued on his way.

The sun rose, and he considered the water with a little more envy until it started to sink again. At this time of year, it was never cold. Even the nights were humid, and the salt of the sea, miles off, could be tasted on lip and tongue.

But his curiosity had always been his downfall; he was curious now, and he didn't intend to stop searching until he found the girl.

When the sky was crimson, he did.

She was half clothed, and, judging from the way she clung to the shadows of the bridge, not comfortable being so. But she was trying to wash her face, her arms, her hands; she scrubbed at them, dousing them in the running current of the summer river; it was at its lowest. Spring would bring the rains that would cause it to swell, making the lowest of the bridges nigh impassible.

He waited for her to finish as the minutes passed and the darkness gathered. Colour, sunlight dying, could be seen between buildings; the sky above was already revealing the brightest of stars as faint light. Moon was at half, he thought, but there were no clouds. The magelights that kept the streets lit well beyond sundown were high enough above ground that they had yet to be dislodged by thieves.

Then again, the magelights were tended, and often by mages, so they were seldom an object considered worthy of theft; too risky.

When she had clothed herself again -- in dry shirt, to his surprise -- he made his way down the banks and folded his arms across his chest, waiting to be noticed.

She didn't even look up.

"I'm sorry," she mumbled, her back turned toward him, her shoulders hunched. Her legs were straight and still; she had no intention of running again.

It wasn't quite what he had expected to hear, although he'd heard the whining and snivelling of more thieves in his life than he cared to remember. There was a quality to the girl's apology that those pleadings lacked.

"For what?" He approached her with care, his dagger sheathed.

"For stealing your money," she replied. She turned to face him. "I didn't spend it all."

"You couldn't."

Her curls half covered her eyes, and she lifted a palm to shove them to one side. Because they were still wet, they went. He could see her eyes so clearly, it might have been full daylight.

"You're Jay," he told her quietly, as if she were a wild animal. "Jay Markess."

She nodded. She didn't seem surprised that he knew her name.

"And I'm -- I'm called Old Rath in these parts."

"Rath. Like in anger."

"No. It's a diminutive. My sister used to use it, when we lived together." Without thought, he added, "My name is actually Ararath, but I'd prefer to be called Rath."

"Mine's Jewel," she said, scrunching the lines of her face in disdain. "But everyone calls me Jay."

"This is where you live."

She started to say something, and stopped herself, watching him warily. "Yeah," she said, with a shrug. "This is where I live." And then, in a rush, "But only until I can find work."

"At your age?"

She said something rude. He almost laughed. But there was a gravity about her that defied laughter, especially ugly laughter.

"You took something that belonged to me," he told her quietly. "How do you intend to repay me?"

Her shadowed eyes, her sudden, *complete* stillness, told him more than he wanted to know. He wondered what he was doing here, on these banks. Wondered why he had asked her name, why he had spent a long day searching for her.

Head bowed, she approached him.

He reached out, caught her by the chin, and dragged her face up. Beneath the dirt, it was paler than he had thought it. "Your parents -- they were from the South?"

"My Oma -- my grandmother was." She shrugged. North or South, it didn't matter much.

"Mine are old stock," he replied. "From the North. They don't much like thieves."

"They don't like 'em much in the South either, according to my Oma. At least here, they don't cut your hands off."

"No," he said quietly. "They don't." He looked at her; she couldn't move her face. "Jewel. Jay Markess." He shrugged. "Keep the money. Consider it a loan." He let her go, and her eyes widened.

"I'll see you around," he added softly, retreating from the banks.

#

Five days later, he found her again. He knew how much money she had taken, and knew how quickly it would dwindle. He had, in the meantime, managed to acquire more of it, but kept it better hidden.

He had gone searching through the old tunnels in the evening as he often did, but when he returned, he chose to eschew the noisy taverns that seemed to blossom only at the fading of the light. He was restless, and not yet ready to return to the confining space of two cramped rooms, so he continued to walk aimlessly, the whole of the night sky laid out before him. He had no particular destination in mind -- and he chose to believe this until he found himself skirting the edge of the river.

