

Chapter 7 -- A Ghost in the Flames

Cyrus

Bram's excitement about his massive sale continued throughout close-up and into the rest of the day. As soon as he could close the gate on his little section of market we were off to *The Fat Traveler*, a bar that I couldn't believe was open this early in the morning. Bram nearly kicked the door in as we got there, strutting in like he owned the place.

"Hey Sam, guess who just sold their entire stock in one pop!" Bram called. "Because it's looking to me like I just won the pool this year."

"You and every other farmer in the city!" Sam called back. She was a big woman, built like Bram in the way that you could see them pulling a plow if their horses got tired.

"What you talkin' bout..." Bram said, turning around and looking to the back, where four more men that I could have sworn were Bram's brothers were sharing a booth.

"Goddamn it," Bram sighed, shaking his head.

"Yeah you ain't the only one Central cleaned out!" a man called, raising a huge glass of beer.

"Trandel got here before sunrise!"

A tall, black haired man who wasn't facing us raised a matching glass.

"Well shit, looks like I'm the last belle to the ball," Bram said to me, and then nodded towards the bar. "But that don't mean it ain't a good night. Come on."

I followed Bram up to the bar, taking a seat next to him as he read the list of drinks that had been scrawled in chalk behind the bar.

"What's good here Sam?" he asked. "I never recognize any of this shit."

"Well I got a pretty nice northern brew 'came in just a little while ago. Some spot just South of Railenheim makes a mean stout, that's what your other boys are drinkin'," Sam said.

"Drinkin' stouts first thing in the mornin'?" Bram asked.

"Well for some of them boys it ain't so early," Sam said with a wry smile.

"Well I'll be damned if I ain't keepin' up!" Bram said, smacking the bar for emphasis. "Grab me two... and one for the lad as well."

"Comin' right up," Sam said with a laugh, and walked over to a tap on the wall with three huge glasses. As soon as she was out of earshot I leaned over to Bram.

"Bram, you don't have to-" I started.

"Boy I told you we're celebrating," Bram said, grabbing my shoulder and giving me a friendly shake. "Now I ain't buying you the whole bar, but come on, have a sit-down, drink the beer I got you and take a load off. We'll figure everything out in a few hours"

Yeah, come on Cyrus. Nothin' wrong with relaxing and having a drink. Or maybe a few drinks.

"A few?" I muttered.

Eh, I feel like drunk farmers with more money than they know what to do with are probably gonna be pretty generous.

"You're evil," I whispered.

Just callin' it like I see it.

And he saw it right. A few hours later I was six drinks deep and started turning away the free beers to keep myself lucid. After all, no matter how fun it was to spend time with Bram, and laugh and drink with the mix of old and young men that all made their living off the land, I had a more important purpose, one that kept running over and over in my head -- I needed to find out where in the world I was.

"Hey Bram, I think I need to step out," I finally said, getting his attention after a few tries. The bar had continued to fill up, more and more merchants coming in with similar stories to Bram, and it was starting to get loud.

Bram turned to me, eyes a little glassy from the tall dark beers and a big smile on his face.

"What?!" he asked loudly.

"I need to go to the port," I repeated, louder this time. "See if they know what happened to me." He paused while he processed the words, before his eyes suddenly gained a little more life.

"Ah, shit, yeah," he said, smacking his cheeks a few times and shaking his head. When he spoke next he sounded sober.

"Well damn, we ain't had time to get you some new clothes... but the Port Authority ain't far away... and you're going straight through the biggest road in Sunsetton..." he said, but still frowned. "Are you sure you don't want to wait a bit, let me go with ya?"

I squirmed for a second. I did want him to come with me, his warnings about the town still ringing true in my ears, but he was having such a good time here.

"Well I would... it's just that..." I mumbled. Bram squinted again, but didn't have to answer because suddenly one of the men from before, Trandel, leaned in. He'd been coming back with a beer in hand and overheard.

