

WEAVING FREEDOM



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WEAVING FREEDOM

I - Through the wall

Tesch ran for his life.

Aching legs stabbed with pain at every stride. His heart was near to bursting in a chest that was heavy and sore. Hidden roots in the dark forest threatened to trip his feet from under him. The trees and bushes made shadowy phantoms, reaching out to catch him. Thorny branches scraped his arms and legs. His every muscle complained of the need to rest. Sweat slicked his skin, stinging his wounds. Every step was a struggle against fatigue. But he didn't consider stopping.

The blood-foxes on his trail howled somewhere behind him.

They were getting closer.

If they caught up with him, he would be taken back to the caravan, tortured in front of the other slaves as an example, and then killed.

"No," he said to himself, though it came out in a heavy breath. "Not the *other* slaves. *I* am no slave! I am a *free* man!"

He called himself a man, though he was barely thirteen. He would not come of age, by his people's customs, for another two years. It did not matter. If he was to achieve true freedom on his own, then he would have to be a man.

Tesch was always called a 'runt' by the slave-drivers because he was small and skinny. Most of that came from a lack of food. His sun-darkened, olive skin and dark eyes came from his people, the Jaresh of the South Islands. He didn't really remember life back there. Just images and flashes of sound and music. He and his parents had been

on a fishing boat, far out in the South-Sea, when the pirates had taken them to sell to slavers on the coast of Koar. That was at the age of nine.

He had been running since nightfall. The caravan had set up camp near a stream, just before dusk, about ten miles from the city of Barst. The slave-master, Graeg, had ridden ahead to the city with his guards. It was a long journey from Vark, back in Koar, to Barst and even the slave-drivers were tired. Tesch and a few others had been sent with a guard to fetch firewood. Not far into the forest, he had taken his chance. When the fool had turned away to look back towards camp, Tesch had clubbed him on the head with a large branch, taken the guard's knife and slit his throat. He had always been told that killing a man was hard, but it had been so easy; a just death for the suffering that man had caused.

He ran now. *I must be nearing the city*, he thought desperately. He didn't know why he'd chosen this direction, but he didn't know how to survive in the wilds of this land. He would need the help of the free men. Free men like himself. That is if any would help him.

His mind wandered as he ran. He thought of his father.

The slave-drivers were beating father again. Father wouldn't say he was a slave. He worked reluctantly and only then because they threatened to beat Tesch instead. This time it was worse. Father had punched one of the drivers and threatened to kill him. He'd said that he was a free man. After the beating, they threw Father's limp body into the pen. Tesch went to him, tears in his eyes, and tried to comfort him. One of Father's eyes was swollen shut but he fixed Tesch with his other eye, still defiant.

"You are not a slave, Tesch. You are freeborn." He coughed, blood sprayed over his thick beard. "Bide your time, take your chance and be free or die trying. Find your

mother if you can." Mother had been sold on, long ago. "Make me proud, son." And then he had died. That was a year ago.

Tesch fell again and landed hard. His muscles shuddered uncontrollably and his arms went limp as he tried to push himself up. He'd never run so fast or so far. He was near to giving up, but his father's last words pushed him to rise, "Make me proud, son."

He would.

About twenty strides away, the forest dwindled to bare grass. Another two hundred strides on was the wall to the city. He could hear the shouts of the men now. They were too close. He summoned the last of his resolve and ran, eyes on the narrow stream running from the city wall. He could swim and perhaps enter the city that way.

When he was fifty strides from the wall, he heard a cry behind him. The slave-drivers had seen him. They would loose the foxes after him but he had a good lead. He kept running, listening to the foxes gain on him. He couldn't say how close they were when he reached the small opening in the city wall. It seemed more a crack than a true opening and the water was murky and thick with the stench of sewage. He leapt for it, swam down and under. The slimy water was blessedly cool on his skin. There was some kind of grate across the opening beneath the water but it had fallen from old rusted hinges. He pulled it as far as it would go and squeezed himself into the gap, grazing his skin on the metal and rock.

He was through.

He stepped out from the stream, smelling of human waste. He did not care. He was in the city and he would be free.

Breathing hard, he bent over and rested hands on knees, wanting to vomit. He had nothing left. The street

moved in and out of focus and he blinked his eyes to try to clear his vision. Still, he felt faint.

Looking around at all the buildings and the city walls heading off into the distance, Tesch couldn't believe the size of the place. Strips of coloured cloth hung from every window and he heard shouting and singing from further along, a celebration perhaps. There must be thousands of buildings here and hundreds of small streets. Surely he could hide in this maze until the slave-master gave up and moved on.

He heard the foxes barking on the other side of the opening. He turned to hear the men shouting and arguing.

"I'm not going through that filth. You go."

"What makes you think I'd go through it? Besides, it's too small. The slave only got through 'cause he's a skinny runt." "What'll we tell Graeg?"

There was a pause.

"Tell him the boy killed Henji and we tracked him towards the city but we never found him. For sure, don't mention you let him get away."

"Me? Listen you..." The voices began to dwindle and Tesch, still breathing heavily, felt his muscles relax. At the same time, he became dizzy.

He didn't notice the man approach from behind until a hand clapped him on the shoulder.

2 - The Weaver

Merry looked out at the street. The sandstone buildings glowed in the morning sunlight. It was crowded today, after the ten-day's fast. The quarter-moon of quiet reflection had passed and tonight there would be music, dancing and mouth-watering food. All along the street, as in the rest of the city, people were hanging strips of coloured cloth from their windows and handing out sweet foods or flowers to their neighbours, all in preparation for the festival.

He scratched his chin. Three days' growth marked the beginnings of his latest attempt at a beard. He longed to go out and join the preparations. Laisa would be out there with her mother, handing out sweetbread. She always gave him an extra piece. For now, though, he had a more serious matter to attend to. And perhaps, if all went well, he would be in a position to approach Laisa more openly at next year's festival.

He turned as his father came out from the back room where the carpets and cloaks were made. Dressed in a white robe that matched Merry's own, the cross-weave symbol of the Weavers embroidered on the left breast, he looked every inch the man Merry wanted to grow up to be. Though Merry didn't want the baldness to go with it. He also wore the red cloak that Merry had made for him. His father stroked his long, curly, grey beard as his eyebrows drew together in thought. Then he coughed, wheezing and patting his chest. Merry was sure that the cough was getting worse and wanted to summon a healer, but his father wouldn't hear it. Merry moved to help him to a chair but his father waved him away.

"Merrim," said his father, using his formal name. "Your work this last year has been most pleasing." He rested his hand on Merry's shoulder. "It brings warmth to

my heart to know that you follow in mine and your grandfather's footsteps."

"Thank you, father." Merry couldn't help but smile. His father never gave false praise.

"When your grandfather first opened our weaver's shop and sold his first cloak, it was his dream that it should always remain in our family. You've inherited his talent for weaving. More so than I did." He looked at his hands, turning them over and inspecting the callouses and burns from where he had weaved his magic into the cloth. He took Merry's hands in his. He had the same brown skin, but Merry knew his own hands were soft by comparison. It was true what his father had said. Merry didn't need to force the weave, it came naturally to him. He could blend the forces with the cloth to make it stronger or softer or even to stay warm in winter. Well, most of the time.

His father continued, "That is why I have decided that you should have more responsibility."

This was it. This was what he'd been waiting for since Laisa had introduced him to her father all those months ago as "the future owner of that impressive weaver's shop."

"For the rest of the day, you will be in charge of the shop."

"Thank you, father," he smiled.

It was only one day for now, but more would follow. This was the day his father told him he was becoming a man. This was usually done around the age of eighteen, as Merry was, but it was far from certain.

"Now Merrim, I know it is only one day, but this is a great responsibility. You must uphold the integrity of our profession; the honour of our shop and above all, make

sure everyone leaves here with a smile, whether they buy something or not.”

“Yes, father,” Merry beamed. “Have no worry. Everyone will know that I am your son.”

His father smiled warmly. “I’m sure they will. And now, I am going out to enjoy the preparations for the first time in twenty years. Meet me over at Uncle Marek’s place after you close up the shop tonight.”

“Yes, father.”

The morning was full of customers, buying sparkle-cloth to drape from their houses. The special weave was a secret passed down from his grandfather and no other weavers could make it as well as Merry and his father. Each piece seemed alive with hundreds of tiny stars, even in dim light.