He had chosen clothing that better suited the holdings, and his scars were not so unnaturally prominent. He hadn't bothered to plait his hair; he'd drawn it back over his face, and tied it in a loose knot. He thought about having it cut every couple of weeks during any season that wasn't Summer; in the Summer, he thought about it constantly. But it was a necessary part of his work, and he let it be.

Jewel Markess was on the banks, just beneath the flat wooden slats of her bridge; there was no fire to light her, and only the moon to give her shadow, but he saw her instantly. He approached with care, and waited to be noticed.

She took her time, and because she did, he knew that she'd seen him coming. But she'd clearly been waiting for him to break the silence, as if the breaking were some kind of contest. When it was clear that he wouldn't, she turned to face him. Light on her face was scant; if it weren't for her height, she might have been older.

Her expression was grave. "Rath," she said quietly. She lifted a hand in greeting. The hand shook.

"Jay," he replied, bowing. It was a natural bow, and as a consequence, far too formal.

"I don't have your money yet," she told him. The hand fell, and she drew it across her chest, as if it were armour. "Are you --"

"No," he said quickly. "I was out today. I'm something of a historian, and I found a couple of stone tablets I'm hoping to sell." He wasn't quite

sure why he'd said it; it was true, but truth was something he seldom offered anyone. Certainly not a thief in the hundred holdings.

Her dark eyes widened, and he recognized the particular cause of that width: she was curious. But she didn't ask, and wouldn't.

Before he could stop himself, before he could break the fragility of the mood, he pulled his backpack from his shoulders.

"You're not afraid I'll steal them too?" She asked bitterly. Age, in the words, in the question. Age and self-knowledge.

"Not much," he replied, both smiling and shrugging. "They're heavy, and you don't know where to sell them. Take them to the wrong place, and they'll be thrown out in the garbage heap, and if the proprietor is annoyed enough, you'll follow them." He pulled the lighter of the tablet fragments from the pack and handed it to her, watching how she handled it.

She handled it with care, as if she could tell, just by touch, how old it must be. Her fingers traced the runes that were engraved in the stone's surface, and her eyes followed her hand's movements, absorbed by them. "I can't read these," she said at last.

His brow rose a fraction. "I should hope not."

"Why? I can read," she added. Defensive, showing her true age at last.

"If you can read these," he told her, "you're wasted here."

She ran her fingers across the stone's surface again, as if sensation could be stored and remembered, and then she handed the piece back to him. He touched her hand, meaning the gesture to seem accidental. Her fingers were cold. Death-cold.

The night was warm.

"Maybe," he said, with a shrug, repenting his earlier honesty, "it's the light. There's not a lot of it here." It wasn't the light. He knew it.

She shrugged. "It's night," she told him softly. "There's never much light at night. We could -- we could go to the magelight."

"There's hardly enough light to read by there."

"More than here."

He nodded. "True enough. Very well, Jay. Let's go to the magelight." He rose, his knees feeling the damp, and took a few steps up the incline. Then he turned to see if she was following.

It was the wrong thing to do: he met her eyes, her round, dark eyes, and no magelight was necessary to see the hunger in them. It was a hunger he understood; it had nothing to do with food.

"I'd take you to Taverson's," he said quietly, "but these are not items I wish to show everyone."

"They have tables," she offered.

"Everyone in the tavern has ears like an elephant's, and eyes only for another man's business. I have one dagger and no guards. No, Jay, I think Taverson's is out of the question."

Her shoulders listed. She looked so pale, in the early night, he thought her ghostly. And afraid. But she shrugged mutely, and started to turn, to head back down the incline, and away from him.

He didn't want her to leave.

Gods, he was foolish. "Come with me," he said, more abruptly than was wise.

She froze, became even more pale. At another time, he would have been annoyed. But he understood that scars -- real scars -- were hidden, and for a reason; he felt no anger at all. He did not reach for her; did not offer her a hand.

And because he didn't, she approached him slowly. "Where?"

"My home," he told her gravely.

She hesitated again, torn, and he held out the pack.

She didn't touch it; it weighed about as much as he thought she did. But she nodded.

He led her back to his rooms, pausing between lights to see that she followed, as if she were a stray dog that had been kicked one too many times. Her hair was a mass of curls that caught and trapped the magical light from above; he could see that her cheek was bruised. Wondered, with the sudden heat of unexpected anger, if those were the only bruises she had.