"Y'all need to get the kid over to the harbor Bram?" the tall man asked.

"Yeah, kid's tryin' to find something out about a shipwreck," Bram said. "We think he mighta been in one."

Trandel's eyebrows raised, and he looked at me.

"Well damn," he said. "That's one hell of a 'maybe'."

Ain't that right.

I started to think up some reason for my confusion, but to my surprise Trandel just waved a hand.

"Well, that ain't my business," he said, turning to Bram. "I'm gonna be heading down to the docks to say hello to an old partner, explain what's been going on an' why I couldn't sell to him, but I can take your boy to the Port Authority right after. Ain't no thing."

"Well butter me sideways and call me a biscuit," Bram said. "That's great. I'll pick you up a pair of brews when you get back."

"You got it," Trandel said, lifting the tall beer up to his lips and draining the whole thing. He slammed the glass down on the table, belched, and wiped some foam out of his long beard.

Good lord.

"Now don't let the looks fool ya, Trandel's a lot smarter than he looks," Bram said, clapping me on the back as he stood to let me out of the booth. "He knows the city back and front, just listen to him and you'll be fine."

Trandel offered a handshake, his grip nearly popping two of my fingers out of their sockets.

"I promise I got your back kid," Trandel said. "Bram'd never forgive me if I let somethin' happen

to ya.”

He released my hand and I winced, but decided that if my aching fingers were anything to go by, this was a man to trust, at least if it came to having my back.

“How long do you think you’ll be?” Bram asked.

“Eh, probably little less than an hour?” Trandel suggested. “What, you’re not gonna pass out before then, right?”

“Them’s fighting words, T,” Bram said. “I’ll drink you under the table when you get back.”

“Is that right!” Trandel shot back, and then turned towards the bar.

“Well, it looks like we got ourselves a little challenge here Sam!” he called out. “Put it on the board!”

Sam threw a thumbs up, otherwise occupied with two more patrons, and Trandel chuckled before nodding towards the exit.

“Come on kid, let’s find out about this shipwreck that might have been,” he joked.

Bram was right about one thing -- everything went fine when I was with Trandel. We went about a hundred yards from *The Fat Traveler* to one of the main roads, and followed that for a quarter of a mile until it met a large crossroads with signage clearly pointing towards “Setton Harbor”. Which isn’t to say that it was a boring walk. I was glad that I’d stopped drinking when I did, because as soon as we stepped onto the main road I was overwhelmed.

All along the sides of the streets there were dozens of stalls and storefronts, all manned with shopkeepers fishing the crowd for customers. Regardless of what they were selling -- pottery, jewelry, food, cloth, steel, liquor, animals, furniture, or one of a dozen other things -- it seemed that everyone had a representative spread throughout the crowd trying to hook you into conversation and drag to you their store. Fortunately for me, Trandel was an expert at navigating the commotion, setting a straight path down the road with broad shoulders and up-tempo pace making it very clear that he wouldn’t stop for anyone. I was happy to be the little fish swimming alongside the whale, settling into his wake as he made his way through the seas of people towards the harbor.

The atmosphere changed the longer we walked, the crowds thinning out, the distinct smell of salt starting to fill the air, and the people around us beginning to change. People with skin both lighter and darker than the Edarans started to appear, all traveling in small groups and moving quickly. Also, where there had been a number of women and men that I categorized as ‘normal sized’ all across the main strip, the port brought waves and waves of burly men and a few grizzled, Trandel-sized women that could very well have broken me in half.

It takes a tougher breed to work the ocean, I guess.

“Yeah, I guess it does,” I said.

“What’s that Cyrus?” Trandel asked.

“Nothing, just thinking out loud,” I said.

He turned back as he walked, cocking an eyebrow, but shrugged and continued on.

“We’re about a quarter mile from Cragg’s, and then another quarter mile from the Port Authority. Shouldn’t be too much of a walk now,” he said.