At midday, Merry got a surprise visitor.

“Good Noon, Merry,” said Laisa from the open shop-front. Merry nearly dropped the bolt of cloth he was carrying as he tried, but failed, to look at ease. She was so beautiful, with dark, wavy hair, large brown eyes and full lips. Her white, cotton dress, patterned with yellow flowers, draped loosely from slender shoulders. He smiled at her. Smiling always came easily to Merry. It was part of his philosophy: “Smile at the world and the world will smile back. In this way, even the lion will buy your cloth.” He had learnt that from his grandfather and it had served him well.

“Welcome, Laisa. Have you been handing out sweetbread?” *What a stupid question, of course she has.* Why couldn’t he ever think of something smart or witty to say?

Laisa smiled as she brushed a lock of hair behind her ear.

“Yes, with my mother, but I didn’t see you.”

“Ah,” Merry beamed proudly, “that is because my father has put me in charge of the shop today.”

“That’s wonderful, Merry.” She clapped her hands together and smiled an angel’s smile as she said it. “You must be hungry then. It’s a good thing I saved you a piece of sweetbread.” The aroma of honey rose from the still-warm bread as she unwrapped a cloth and handed it to him.

“Many thanks,” he said, his mouth beginning to water. “I will eat it at once. Would you like some tea?”

“I can’t. My mother expects me to return.” She clasped her hands behind her and swayed slightly as she said it. Merry stared for a moment before recalling himself.

“Oh,” he said, covering his disappointment with another smile. “Perhaps another time then.” “Oh yes, I’d like that.”

She left and Merry gazed longingly after her as she walked down the street.

“She’s too good for the likes of you.” came a familiar voice.

“And I suppose you’re good enough for her, Tarry?” Short and stocky, Tarrel Goze had been his friend since they were little.

“I might be, but I’ve got my eye on the silversmith’s daughter.” His tanned face smiled a knowing smile as he wagged his thick, dark eyebrows.

“The silversmith’s daughter? You have little chance there. I heard her father wants her to marry that merchant Cagon’s son.”

“Such a pity. Maybe I should look at Laisa after all,” he said with a sly grin.

“Then again,” said Merry quickly, “he’s not as persuasive as you.”

They laughed together.

“I must go,” said Tarry. “My father wants to get an early start at the winery. I just thought I’d drop in to greet you as we passed.”

“Go then, I will see you at the festivities later.” He waved amiably to Tarry’s father, who smiled and nodded back.

By the time the sun disappeared behind the city wall, Merry was feeling rather proud of his first day in charge. He shut up the shop and walked a few streets over to Uncle Marek’s place. Uncle Marek was a weaver too but he mostly sold tapestries to rich merchants and lords.

The whole family was there and they all greeted Merry as he arrived. His father asked him about today’s business. Uncle Marek commented on his stubble. Aunt Sela, Marek’s wife, asked after Laisa, which brought a blush from Merry and a good-natured laugh from the others. And Merry’s cousin Marte, a lad of ten, wanted to tell him, wide-eyed, about the latest rumours of Malthanes, the great warrior.

“They say he defeated an army of five hundred men at Korl Pass and freed a hundred slaves and then took the gold from the army and gave it to the people of Sharl near Ganon because their crops failed and—”

“Nonsense,” interrupted Merry’s father. “at last rumour he had only fifty men in his group. They couldn’t overcome an army of five hundred, even in the pass. And besides, Malthanes would be eighty by now if he were still alive. It’s nothing but brigands, raiding caravans and trading on his name.”

Merry had always admired Malthanes. He was his childhood hero with tales of great bravery and valour. Never mind that the only official histories were of his defeat at Sorrow’s Keep, some fifty or more years earlier.

There were always rumours of him and his sworn swords, helping the poor and defenceless.

“But isn’t freeing slaves a noble pursuit?” Merry asked. “You can’t tell me you agree with the slavery laws?”

“Of course I don’t,” replied his father. “And neither did your grandfather. That’s why he went off to join the war.” His voice saddened for a moment. “But we lost and he came back a different man. None of which has to do with whether Malthanes is alive and defeating armies.”

“I’m sure the rumours exaggerate, father,” he said, “but if you can see the smoke, the fire isn’t truly out.

“That’s as may be, Merry, but I don’t want you filling your cousin’s head with admiration for an outlaw. I’m sure my brother agrees.”

“I do, Merrik, my brother. No more talk of Malthanes. Let’s be off to the square.”

They joined the throng in the square for singing and dancing the *Hazaa*, eating treacle-tarts and drinking berry-wine, not too much in Merry’s case as his father told him early in the celebration: “Merry, my son. If you’re feeling up to it, you can open the shop tomorrow and take the morning.”

Merry didn’t hesitate to agree. That was why, with the partying still going and Tarry still trying to catch the attentions of the silversmith’s daughter, Merry left early to walk back alone to their home above the shop.

He was walking along the street, towards the South Wall, when he saw a small figure climb out from the sewer drain. There were foxes barking on the other side of the wall and mens’ voices. He distinctly heard the Koari words ‘slave’ and ‘get away.’ His heart-beat hastened as excitement gripped him. He could make out now that the figure was a skinny boy, a few years younger than himself.

Glancing along the top of the wall but seeing none of the guards patrolling, he approached the boy and placed a friendly hand on his shoulder.

The boy jumped, spun around and raised his hands threateningly. His eyes seemed unfocused. Then he collapsed. Merry knelt down to check on him and was relieved to find he was breathing. *Exhausted*, Merry thought.

Wrinkling his nose at the smell, he pulled the boy across his shoulder and began to carry him. Worrying and wondering how he would explain this to his father, Merry took the boy to their home above the shop. He would need a wash and some clothes. The smell really was awful.

3 - The Fox and the Hound

Shem Graeg's thick-fingered hands gripped the lapels of his fine green coat. He was not happy. He had been happy last night. They'd made it to Barst in time for the Festival of Colours and he had enjoyed good food, wine and a little company. And yet, when he returned to the caravan, there were two of his slave-drivers with bad news. One of the boys had not only escaped, but killed another of the drivers at the same time. It wasn't unusual for a slave to make a break for freedom but it was unusual for them to still be free after one hour, let alone a whole night. It was even more unusual for a slave to try running after they'd been a slave for a few years. By then, they understood the punishment. He'd lost a driver and a slave. He was not happy at all.

The slave would not remain free, of course. None of his property had ever stayed lost for long. But it would cost him dearly to get it back and delay his business on top of it.

"Send a messenger to the city," he told the drivers, tugging at his thick, black moustache in irritation. "Tell them to find a Tracker and have him meet me at the Wine-Rest Inn at noon. You are both docked two weeks' pay. Go."

The men knew better than to argue. Perhaps they'd had a chance to catch the boy or perhaps not. Either way, they would try harder next time. He poured himself a cup of grain-spirit to soothe his mood. The smooth liquor was the best that money could buy in Koar and far superior to the rough bite of the Sorilani brews. The liquid blossomed warmly in his chest. He tried not to dwell on the cost of the spirit, nor on the cost of the Tracker.

Trackers were expensive but necessary. If slaves thought there was a chance for freedom then more would

risk their lives to get it, despite the punishments awaiting those who were caught. But when it was understood that remaining free was impossible, they became meek.

Shem didn't know how the Trackers' magic worked, just that they needed a sample of the target's body. He kept cuttings of all his slaves' hair, taken when they were purchased, for this reason. He went to one of his chests and retrieved the sample of the boy named by the drivers.

He stopped long enough to change his clothes, putting on a fine, red-silk tunic and reddish-brown, silk trousers. He selected a silk cloak to match his trousers and fastened it with a golden clasp. He put on his golden chain with its golden-hand pendant to show his status. Lastly he took some of his scented hair oil and ran it through his hair and beard. One wanted to look impressive when meeting with Trackers. Then he called for a fresh horse to be saddled and guards to accompany him.

The boy would pay for souring his mood.

*

"What in the name of the Highest are you thinking Merry?" shouted his father. "You could bring ruin down on us all!"