He would have said, *I won't hurt you*, but those were the wrong words. He promised her nothing. She expected nothing. And nothing was safest for both of them.

#

He was utterly silent as he unlocked his door, aware that she watched not only his actions, but his setting; the length of now dark hall, the step-curved floor of wooden slats that had seen far too much use and far too little repair, the flat and impersonal surfaces of closed doors that extended into shadow.

He had a small magelight which he took out of his shirt's inner pocket, more for her comfort than from any practical need; she watched this as well, assessing him.

If she was afraid, she contained her fear. It was there; he knew the signs well enough, and although the streets had added a patina of opacity to her age, she had not been there long enough to become hardened. But he found he had no desire to inflame the fear or to use it to his advantage, and this was unusual. He had on occasion brought people to his dwelling, and each and every one was worthy of intimidation. When he was doing the intimidating.

But as he opened the door, he almost cringed. He did not, as a rule, have guests; his rooms were therefore not entirely presentable, and the detritus of his many identities lay strewn from wall to wall. It almost made him feel self-conscious, which was both exceedingly rare and unwelcome. "Watch your step," he told her, his voice cooler than he had intended.

Her curt nod was instant and perfect, but then again, she couldn't yet see into his private life. Couldn't yet step across and over it, examining it with her wide, dark eyes. If there was a moment to turn back, this was it, and it was the only moment he would be afforded.

A better man than Old Rath wouldn't even have considered it; he did. She was -- by presence alone -- a complication, and he abhorred complications; they were always costly, and in ways that mere money did not assuage. But he entered into the room, holding the door wide, and she hesitated in its frame, for entirely different reasons. The first thing her eyes skirted was the dim shape of the obvious bed, seen through the arch that separated the two rooms that contained his life.

He offered no safety but silence; was aware that there was no safety in silence. He let her choose, waiting, the backpack he'd slung across one shoulder dragging his arm down. He wasn't young; it was heavy. Heavy with the intangible gravity that drew her eyes, her attention.

It wasn't because he pitied her that he'd invited her here.

She entered his home, unaware of the singular honour he offered, and waited while he closed the door behind her. She didn't turn to watch him bolt the locks, but he saw her back as he did; he didn't need to look at what he was doing, and it was less interesting, less foreign, than she herself, standing there and flinching with each quiet click.

He opened his hand, exposing the magelight to air and darkness; the darkness made its light grow, and her eyes widened.

"That's expensive," she whispered.

"I didn't buy it," he replied, voice heavy with irony he thought she might miss. He walked over to the table and set it down upon the small pedestal designed for its use. Passed his hand above it twice, each time increasing its

offered brilliance.

"Are you hungry?"

She shook her head.

"Jewel, the first thing that I must ask of you is this: while you are in my home -- and you may never be in it again -- you will not lie to me. Do I make myself clear?"

She met his gaze, held it, and surprised him. "If you already know the answer, why are you asking?"

He laughed; it was quiet, but audible. "Point," he said, raising a hand. "I wanted to see if you would lie."

"I was raised to be *polite*," she replied, the inflection implying clearly that he wasn't.

"And where have your fine manners brought you? To a home of ill-repute." The words trailed into silence as he studied her expression. No, he didn't want to frighten her -- but he found that he couldn't help himself; it was interesting to watch her deal with discomfort.

His sister would have slapped him, hard, had she been here. But had she, he wouldn't. He placed the backpack before the magelight holder, and made his way to what passed for a kitchen. The tabletop was littered with an array of dyes, powders, unguents and the odd piece of clothing; the counters were likewise adorned, although the shadows leached everything of colour. He opened a cupboard, pulled out cured, dry beef, and with it a jug of sweet water. The bread beside these was two days old, and it would probably break an older person's teeth. As he wasn't sure if Jewel had all of hers -- her adult teeth -- he brought that as well.

"Forgive the lack of cutlery, the lack of fine plates," he said with mock gravity, as he placed the food on the table. "I'd offer you wine, but I have a suspicion you don't drink."

"Depends on how thirsty I am," she replied.

"If you're thirsty, wine is exactly the wrong thing to drink."

She shrugged. Her shoulders inched up and down; they were tight and drawn down toward her body, as if, at any moment, she might have to ward off blows. Or other physical violence. It angered him. The anger surprised him. He would have bet money -- his own -- that he had long lost the capacity for that kind of anger.