Merry had hidden the boy in his room and spent most of the night watching over him. He had washed off some of the muck, but the boy still looked, and smelled, like he'd crawled through a slop pit. When his father had arrived home from the festival, Merry had remained silent. This sort of discussion was best left for daylight and he hadn't wanted to spoil his father's mood. Looking back, perhaps talking about it when his father was happy from the festival would have been the better idea.

"He needs our help, father," pleaded Merry. "You didn't see the state he was in last night. Exhausted from running, scared, helpless."

“His state of health isn’t the issue, Merry,” interrupted his father. He dropped his voice to a hiss “You must know what he is. If they trace him to us, we’ll both be in a lot of trouble with the Enforcers.”

“But father,” Merry argued, his eyes strained with pleading. “You said yourself that you don’t agree with slavery. If we don’t help him, if we turn a blind eye, then we’re as bad as those who trade them. What would grandfather have said?”

“Don’t bring up your grandfather for this. He would...” he hesitated, “he would agree with you.” His father smiled, grimly and put on his most paternal face. “But my responsibility is you. This shop, your skills, they can bring you a bright future, Merry. You can—”

His father cut off short as the boy appeared from the bedroom door. He was short and skinny, perhaps twelve years old. His colouring suggested a South-Islander. He was glaring between Merry and his father and his hands were raised, threateningly.

Merry raised his own, arms forward and palms up, in a gesture of peace.

“It’s alright,” he said, thankful that the Common tongue had become so widely spoken that even the islanders should know it. “I mean you no ill. Do you speak Common?”

“Yes,” said the boy, his eyes narrowed.

“My name is Merry, I’m a weaver. I found you last night and brought you here. We are in my home, above my father’s shop. Are you running from something?”

“I am Tesch.”

Merry waited for more, but the boy just looked at him.

“I heard those men last night. If you’re a slave—”

“I am a FREE man,” snarled the boy, defiantly.

“Of course,” said Merry, repeating the gesture of peace and smiling his friendliest smile, wide and showing a great deal of teeth. “I agree, there should be no slaves. All people are born free. Let me help you. You can hide here until it is safe to leave.”

The boy kept his narrowed eyes on Merry but slowly nodded his head and lowered his hands.

Merry looked to his father. “Yesterday, you treated me as a man. Today, will you let me make a man’s choice?”

His father considered for a moment before nodding.

“Yes, my son. You are a man indeed, it seems.”

“You can go to Uncle Marek’s,” said Merry. Say you’ve left me in charge. I will take any responsibility.”

“No, my son. Whatever happens, we face it together.” His father smiled, looking almost proud.

“Then wait here. There is someone I must see, who may be able to help,” said Merry, thinking of a strange man he’d met in a sup-house near the entrance to the Holy-Quarter.

His father looked nervous, but only nodded.

Before he left, Merry spoke more to the boy, learning that he had been part of a slave caravan, up from Koar. He had led a hard life, it seemed, but he was determined and defiant.

Twenty minutes later, Merry was walking along the Street of Kindness, the name given to the place where the poor were fed and clothed. There always seemed to be more poor in the city than this street could contain. Merry wondered how they managed to feed everyone. Certainly many of the beggars he saw on the street didn’t look fed. Merry was sure that there were more than last year. It was said that things used to be better for the poor, under the old king, during his grandfather’s time. Since the Great

Merchants came to power though, there was a greater need for compassion from everyfolk. *If only there weren't too many to help*, thought Merry.

Merry found the sup-house where he'd volunteered last winter at Moon-fest. It was one of three on the Street of Kindness. This one was made of the same sandstone used throughout the city but painted at the front with the purple and white of the Order of Harmony, a spiritual movement. A sign hanging at the side displayed the owner's sigil, a desert-fox.

Inside the large hall, the air was cooler. His footsteps sounded on the stone floor as he sought out the supervisor, Harwet. Merry found him among the rows of benches, wiping down one of the many long, stone tables that spanned the room. His wiry frame moved with vigour, though the grey in his short-cropped hair told of his age.

"Master Harwet?" said Merry.

"Ah, young Merry, isn't it? Come to volunteer again?" he asked with a friendly smile.

"Ah, no, I'm afraid not today, Master Harwet. I have some, er, pressing business."

"Pressing business?" his bristly moustache barely hid his amusement. "Were you not a child of leisure, the last time we spoke?"

Merry remembered the jovial way Master Harwet had teased his young volunteers, reminding them constantly of the ease of their lives compared to the poor. He smiled in return but spoke seriously. "Just yesterday, my father put me in charge of the shop. Today, I have another man's burden."

"Indeed? Then let us speak of it and share the load," said Harwet, using the old phrase to offer assistance.

“Erm, might we speak somewhere private, Master Harwet?”

He quirked an eyebrow at the request but nodded and motioned Merry to follow him into the alley, behind the sup-house. The clanging of pots, barked orders from the cooks and the smells of rice and turnip came from the kitchen windows but there were no prying eyes here.

Merry wondered where to begin. Now that he was here, he fretted, wiping sweaty hands on his robe. Dare he trust Harwet? And even if he could, would the man risk himself to help? But Harwet was of the Order, and he often talked of helping those less fortunate. Surely he would help.

“Master Harwet,” said Merry, voice hushed. “Tell me, if one meets a young man, a boy even, who is in desperate trouble, is it not one’s duty to offer aid?”

“Of course, young Merry,” said Harwet, smiling, his chest swelling as he spoke. “That is what we of the Order of Harmony are dedicated to.”

“Then tell me,” continued Merry, voice barely audible now. “Have you ever had cause to help...say...a runaway slave?”

Harwet’s face changed in a flash, from fatherly curiosity to burning anger, eyes wide with a hint of fear. His voice came out in a thick hiss.

“What are you speaking of? Who sent you? What do you know?”

Merry stepped back, suddenly afraid.

“Nobody sent me, Master Harwet. I sought only your advice on a...er...problem.”

“Merry,” said Harwet, his eyes piercing Merry’s own as if he could read every secret in them. “What have you done? Tell me, now and I’ll do what I can to shield you”

Shield me?

“I...I...” Merry’s voice came out in a stammer and then a flood. “I found someone, last night. A runaway. He’s not from here, he was with a caravan up from Koar. I...I’ve got him hidden at my home.”

“Oh, Merry,” said Harwet, his face falling. “You don’t know what trouble you’re in. If it’s the caravan I’m thinking of then there could already be a Tracker on his way to your home.”

Merry’s heart tripled its beat.

“A Tracker? For one slave?”

“Yes. Let us hope I am wrong.” He took Merry by the arm. “Quickly, take me to your home.”

*

The applewood tables of the Wine-Rest Inn were busy with the noonday crowd. The food here was the finest in the city, outside of the High-Merchant’s hall, and the price meant that only the more well-to-do merchants could eat here. Nonetheless, in a city like Barst, that still left a full inn of finely clothed patrons.

Shem Graeg looked up as the Tracker approached his table. Trackers were always conspicuous. They dressed in green-dyed leathers over brown breeches with the pin of their guild, a simple wolf’s paw print, embroidered in thread of gold on their left breast. He wondered why anyone whose job was to track people could be so obvious, but the Trackers never failed. Perhaps the uniform helped them to terrify their prey into giving themselves up.

The Tracker stopped at Shem’s table. The tall, broad-shouldered man would tower over him, even if he stood up, so he elected to keep sitting and maintain the illusion of being at ease. It *was* illusion. The Tracker’s dark eyes were sharp and piercing. His short beard and moustache

framed a mouth that held only contempt for his surroundings.

“You are Graeg,” said the man. It wasn’t a question. “You will give me the sample of this slave. I will return him to you before morning.” He held out his hand.

Shem could speak Common, of course, like all merchants, but he still found it an awkward language. He retrieved the hair-sample from his coat pocket, along with a writ of credit for two hundred gold crowns. It was a hefty sum already and there was as much more to be paid on completion. The Trackers belonged to the High-Merchant, and through him to the Great-Merchants of Sorilan, and they were not let out without great cost.

The Tracker took the sample and the writ, folded them both away in his pouch, and left without another word. Shem was glad for the man’s efficiency. His own drivers would have given all the necessary details when they requested the Tracker’s presence, and the less time Shem spent dealing with this unsavoury matter, the better.

The slave would be back by morning and the auction could go ahead as planned, after the slave had been appropriately tortured and executed in front of the others.

Perhaps he could still sell the remains as pig feed.

*

Merry led Master Harwet up the near vertical stairs from the back room of the shop and into the reception room above. His father was waiting there in silence with Tesch. The boy had clearly just finished off some bread and was picking at crumbs on the plate as though he would need each one. He looked up as the pair entered, and viewed Master Harwet through narrowed eyes.

“Father, Tesch, this is Master Harwet from the Order of Harmony. He has come to help,” said Merry.

“I will do what I can,” said Master Harwet, “but first, I must know. What was the name of the man who claimed to own you?”

Tesch’s mouth tightened and his breathing became heavier as he replied “His name is Graeg,” he spat as he said it, “and he will suffer in Karagh-dan for what he has done.”

Merry didn’t have a spare thought to wonder what ‘Karagh-dan’ meant. His eyes were on Master Harwet, whose face had fallen at the mention of the slave-owner’s name.

“It is what I feared,” he said. “This man, Graeg—”

“He is no man; he is a beast!” snarled Tesch.

Master Harwet continued, without a sign he had heard. “He has great influence through his merchant circle. There could be a Tracker on the way here even now.”

“A Tracker?” exclaimed Merry’s father, his pitch rising. “But that...that...”

“We must move quickly,” said Master Harwet. “I’m sorry, Tesch, I truly am, but there’s nothing I can do.”

“I will not go back, I will fight this ‘Tracker’ and run,” said Tesch.

“It will do no good,” said Master Harwet, “Trackers are trained as the best. And if you are here when he comes, then everyone here will be held responsible”

“There must be a way,” said Merry, the injustice of it making him seethe. “Every magic, every skill has a counter.”

Tesch looked from Merry to Master Harwet. Defiance and determination etched on his face. “I will go,” he said. “Thank you for your help, but I cannot risk you for me.”

“No,” shouted Merry, incensed. “I won’t let this be. Quickly, Master Harwet, tell me everything you know. Even a little knowledge might help.”

Master Harwet sighed. “There is little to tell. The workings of the Trackers are a closely guarded secret. We have tried before to learn of them, but anyone we have sent to look has met with failure and sometimes death. All we know is that the Trackers use a piece of the person they are tracking, even a single hair will do.”

Merry’s mind worked furiously. His father had always called him ‘gifted’ when it came to weaving. He needed a gift now. If anyone was going to weave a solution here, it would have to be him. He thought, the way his grandfather had taught him, by looking at the pieces of cloth and trying to see their purpose.

“Merry,” came his father’s anxious voice. “We must let him go.”

“Please, father, just give me a moment.”

Yesterday, being in charge of his father’s shop had seemed the most important responsibility in the world. Today, a young boy’s life was balanced against his own.

If they were using the person’s own body to track them, then it had to do with resonance between the two things. After his grandfather had returned from the war, he rarely spoke of what had happened. But when it came to weaving, he had shared. During a retreat through the mountains, his grandfather’s unit had been hunted by a force of Koari with tracker bears. His grandfather had thought to mask their scent by weaving their cloaks with its opposite. If Merry could do something similar then perhaps he could mask Tesch from the Tracker.

“Father, I have an idea,” he announced, hope filling his heart.

“Make it quick, son,” replied his father, eyes lost out of the window. “I can see a Tracker approaching.”

The four of them nearly fell down the stairs in their rush. Master Harwet and his father were alternating between insistence on letting Tesch run from the back door and trying to ask Merry just what he thought he was doing. Tesch was silent but darting furtive glances between the back door and the front, the direction from which the Tracker was coming.

Merry was too busy thinking to pay much attention. He had to be right, too much depended on him. He pulled Tesch through the door to the shop as his father spluttered and ran to the front. He seemed to be trying to look busy with work while straining to get a look at the approaching Tracker. Master Harwet remained in the back room with the door pulled nearly shut.

Merry had no time for either of them. He pulled back the cloth hanging in front of the alcove, where they kept pots of dye and some weaving tools. Pulling out a few of the pots to make room, he pushed Tesch inside and said "Trust me my friend." A pair of scissors on the wall were all Merry needed to take a cutting of Tesch's hair. Letting the cloth drop back down, he set to work.

Urgency warred with the need for calm concentration. Merry passed his hands left and right, up and down, across the length of cloth. He tried to make his breathing smooth and slow, but despite his concentration and the danger of what was approaching, excitement crept into him. He weaved his magic into the cloth, blending Tesch's hair but inverting the weave. He strengthened the cloth, making it as rigid as stone and set it against the wall, leaving only a small hole at the side for breathing. But for the colour, it could be a part of the wall itself.

Just as he finished, he looked up and saw the Tracker not twenty feet from the shop. He had stopped and was

shaking something in his hand. He turned around on the spot, holding the thing, a small black box, in front of him. Merry's heart lifted. He had confused the Tracker's magic. He could scarcely contain the feeling of pride that welled up inside. His grandfather had taught him well indeed.

The Tracker looked up, towards the shop. He was a big man, imposing, and he had the look of someone used to getting what he was after. Merry caught himself staring and quickly bent down to move one of the dye pots onto a table.

The Tracker approached the shop and addressed the two of them. "I'm looking for someone. A boy. Have you seen anyone suspicious?"

"No," said Merry, a little too quickly. "No sl—"

"—no suspicious people round here." his father quickly spoke over him.

Merry bit his tongue. He'd been about to say 'slave' but of course, the Tracker hadn't mentioned slaves and was more likely to be after a criminal. Merry silently blessed his father for quick thinking and keeping his head.

"There are a few beggar boys about," said his father. "Perhaps one of them has seen a new boy."

"Perhaps," said the Tracker, his brow drawn down and his eyes searching off to one side as if looking for an invisible thread. And then he left without another word.

Merry let out his held breath and his father, whose breath came out in a coughing fit, sat down on one of the fitting stools. After a long moment, Merry moved to the front of the shop and saw the Tracker far down the road. He spoke to Tesch through the cloth, telling him the good news and asking him to stay where he was for now. Then he brought Master Harwet into the shop front.

"I can't believe it." said Master Harwet, his eyes full of wonder as he looked at Merry. In fact, Merry grew

uncomfortable with the inspection. Just an hour ago, Master Harwet had looked at him like any other boy. Now it was as if he were looking at Malthanes himself. Merry shifted his feet uncomfortably and mumbled that it was nothing.

“Nothing?” exclaimed his father, through another cough. “My boy,” he dropped his voice to a whisper. “You’ve foiled the magic of a Tracker. There should be stories written about today.” He considered for a moment. “But hopefully not until after we’re both long dead,” he added with a wry smile. “Your grandfather himself couldn’t have done that.”

“It was from grandfather that I got the idea,” admitted Merry. “I just, improved the weave a little.”

Master Harwet was still staring, but now he looked like he was planning something.

“Merry,” he said. “Would you be able to help us make something that could mask a man as he travelled? It could mean a great deal to the Movement.”

“Now, listen here,” interrupted his father. “It’s one thing to help this boy, but quite another to ask Merry to get involved in the—” he lowered his voice further so it was barely audible, “Movement”.

“Father,” said Merry. “It’s my choice. And I choose to help. It won’t be dangerous. I’m only making cloaks after all.” He turned his attention to Master Harwet with a grin. “To answer your question, Master Harwet, I believe I can weave this into a cloak. If you keep Tesch wrapped in it, it should keep his ‘scent’, or whatever, masked from the Tracker.”

“Excellent, Merry,” said Harwet. His attention was no longer on Merry but on something unseen in the distance. “I will send someone to the back door at evening. They will escort Tesch out of the city just before the changing

of the guard. A soldier with his mind on a warm meal is less vigilant. When my man asks about Tesch, claim ignorance. Then they will give the secret words ‘a fox sent me to claim a chicken’ so you will know they are from me.”

Merry finished the cloak long before evening and he, his father and Tesch sat upstairs. Tesch was wearing his new cloak and some of Merry’s old clothes that his father had spent the afternoon altering while minding the shop. Luckily, for once, business had been quiet. Too many people were still celebrating or recovering from the night before.