He split the beef evenly, and the loaf less evenly; it left a trail of crumbs for the mice. The water he sloshed into ceramic mugs. "Here," he said, handing one to her. "Eat. Drink."

She eyed the food, hunger warring with wariness.

It said much about her that wariness won. "Why are you doing this?" She asked him softly.

"I'm hungry."

"I mean, why are you --"

"I know what you meant; I'm not an idiot. But I'm hungry, and I dislike philosophical discussions on an empty stomach. If you're determined not to eat, starve. You've probably become adept at it."

That brought a flush to her cheeks, and the colour added something. Not beauty, not exactly, but warmth and life. She shoved her hair out of her eyes, pushed something off a chair, and pulled the chair up to the table, sitting down as heavily as her sixty pounds of weight allowed. Reaching over the ungainly lump that was the unopened pack, she grabbed the strips of dried meat and began to eat.

"To answer your question, Jay, I don't know. I have no idea what I'm doing." He swallowed warm water, brushed bread crumbs from the corner of his mouth, and looked at her face in the glow of magelight. At her dishevelled hair. At her eyes. "It isn't every day that someone steals my satchel in the streets of the thirty-second. I should have cut you; you were faster than I thought."

She shrugged, chewing slowly.

"I thought leaving you with the money would be enough. I had no intention of seeing you again; I went out for a walk tonight, found these, and started back. But ... I walked past your bridge on the river." It would always be that to him, even years later: Jay's bridge. "And I saw you there."

"You could have kept walking. Everyone else does."

He nodded companionably. "I could have. But you could have taken what the farmer offered. You didn't. And you offered to pay him for what he did manage to slip you the last time you visited. I don't need to tell you how unusual that is."

As she frowned, he realized that he might be wrong on that last point. "You don't work," he said softly.

"I do. When there's work. When someone needs me. When it's festival season, I can be a runner --"

He lifted a hand, and she let the words trail off. She still had hope. He couldn't decide whether that was a gift or a curse; when one had hope, one always stood on the brink of despair.

"The magisterians would consider your line of work suspect," he told her,

smiling to take the edge off the words.

It didn't work. Her face crumpled around the edges, her eyes narrowing in shame. He almost reached out to touch her, then, but that would have been a mistake, and Rath had survived to be called Old Rath for good reason.

"When I'm older," she told him, averting her gaze, "I'll work."

"Doing what?"

"What everyone else does," she said. There was no hope in that phrase at all, and Rath decided that hope, in Jewel's case, was a gift. To him, at least.

"What," he said carefully, "does everyone else do?"

She hated the answer, and didn't give it, but she shot an accusing glance at him, and held his gaze.

"No lies," he said softly.

"I wasn't going to lie," she told him. "I just wasn't going to answer. You said you weren't an idiot. You figure it out."

His shadow flickered as he moved; the magelight, unlike inferior candle-flame, was steady and constant. "Sell your body?"

She nodded.

"It's not a good life," he told her. "And it's usually a short one."

"Shorter than this?"

"Less respected."

She snorted. Not quite what he'd expected, but he was willing to let it play out. "It shouldn't be," she said, after the pause had grown long. "I own my body. It's mine to sell. It's honest. Stealing isn't."

"Jay --"

"It's true," she continued, her earnestness at odds with the subject. "At least that way, I'd be giving something back. I try," her voice dropped, "to steal from people who look like they won't starve if they lose a few coins. I try not to take more than I need. But I --"

Silence.

"There are men who won't pay you," he told her quietly. "And men who will beat you if they think someone else has."

She said nothing.

"Jewel."

Looked up.

"How long have you been living by the bridge?"

She shrugged. He knew, by the quality of that forced nonchalance, that she could tell him to the day how long it had been. But he didn't press her. Instead he rose and untied the leather thongs that bound the backpack shut. Her eyes shifted, watching his fingers work the knot. She didn't offer to help him.

But her hands jumped up against the tabletop as he pulled the two tablet fragments from their resting place and laid them out beneath the light, runes taking shadow and making shape of it.