Tesch had the cloak drawn tight around him with the hood up. Every so often, a hand would dart out and grab some food from the table before being pulled quickly back in. Merry didn’t think it was necessary to have every inch covered but he supposed it didn’t hurt for now. So long as Tesch didn’t draw too much attention to himself later.

About an hour before sundown, there was a knock at the back door. Merry’s father insisted on being the one to go down to open it. A few moments later he called up to Merry to bring ‘the chicken’ down. Tesch’s mouth tightened. He obviously didn’t appreciate being called a ‘chicken’.

“Good luck, my friend” Merry said to Tesch, offering his hand in friendship.

Tesch took the hand in his and replied in earnest. “Thank you, for your help and for your courage.”

And with that, the pair left. Merry realised that he hadn’t gotten a good look at Master Harwet’s agent. He supposed this was for the best.

*

Tesch tried to walk comfortably and not look like he was hiding. His muscles complained at every movement, still not recovered from his escape the night before. Every step felt stiff and unnatural. His guide, on the other hand, seemed perfectly at ease, just out for an evening stroll. The man wore a cloak too, of a dark brown, and held a tall walking staff, though he didn't seem to need it. He looked like any other from this city. A simple man, perhaps forty or more years old, his dark hair was cropped short like his beard.

The sun was dipping towards the city walls. He worried that it might attract attention that two men, or one man and a boy as they would see it, were exiting the city at this late hour. But he supposed his guide knew what he was doing. He felt eyes on him and clutched his cloak more tightly.

They reached the gate, a small opening in a larger wooden door set into the city wall, to find a line of people waiting to go through. Perhaps it wasn't so unusual, or was part of their festival tradition. Then he saw the Tracker-man at the gate and he froze. The Tracker-man was looking at the people as they went through. He seemed to have something in his hand, held towards the line. Tesch eyed it warily and gripped his cloak.

"Just relax," said his guide. "We are just out to send our wishes on the North wind. Let me do the talking if any is needed."

Tesch just nodded and tried to appear at ease. His heart was beating loudly. To his ears, it was loud enough to give him away. They waited as the line moved on. A young couple moved through the gate, then a man leading a mule and a wagon laden with grain. After just a few minutes, their turn came.

He saw the Tracker's eyes widen as he moved the strange object toward them and he knew they had been undone.

"It's him." The Tracker cried with a note of triumph in his voice.

"Run, just go." shouted his guide as he brought up his staff to hit the Tracker on the side of his head.

Tesch didn't wait to see whether the Tracker would get up again, the opening through the city gate was barred by two armed guards so he ran down the street, away from freedom. After only a few strides, he chanced to look behind. His guide was beset by four armed guards now and the Tracker was on his feet to join them. Strangely, they were all focused on the guide and none had run to challenge Tesch. Just then, one of them seemed to realise this and pointed down the street. The Tracker moved to get around the guide but a swing of a staff blocked his way.

"Run, you fool, run," shouted the guide. Then he shouted no more as he was pierced by a sword. The other guards rushed forward to finish the job. Tesch turned and ran. Once again, running for his life.

Early the following morning, they were all in the upstairs sitting room. Merry and his father were arguing again. His father thought it was too dangerous to keep helping and Merry thought they had a responsibility to the boy. Tesch was hiding in Merry's bedroom under the cloak. It seemed that the cloak didn't work if the Tracker got too close. Merry felt deflated. His earlier pride now gone. It was one thing to fool the Tracker's magic but if it didn't stand up to close scrutiny then what good was it? And Master Harwet's agent had died.

Harwet himself was sitting across from Merry. He said he didn't blame Merry for what had happened and still seemed to think the cloak was a great discovery. Perhaps it could help others in the future. When they didn't have to pass through a gate to get to freedom. He insisted that his agent had been ready to give his life for the cause and that his death wouldn't be in vain. People had seen a free man die while defending a runaway slave. Still, even Harwet looked grim. Merry felt that himself and Tesch were the only ones not ready to give up.

Merry tried again to explain his new plan.

"It's simple. I'd only need to get close to the Tracker's black box for a few moments. I can taint the sample with something else and then he wouldn't find Tesch if he were right in front of him."

"It's too dangerous, Merry," said his father for the hundredth time. "The Trackers are no fools. What will he say when he sees you waving your hands over it?"

"That's why we'll need a carefully timed distraction," retorted Merry. "Master Harwet, surely you could organise a simple commotion. It need only take his attention for a few seconds."

“It’s possible, Merry,’ said Harwet. “But I don’t want to put you at risk. Your father’s right. It’s one thing to have you work here on a cloak. It’s quite another to ask you to confront a Tracker directly.”

“Nobody’s asking me at all,” said Merry. “That’s the trouble.” He felt a rebellious impulse come over him. “I’m going to do it. Help me or not.”

His father sighed out. “You’re stubborn like your grandfather too.”

“And like my father.” said Merry.

His father smiled at that. “True enough” he said. “I’ll go and open up the shop. You two plan your...” he trailed off but muttered under his breath as he left the room, “foolish bravery.”

After half an hour, they had the makings of a plan. They would need to rely on luck for some of it, but it was agreed that Merry should only make the attempt if things went right. Merry looked in on Tesch to let him know and then went downstairs to see his father.

As he entered the main shop area, he was greeted by a familiar face. One that would normally make his heart jump with joy, but now made him pause, a sinking sadness coming over him. Laisa stood at the door and smiled when she saw him.

“Your father said you were busy. I was just about to leave,” she said.

Merry looked at her, everything he wanted in a wife. But he realised that his new path was no safe place for her. She would be better off without him. With a steely determination he arranged his face as his father did when delivering serious news.

“Laisa, may I speak with you in private?”

“Of course,” she said, giving a puzzled look at his tone.

He led her into the back room.

“Laisa, I know that you and I have been growing closer of late. I had thought to ... erm ...” He didn’t know quite how to say this. Perhaps directness was best. “I’m afraid we mustn’t see each other any more. It would be best for you to find ... Laisa?”

She wasn’t listening. She was looking, mouth open, past Merry and up the stairs. Merry turned to see Tesch, face frozen, peering down at her. Merry tried to block the way and turn her around but she slipped past him. Tesch came to his senses, far too late, and bolted back into room above. What had he been thinking, looking down the stairs like that?

“Laisa,” Merry said. “Let me explain.”

“He’s the one they’re looking for!” she said in wonder, turning her eyes on Merry. “There was such a commotion yesterday. The whole town is talking about it. And you’re hiding him right upstairs.” Her wide eyes were fixed on Merry’s. There was such admiration on her face that Merry felt his heart would break at what he must say.

“Yes, Laisa. Please, I know I can trust you not to betray me, but you see now, don’t you? I have made a commitment, not just to this boy but to any who need my help.” He lowered his voice. “I’m joining the Movement against slavery. It ... it wouldn’t be right to risk your reputation by associating with you any more. If I were discovered...”

“Merrim Weaver!” she said, her voice stern and her eyes so suddenly serious that Merry backed away a step. “If you think for one moment that you can make that decision for me...” She raised her eyebrows. Merry tried to work out whether it was a question or a threat.

“I ... I just meant ... that...” stammered Merry.

“If you weren’t being so brave as well, I’d give you a scolding for your foolishness.”

“Don’t worry,” replied Merry, assaying a smile. “My father’s already done that.”

“Perhaps you’d like to ask *me* if I think you’re worth the risk,” she said, returning a smile and a look so intense in her eyes that it made Merry’s ears burn. He remembered that he’d just been complaining to his father and Master Harwet that nobody had asked him what he wanted either.

“Er...Laisa? Do you ... do you think I’m worth the risk?”

“Merrim Weaver,” she said, suddenly standing a lot closer. But he didn’t get to hear her answer. At that moment her father appeared in the doorway. He was a tall man with a kind face, though Merry found him a little intimidating.

“What’s this?” he asked, voice mockingly stern. “Just what do you think you’re doing young Merry? Inviting my daughter to a private room and the two of you not even betrothed?” He turned to Laisa. “And you, young lady, I thought you were going to the chandler’s?”

Merry and Laisa spoke at the same time.

“Sir, I didn’t mean...” said Merry.

“Father, I just stopped in to greet Merry, but he had something important to ask me.” said Laisa.

Her father laughed good-naturedly at their obvious discomfort. A twinkle in his eye, he said “Well, I can see I’m going to have to have a talk with your father Merry. He clapped Merry on the shoulder. “It seems our families may be getting closer in the future.”

He smiled as he took Laisa by the hand and led her out. She turned and beamed at him as she left. Merry

stood, stunned, trying to figure out if Laisa's father had just given them his blessing and wondering why he ever thought he could give her up.

Three hours later, Merry was on his way to The Humble Cup tea-house on the pretense of bringing a sample of cloaks to a rich buyer for inspection. The part of the customer was being played by another of Master Harwet's agents. This one actually was a rich merchant who sympathised with the condition of the slaves. Unfortunately, he was in a minority among the rich and influential. According to Harwet, he kept his opinions secret so as to better serve the Movement 'from the inside' as he put it.

They had chosen this tea-house for its exclusive nature. The name 'Humble Cup' was taken from a classic play. There was nothing humble about the place itself and only the wealthy and important could take tea here. Trackers fell into the latter category and were known to be choosy over where they drank when in public.

To lure the particular Tracker they needed, Master Harwet had arranged a messenger bird, offering enticing information about the runaway slave to be delivered by an informant at the tea-house. It was all very well planned and exciting to be a part of. Another bird had just been sent to Merry to tell him that the Tracker and the Merchant were both at the tea-house. He had to hurry. Merry felt a righteous determination as the tea-house came into view. He was more than a weaver. He was a fighter for a cause. Not that he'd ever done any actual fighting, beyond the scuffles all young boys get into. Hopefully there would be no need for fighting at all.

He announced to the attendant at the door that he was here by order of Merchant Tristontal and was let in. He gaped for a moment at the finery on display. Fine lace

cloths adorned every table and golden candlestick holders played off against silver trays of food and fine porcelain teapots and cups. Merry noted the Tracker, sitting alone at a table. A man in a fine green suit on the next table waved Merry over. Merry played his part, showing the cloaks, taking great care to mention, somewhat more loudly than necessary, how excellent the weave was. After all, he still had his father's business to consider and there may be some real potential customers among those at the tables.

As he displayed the various cloaks, he also glanced at the Tracker who was toying with the small black box that Merry had seen earlier. He seemed agitated by it. Trackers were usually so self contained. It amused Merry to think of his frustration. But then Merry remembered the dead agent and sobered himself. There was a needle on the box, like those in a compass, but it moved with the box instead of holding its direction.

Suddenly, a boy appeared behind the Tracker. He was dressed in a street-urchin's rags and it was a wonder that he'd been let in. He tapped the Tracker on the shoulder. The Tracker turned swiftly in his chair, apparently caught off-guard by the boy. The small box lay enticingly on the table. Merry moved casually around, displaying a fine grey cloak and draping it between the two tables. The boy was speaking in hushed tones with the Tracker, his arms making many wild gestures. His flailing arm collided with a servant bringing a pot of tea to Merry's 'customer' and the pot smashed on the floor at the boy's feet. All according to the plan.

The boy jumped, complaining of scolded feet. The tea-house owner came over complaining loudly of the expense and who should pay for it. Merry's 'customer' stood and moved forward to complain just as loudly about the inconvenience of waiting for more tea as he was

a very busy man. This kept everyone's attention away from the table, and the box.

His breathing quickened, his heart raced, and Merry reached out his hand over the box. Into it he began the weave, withering the hair sample inside and blending in a sample of a bird's feather hidden in his hand. It was simple, now that he could feel the magic up close. It was as he had suspected. The sample resonated with its host, causing the needle to turn.

Merry finished his weaving not a moment too soon. The Tracker turned back to the table and Merry snatched his hand back. The Tracker gave Merry a look of mild suspicion but then seemed to dismiss him. He was once again focused on the black box. His eyes lit up and he picked up the box. The needle pointed straight at Merry. Merry was still holding part of the bird's feather, but that shouldn't be enough to attract the needle, not with the host bird winging its way towards the city of Ganon at that very moment. Merry quickly withered the feather in his hand, but the needle continued to point at him. The Tracker reached out, put his hand against Merry's chest and pushed him aside. The needle didn't move.

The Tracker cursed, ran to the door and out into the street. Merry ran to see where he was headed and was rewarded with the sight of the Tracker heading through a nearby city gate on his horse. It was a long ride to Ganon, as the pigeon flies. Merry hoped that the Tracker enjoyed the scenery, and forgot whoever was at the tea-house this day.

To keep up appearances, Merry concluded his 'business' by taking an order from the rich merchant, sadly one that wouldn't be completed upon. The merchant had agreed to pay for the smashed pot and lost tea, ostensibly to speed up the process of getting more tea quickly. The boy, therefore, had been allowed to go with a

stern warning about not showing his face around there again.

Merry returned to his father's shop to tell Tesch and Master Harwet the good news. He found Master Harwet not only pleased, but also in mind of an even more daring plan.

"What if," he said, eyes wide, "we could free all of them?"

"Preposterous," snapped his father. "You're clearly letting things go to your head."

"Perhaps," said Harwet. "But I've just had word from a contact of mine. It seems Malthanes and his army are nearby."

Merry didn't need any more than that to get his agreement to the plan. He was going to see his hero.

6 - A Mighty River

There wasn't much time, as the slave auction was to begin that afternoon. Master Harwet left to send word to Malthanes. Merry was more than a little disappointed to learn that the plan did not involve meeting with Malthanes in person. Merry's father still didn't believe it was the real Malthanes but he seemed to have given up trying to dissuade Merry. In fact, he began quoting his own father with sayings like "If you don't try, you won't get by," and "Only the daring truly live." At least he was actively helping the planning now.

The problem would be getting Merry close enough to the box of samples to taint them all. Tesch had been very helpful in describing the location of the slavers' camp and Graeg's house-wagon. It would be too well guarded to simply walk into. They would need to do this during the auction itself when most of the guards would be away at the auction site.

Tesch himself couldn't go near either place for fear of being recognised. He would go out of the city ahead of time, no longer needing the cloak, and meet up with Malthanes' army. Merry was impressed with the young man's determination. Tesch now had a purpose beyond survival and was intent on joining up with Malthanes to aid his cause.

At the noon meal, Merry pushed the food around on his plate. His stomach protested as he forced down what little he could. Somehow, walking into the enemy camp was an even more daunting prospect than facing the Tracker had been. At the first hour after noon, he donned a simple shirt and trousers and a travelling cloak, and bid his father a good day. His father was visibly worried still, but put on a brave face as he wished Merry luck.

Walking along the dusty streets towards the city's Southern gate, Merry reflected on his last conversation with Laisa. She had seemed so proud of him. Just the memory of her smile bolstered his courage. He would take great care, not get caught, return to take over his father's shop and marry Laisa. Tesch and the other slaves would be free to make their own way. Life suddenly seemed to have found its balance.

Master Harwet was waiting for him as he approached the gate. The two of them would go together and Harwet would keep watch as Merry entered the house-wagon. They passed through the gate and went to the small stable against the city wall. Master Harwet paid the horse merchant there twenty-five coppers to borrow a couple of horses for the afternoon. Merry had ridden before, on trips with his father, and although he wasn't the most comfortable in the saddle, he managed to keep a good pace with Master Harwet. Luckily, they had no need for speed as the slave caravan was still making its way towards the city.

They rode along the dusty trail. He always enjoyed the view of the forest to the south, growing thick. The Great Desert had expanded over the last thirty years, but it hadn't reached here yet. The desert showed no signs of stopping though. Some claimed it was a curse brought on the land by Malthanes' treason. Others said it had been the Spirits that held back the desert, and now they were gone, it was growing without restraint. Merry didn't know why it was happening. All he could do was live with what was there.

The trail wound around the outside of the forest. A dust cloud could be seen ahead of them. That would be the slave caravan. Everything was proceeding as planned. The head of the column passed. Two guards, what Tesch had called 'Drivers', riding horses were leading a double

line of slaves, chained together at their necks and with hands tied behind their backs. Some of the slaves appeared to be Koari, with their dark skin and hair, others were like Tesch, olive-skinned South-Islanders, still more were of Sorilani or Cressi origin, lighter skinned and hair in shades from light-brown to black. Slaves could come from anywhere and were, at least officially, convicted criminals, debtors or children of other slaves. Tesch was the proof of that lie.