"Were you born here?" He asked, as he carefully arranged them so that they were oriented for her view. They were cold to the touch. Almost as cold as her hand had been, come new from the river.

She nodded, still staring, her fingers now fluttering as if they were trapped by some unseen force of air. "At least I think I was. This is the only place I remember."

"And your parents?"

"Not my Oma. My grandmother," she added, as if Rath couldn't be expected to know the old Torra word. He did; he didn't enlighten her. Enough that she talked at all.

She hadn't looked away from the engravings, but her expression was slowly shifting into something that looked like disappointment. If disappointment could be said to be shattering and crippling. "I can't read them," she whispered. "It's not – it wasn't the light."

He said, "if you cry, I'll throw you out. I cannot abide tears in a child."

"I'm *not* a child."

But you are, he thought, as he carefully moved the stones so that the runes faced him. And gods help me, I have no idea what I'm supposed to do with a child.

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"This," He told her, lifting the stiletto he had chosen as the most convenient pointing device available, "is an R."

Her forehead wrinkled; the lines would fall away the instant her expression shifted, and it did so a dozen times in a minute. As she shoved her hair out of her eyes again, he said, "does your hair always do that?"

"All the time."

"And you haven't cut it?"

She stared at him, and the shadow of poverty crossed her face.

"Never mind. That was a stupid question. And in compensation for the

stupidity, I will allow you to ask any three questions that come to mind." He turned back to the tablet. "It is not in the form of the R you would normally write; this is not Weston. It is Old Weston, and it has not been spoken in the Empire since well before its founding. It is, however, the root of the Weston you do speak. Can you write it?"

She nodded. It was hesitant, but he caught no lie there. "Who taught you?"

"My father, mostly."

"Good man."

"He was," she whispered. For a moment, the tablets lost her interest, and her gaze fell inward. Rath couldn't divine, from her answer, any specific truth; he had seen monstrous men who were, in the end, loved by their children, and that twisted love was a bitter, bitter legacy in the open street.

"In Old Weston, the letter forms used for engraving were very precise. The men and women employed in the carving of this particular tablet were probably priests."

"Whose?"

"I can't answer that question."

"Can't?" She said, her eyes suddenly sharp and bright, "or won't?"

His smile was reward enough. "Smart girl."

"Does that count as one of my questions?"

"No. It wasn't stupid enough. But back to my point: the engravers were artists, of a kind. They worked with chisels, and judging from the absolute uniformity of these curves, I would say those chisels were magical in nature. The R looks much like any other letter form; the letters carved here were intended to be almost of a kind to the uneducated eye."

"Did people read a lot, then?"

"That," he said, "counts as one question. It's not quite stupid, but I'm not that generous a man, as you will quickly discover. No, it is our belief that when these were engraved, writing and reading was done by very few."

"You can read these, though."

"Not a question. You're a clever girl, so I'll let that one by. Yes, I can read these."

"How?"

"I studied Old Weston. I hated it, at the time. My friends -- such as they were -- were out in the sword yards, or out on horseback, or out in the country hunting all manner of vice. My grandfather was a strict old bastard,

and had no patience for such time wasting; I learned from him." He winced, remembering how often blows had been part of that experience.

"Does anyone write Old Weston now?"

"Not that I know of," he replied. "And I'll count that as half a question. There is a possibility that the priests still write it, when it suits them; it is certainly spoken in some of their more odious, long-winded ceremonies."

Her mouth rounded in an O of shock, and he was almost ashamed at how pleased he was by the reaction. He really had spent too much time in self-imposed exile.

"That's an M?"

His brow rose and fell. "Yes, in fact, that is an M. And in the middle of a word. You have a good eye."

"These aren't from the same place, are they?"

"An extraordinarily good eye. No, they aren't. The larger piece will fetch a higher price."

"Where did you find these?"

He smiled. In truth, he had expected that to be her first question. "It's a trade secret. And I," he added, "am a trade of one."

"Tell me what they say."

"The first," he said, "is a snippet of praise. I believe it's from the base of an old statue; the statue itself exists only from the knees down, and there is no name here to indicate who was being honoured by its erection. The second, longer and flatter, is from the base of a cenotaph."

She frowned, turning the word over and over. After a moment, she gave up. "A what?"

"A large, stone coffin that rests above ground. Usually in a crypt."