A few more guards were afoot, idly smacking the slaves with sticks and shouting at them to move faster, though they couldn't as the chains held them and the front guards set the pace. Merry winced as they passed, Master Harwet appeared to not even be interested. Merry tried to copy him, eyes toward their destination. Even so, his eyes slid sideways and his heart grieved for the way these people had been treated. One of the slaves looked up at Merry and Harwet as they passed, eyes locking with Merry's in a silent plea for help. Then a nearby guard smacked him on the side of the head and shouted something in Koari before turning to Merry and addressing him in Common.

"Apologies, young master. Stupid slaves don't know to respect their betters. This one will be beaten for you later."

He seemed to have taken Merry's look of distress for one of disgust. Master Harwet quickened their pace. When they were a little way down the road, Harwet slowed and pulled alongside Merry.

"You must take care Merry. It's good that you are moved by their situation, but you can't let it show on your face. We must appear to respect the law and even be indifferent to that which we oppose. In this way we can act in secret."

"Yes, Master Harwet. I understand," replied Merry. He did understand, but that didn't make it any easier. It

was one thing to hear of the suffering of slaves. It was quite another to see it in their faces.

“You needn’t worry about that slave being beaten. At least no more than he already was. The slavers want to show strong slaves at auction,” said Harwet.

They neared the location of the camp. Master Harwet pulled up and Merry stopped alongside him. They began to speak of their plan but soon stopped short as they heard the sound of wagons approaching. To Merry’s dismay, the house-wagon that Tesch had described was rolling along the trail towards Barst, pulled by a team of four grey Koari horses. It was leading a procession of three smaller, covered wagons, the edge of a strongbox peaking through the cover of one. To collect the money for the slaves, Merry surmised. There were many guards escorting this one. Each wore a polished breastplate and was armed with a sword on their back and a lance held upright. Graeg liked to make a show of things it seemed.

Master Harwet led them forward at a walk, as if on a leisurely journey. He nodded to the lead wagon, though it was unclear if anyone inside could see them, the shutters were closed against the dust of the road. Once they were far enough away, Harwet stopped again and turned to Merry, concern on his face.

“Perhaps the sample box is still at the camp,” suggested Merry, though he didn’t really believe it.

“No,” said Harwet, looking tense. “This is a big problem. If those slaves escape and go with Malthanes and his army, the Trackers will be led right to them. And with an army of their own.”

“We must get back to the city and send word,” said Merry, turning his head Northwards and wondering how suspicious it would look if they galloped past the wagons and the slave column.

“Even with my associate making sure the auction goes slowly, we won’t be in time. Malthanes will already be in position by then. I know where we must go. Follow me!” And with that, he turned his horse off the road and headed East at a run. Merry followed. For a wonder he’d forgotten his nerves. There was only excitement now. There could only be one place they were going. They were going to meet up with Malthanes!

It turned out that the army was camped in some hills not far from the city. If this were wartime, they would never have gotten so close without a scout sighting them. During peace-time however, the local High-Merchant had better things to spend his resources on. Barst was far enough from the borders to not fear a direct attack without warning. Bandits were the problem of the local militia, of course, but they usually just patrolled the trade-routes.

It was an impressive sight to Merry’s eyes. There were lines of horses, at least a hundred, picketed in groups of ten. The men and women of the army were already armoured and similarly grouped near their horses. There were fewer soldiers than horses, perhaps only fifty. Merry wondered if this were all there were and whether they really had defeated five hundred in the mountain pass.

As they approached, they were stopped by a guard.

“Our scouts saw you coming. What business have you here?” he said.

Merry hadn’t seen any scouts.

“My name is Harwet,” said Master Harwet in a rush. “I’m the one who sent you the message. Things have changed.” He was breathing hard from the run. Even on horseback there was a lot of effort involved. “The sample of slave hairs that we were to taint is in a carriage that’s on its way to the auction. If you free the slaves, the Trackers will still be able to find them, and you.”

The guard took all this information with a passive face. "Wait here," he said. He walked away, leaving another guard to watch Merry and Harwet.

A group of soldiers who were stood nearby had overheard. One of them spoke loudly in mock seriousness.

"A box of hair inside a wagon? However will we overcome such an obstacle to freedom?" His fellows laughed and Merry felt himself blushing.

"Manners Vath!" shouted a man in a silvery breastplate. He had some kind of rank insignia on his pauldrons. It must have been a high rank as the soldiers quietened at once and looked abashed. "It may be a simple thing to attack a wagon, but without these men's warning, we would not have known to do so."

"My apologies Commander Joril," said Vath with a salute, "and to you men," he added to Merry and Harwet with a nod.

Commander Joril turned and addressed Master Harwet and Merry. "We thank you for your letter and the warning. Now you must go. We ride for battle soon."

"I was hoping to see Malthanes," said Merry and immediately wished he hadn't spoken as all eyes nearby turned to look at him. The officer had an amused smile as he looked at Merry.

"Well," he said. "It seems the general has an admirer. That's him." He pointed to a man astride his horse. The man was clad in full plate armour, helmet on and visor down. He held a baton of command in his hand and was every bit as impressive as Merry had imagined. The way he sat his horse and looked out over the readying army, he looked like he could command by his presence alone. "Unfortunately, there is no time for a meeting. There is still much to prepare."

"Is Tesch here then? Did he arrive?" Tesch should have made it here along with one of Harwet's agents by now.

"The young boy? Yes. Would you believe he wanted to take part in the raid?" The officer chuckled to himself. "A fine spirit that one. Once he's had some training and put on some muscle, he'll be alright. We sent him on to our camp. I'm sorry but I cannot tell you where it is."

"I understand," said Merry, a little disappointed.

Merry was about to turn his horse away when Malthanes started toward them. As he came alongside his officer, he bowed slightly to Master Harwet and Merry.

"I wish to thank you personally," he said. "The chance to strike at the heart of slavery in Sorilan is a great thing." His voice boomed inside his helmet, oozing command.

Merry was awestruck to be listening to his hero speak. He wished Malthanes would remove his visor, but he didn't want to push his luck or cause offence by asking.

"This day will be spoken of in markets and halls, in ale-houses and tea-houses across the nation," continued Malthanes, pitching his voice now for his soldiers to hear too. "One day, when the stink of slavery is finally gone from this land. People will speak of those such as you with pride. Master Harwet I know, but what is your name, boy?"

"Merry, er Merrim, sir. Merrim Weaver"

"You are Merrim Weaver? The one who made the cloak that young boy spoke of? By any chance are you related to Mer Weaver?" he asked.

"He was my grandfather." said Merry, astounded that Malthanes knew his grandfather's name or remembered after all this time.

“I served with him in the war. He was a great man.” Malthanes saluted Merry and Harwet, fingers to head. “Now, if you will forgive me, we must prepare for the change in circumstances.” With that, he returned his attention to his army.

Just as Merry was about to leave, Malthanes paused, turning back once more.

“Actually, there is one more thing you could help us with.” he said and proceeded to unveil a plan to deal with the city guards.

Feeling a strange mixture of being stunned and elated, Merry and Harwet rode back to Barst, making for the road before the city came into sight.

Merry and Laisa hurried along the street. He and Master Harwet had arrived back at the city, returned their horses, and gone to tell his father the news. Laisa had been there and insisted on helping. Merry had reluctantly agreed that she could assist by distracting the gate guards while Merry worked. Now they rushed to complete the final part of the plan before the army arrived. Malthanes himself had asked Merry to do something that his grandfather had done in the war. Back then, it had been to keep the enemy out, this time it was needed to keep the soldiers in. He wouldn't believe it possible but for Malthanes' assurances that his grandfather had done it.

They arrived at the Eastern gate, the one closest to the auction site. Merry went up the steps onto the city wall, while Laisa hid around a street corner. Once Merry was at the top, pretending to look out over the auction site with the other gawkers, Laisa ran out panting and yelling about enemies at the Western gate. The guards looked at her uncertainly, she was young enough to be beneath notice but her apparent panic seeming genuine.

Laisa shouted all the louder. "Hurry, you must hurry!"

The archers atop the city wall called down to the captain who sent them off to see what the fuss was about. Laisa, jumped up and down, swung her arms wildly and shouted that they would need every hand. She was making such a fuss that all those who had been looking at the auction site now turned to look at this crazy girl.

With the archers gone and the people distracted, Merry moved himself into position on the wall, directly above the city gates. He lowered himself to one knee, placed his palms flat against the warm stone and sent his power down through it. It was a messy job with none of the finesse he usually worked with. All that was required was that the strength and the stiffness of the stone blended into the large wooden doors. He focused it at the hinges. He began to sweat and shake with the exertion. He'd never worked on something this big before. Finally he could feel the doors merge slightly with the surrounding stone. It wasn't much of a bond but it would take a large force to open them now.

Shaking slightly from the effort, Merry rose unsteadily to his feet. He caught Laisa's eye, who then rushed away around the corner. Merry moved over to the outer wall and rested himself against it. He still shook, his stomach growled the need for food, and his head felt light. He didn't trust his legs to carry him down the steps just yet, and more importantly, he couldn't help the desire to watch Malthanes and his men ride into action. He took a few deep breaths and promised his body a long sleep tonight if it would just keep going a little longer.

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Shem Graeg was still not a happy man. He'd had a note from the Tracker, so barely legible it may as well have been written by a man in the saddle, to tell him that his quarry

had somehow fled the city. He would be found eventually of course, but in the meantime there was only the auction to look forward to. He had to hope there were enough high bidders to make up for the loss of the one slave and the cost of the Tracker.

There was only his caravan at this auction. Graeg always chose his timing carefully when considering such a large deal. The recent festival would normally be a deterrent to auctions of this kind. The local fools feared some ill luck when dealing in slaves around their 'Festival of Colours'. Nonetheless, the recent plague had taken away many slave workers and the landowners were desperate. Thanks to his network of contacts, he'd been able to pounce on the opportunity quickly and made the arrangements with the city's Merchant guild.

He had received his Golden Hand, from the Kantrom sect to which he belonged, just last month. The palm-sized medallion hung round his neck now, a sign of his success. It was expected, after being granted such an honour, that the recipient would make an impressive deal within a short time. He had invested the majority of his assets into this caravan of slaves, but the return would be grand indeed.

The auction was being held a hundred feet from the city gates. The locals' compromise of their superstition didn't extend to bringing it within the walls. The fools had slaves in the city already, what would a little trade matter? With the seats now full of the wealthy landowners who had been invited, the auctioneer called the proceedings to order.

The first group of ten slaves were led onto a viewing platform and the bidding was opened. Graeg was pleased to see that there was little hesitation. His supply of slaves was plentiful but the demand was even greater than that. The first group were bought for a nice profit and led to a

holding pen while the second group were brought forward.

The bidding continued with each group. One particular merchant made a great show of asking questions as to the health of each slave, but must have been satisfied since he rarely gave up the bidding for a group he liked. It therefore took longer than expected for each group but that meant more money. It was all music to Graeg's ears. He was going to return to Koar a very rich man.

Suddenly, there was a trumpeting from the forest to the East and then a line of horsemen came at a gallop towards the auction site. Graeg stood, eyes wide at the insanity of it. Maybe fifty armoured riders were going to attack this close to a city? The bandits were clearly unable to resist the lure of so many fat merchants. Graeg quickly hid his Golden Hand beneath his coat. The rest of his wealth was luckily invested in the slaves themselves.

It quickly became apparent to Graeg that this was no ordinary group of bandits, insane or otherwise. They moved in military formation, surrounded the auction site and quickly neutralised the few guards Graeg and the other merchants had brought. His personal guard surrounded him and his wagon but it would be a waste of men to send them to fight this threat. Where were the city guards? Why hadn't they started shooting arrows from the city walls or organised a sortie of horsemen?

He hid under his wagon. The other merchants might lose their gold but there were always more places to sell slaves. He jumped as a dozen arrows thudded into the side of the wagon. Then he noticed the smoke and felt the heat as the fire took hold. They had set his wagon on fire! What kind of thugs were they? Was it not enough to rob the merchants? He scrambled forward on hands and knees to get out from under the wagon, his guards pulling him

to safety. Inside, his precious bottles of grain-spirit cracked with the heat and added a whoosh to the flames. His fine clothes, his supply of hair oils, his collection of beast-pelts, all gone. He was quivering with equal parts rage and fear. Then it got much, much worse when he realised what the bandits were going to take.

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Merry watched it all happen from the city walls. Malthanes' army were very impressive. They had quickly taken control of the area and were now breaking the slaves' bonds and putting them on the spare horses or taking them up on the backs of their own.

Below Merry, the city guard were trying to open the gates. Merry felt a surge of pride, dampened only by his exhaustion, that the gates held against their pressure. He suspected they'd eventually have to replace the gates themselves. At that thought, Merry felt a twinge of guilt but it was quickly extinguished when he remembered that the High Merchant had authorised the slave auction in the first place.

The captain shouted orders to head around to the Southern Gate but Merry could already tell that they would be too late. One of Malthanes' men blew a call on his horn and the army, along with all the slaves, retreated towards the forest. They would follow the trail a short way before heading back to the hills and beyond.

The archers returned and a few raised their bows hopefully but their captain shook his head. The army was too far away now.

Merry watched the burning wagon and the angry figure trying to get his men to douse the flames, a pointless task as the wagon was burning with a blaze far larger than Merry would have expected.

With Malthanes and his army gone, Merry carefully made his way down the steps, no longer dizzy, but still weak from his efforts. Some others came down too, to run and tell the news, while a few stayed on the wall, watching the scene.

Merry encountered Laisa just around the corner.

"I waited for you," she said, unnecessarily.

"I'm glad," Merry said in a weak voice. He smiled, then stumbled. Laisa quickly took him under his arm, her face full of concern.

"I'll be fine," said Merry. "I just need some food, and a long rest." "I'll see you back to your father's shop," she said.

Back at the shop, Merry's father soon had bread, cheese and tea ready for him. He ate slowly at first but soon found his appetite. When he was full, he bid Laisa farewell. A part of him felt ashamed for her to see him so weak, but once he was on his feet, the concern on her face was replaced by her beautiful, beaming smile.

"I'm so proud of you Merry," she said. Then she kissed him on the cheek, cast her eyes down shyly and left without another word.

Merry stood there, watching her go, full of wonder. Despite his weakened state, today had definitely been the best day of his life.

His father expressed his pride also and then ushered him up to his room for some much needed rest.

Epilogue

Shem Graeg was distraught. He'd lost everything. He barely had enough money to pay his men's wages for the return to Koar. Of course, they didn't know that. Nobody knew how deeply he'd invested himself in this venture. And therein lay his advantage.

He couldn't return to Koar right now. He'd be a laughing stock. He'd be ruined. But he did have one option. A cousin of his had written to him about an opportunity. He had decided to decline, but now he had little choice.

It wasn't that the idea wasn't lucrative, but it involved two things Shem despised. First he would have to travel west to South Cairn. He hated the South Cairni. They barely took anything seriously and they were rude to everyone, especially foreigners. Second, his cousin had hinted that the deal was with a certain organisation of dark alchemists. Those were worse than the South Cairni. They dealt in things that ought not to be dealt in. But desperate times make partners of snakes and frogs as the saying went.

Graeg would travel west. He still had his Golden Hand and a little gold. With that he could bluff his way into a deal and rebuild his wealth. Oh yes, he would return to Koar rich or die trying.

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A few days later, Merry received a note via messenger bird. It was from Tesch. The language was careful but the meaning was plain to Merry. It read:

My dearest friend. I cannot say much in this letter, lest it fall into unwelcome hands. I am well, as are all our new friends. One of M's men is helping me write these words.

He says he can even teach me to write myself. Isn't that amazing?

Most of our new friends are going to start a new life to the west. But M has agreed that I can stay with his group. They will teach me to be like them so I can help with their efforts in the future. It is my dream to find my mother. They will help me if they can.

All of our new friends want to add their thanks to you too. We will never forget your kindness. One of them, a young man named Provin, wishes me to tell you that he will make good use of his new life. He says he will become a rich man. I believe him. He is very determined, like myself I think.

I hope that one day I can see you again.

Forever your friend,

T

Merry folded the letter away. He would keep it somewhere safe as a reminder of what could be achieved when good men are not afraid to take action, and what he can do when he believes in something.