"You -- you robbed the *dead*?"

"That was your second and a half question. And it was suitably stupid." He shrugged. "The dead don't care, Jay. No matter what your Oma told you, no matter what your parents might have said -- the dead simply do not care. But the living *do*. And every fragment we find, every piece of ancient Weston, gives us information about the society that once laid claim to the city and the isle."

"You're going to take these and sell them?"

He nodded quietly. "I have friends in the Order of Knowledge upon the Isle."

She drew back from the table, staring at him, her expression shifting

between awe, fear and a very stark envy. "I've never been to the Isle," she said at last.

And Rath knew that he was a complete idiot, an utter fool, because of what he said next.

"Would you like to?"

She stared at him. Turned away. Surprised him. "They'd never let me across the bridge."

"Not dressed like that, no."

"I don't have any other way to dress." There was no bitterness in her voice; none of the anger he might have expected. There was simple acceptance. Of life. Of fact. She stood, pushing the chair back so gently it made no noise. "Thank you," she told him gravely, "for dinner."

She made her way to the door and reached for the locks. He wasn't afraid of losing her; she couldn't reach the topmost one. But he rose, leaving the most valuable objects in the room by the light.

"Jewel Markess."

She turned at the sound of her name, listless, but no longer afraid. He had earned at least that much this eve -- her lack of fear.

"If you could have any one thing -- anything at all, accepting the fact that the dead cannot return -- what would it be?"

"A home," she whispered. "A place of my own."

He nodded. "You have one more question."

"Half a question."

"Ask."

She shook her head. "I'll save it," she told him. "Can you -- can you let me out?"

"I could. But it's not safe in this holding at this time of night."

"I have a knife."

"Do you know how to use it?"

"You saw."

"Good point." He was a damn fool. He should have known better than to lay food out for a stray. Should have known better than to coax her here, to his stronghold, his place of impermanence. Well, he would be gone soon enough. "I have a favour to ask of you."

Her eyes once again darted through the arch. To the bedroom, which was at least as messy. Anger, unwelcome, almost made its way to the surface of

his words.

"If you live to be sixty," he told her curtly, "that will never be something I ask of you. Do you understand? I realize you mean no insult, but I *am* insulted, and I am not a man you wish to offend."

She said, "I don't understand you."

"No, child, you don't." She didn't even bridle at his use of the word. "And I doubt that you ever will. I can hardly be said to understand myself these days. If I thought they would find you a decent home for a few days, I would turn you over to the magisterial guards."

She knew, by that, he wouldn't.

"I work alone. I have worked alone for most of my life, and I admit there was a time when I resented it. I was younger, then. But never as young as you."

She still waited, her palm on the flat surface of his door, a few inches beneath the final bolt.

"You cannot live with me," he continued. "For reasons that might, if you are very unlucky, become clear to you. But tonight, I would like you to stay."

"Why?"

"Because I don't want to go out again, and I don't wish to find your body in the streets. I don't want to go to the bridge and find it abandoned. In the morning, you can leave."

All of her hesitations were almost linguistic. He could read them, but slowly, as precisely as if they were words being formed with care.

She nodded, and let her hand fall from the door. Her eyes were ringed with dark circles; she looked pale. Too pale. He rose and went over to her; he touched her arms and her hands, but not her face.

They had gone from the cold of the river to something just slightly too warm. He cursed under his breath. Lifting her, he carried her to his bed, and shoved aside the pile of clothing that occupied the centre. "Sleep here," he told her.

"But it's your --"

"That wasn't a request. I am not yet finished my study; it will be a few hours yet before I require sleep. I have a bedroll; I am not always situated in such luxury." The irony was lost on the girl.

She closed her eyes.

It was dark enough in the room that he could pretend she wasn't crying.

"There's no door," he told her. "If you need me, call. I'll hear you."

"I won't --"

"In the morning, if you are still ill, we will go to the Mother's temple."

Her eyes widened, then. She caught his hand in hers, crushing -- or attempting to crush -- his palm. There was more than a little strength in the grip, but not nearly enough.

He disentangled himself and rose. Paused beneath the arch. "I smoke," he said, "when I work. Do you mind?"

She didn't open her eyes. Didn't nod. But he knew she was not yet asleep.

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