I nodded, continuing to watch as we walked. The deeper we went into the port the more the stalls changed, from crowded plaza storefronts into stands smoking enormous slabs of mystery

meats, dingy bars, tinted shops selling heavy equipment and tools, and a few stands selling herbs and glassware that it looked like people were smoking. The smell continued to change, a pungent combination of herb smoke and fish layering in under the growing smell of salt in the air. Finally, the last thing to change were the buildings. Where there had been gridwork and smooth stone on the main drag, here things turned to twisting bricks and winding alleys, weathered and worn down like this part of the city had been hit with the same storms and swells that rocked the ocean.

It was to one of the less worn down shops that Trandel finally lead us, stopping in front of a nondescript storefront with a faded sign that read *Cragg's*.

"Alright, this is the place," Trandel said, turning to me. "Just find a little place to sit, enjoy the air, and I'll be in and out before you notice I'm gone. After that, Port Authority."

"Great," I said, giving him a thumbs up and then scanning the street for a place to sit. There was a wooden bench just across the way, and I made my way over and sat as Trandel met an older man at the door and stepped inside.

The walk had done some good for my head, which was buzzing a little less as I settled down on the damp wood, watching the thin crowds as they moved down the street. I was okay with the break, and took the time to look down the street to where the smell of seawater continued to grow.

The Port Authority. I felt my chest start to tighten with anticipation as questions swirled in my head. How had I gotten here? Why had I never heard of Edara before? And more importantly, why had I never heard of their war? Bram had spoken of some conflict... the war that had happened seven years ago... and the men at the gates had nearly killed me for being a... what had the word been again? Whatever it was, Bram had nearly killed *Rand* for saying it, which only gave me further questions.

Man, just how far from home was I?

I had just begun to think back about Valgardia when I heard a crowd of raucous voices coming down the street, one of which sounded familiar.

And since at this point I knew four people's names in the entirety of Edara, it didn't take long for me to figure out *exactly* who it was.

I saw them before they saw me, a group of men half in uniform and half dressed in grungy street clothes, lead at the front by the swaggering figure of none other than *Rand*.

Goddamn it.

I glanced over at *Cragg's*, still seeing no sign of Trandel, and considered running over and knocking on the door, but that would have meant crossing right in front of the crowd, and there was a voice in my head that told me it would be a bad idea to let them see me.

Hey Cyrus, it would be a really bad idea to let them see you.

Doing all that I could not to sprint away down the street, I stood, and tried to walk calmly away from them. I was eyeing an alley about fifty yards down the street, but for some reason their voices seemed to be getting louder by the second. An argument had escalated, and now two of them were screaming obscenities and hurling awful threats at each other to the amusement of their friends. The voices reached a fever pitch just as I ducked around into the alley, pressing myself up against a wall in time to hear *Rand* bark at the two men to "shut up before he slit their fuckin' throats". There were two shouts, and then I heard yelling as a fistfight broke out, between

who I couldn't tell.

I slipped further into the alley, dipping into a recessed doorway and listening. It sounded like two, maybe three people, all cursing drunkenly as they fought, and getting closer and closer to the mouth of the alley.

With a few more strikes they were there, swinging at each other not more than 20 feet from where I had hidden. I could tell now that there were only two men, and one of them was very clearly winning. Suddenly, with a cry and a terrifying crunch, one of the men slammed into the ground and lay unmoving. I held my breath. There was a grunt as his opponent mounted his chest and began to throw punches, screaming in rage.

Good fucking god they're going to kill him!

I tried to shrink even further into my hiding place as two other men broke up the fight, claiming that a dead man was more trouble than they wanted to deal with.

Suddenly I heard more swearing in Rand's distinct voice, as he declared in no uncertain terms that "if anyone else steps up at him he'll beat them crippled". There were murmurs of agreement, and then Rand let out a cackling laugh, echoed by his friends like a pack of wild dogs.

Still, I held my breath, eyes on the alleyway. The men laughed and joked, slapped the unconscious man a few times, and then lifted him up to drag him away.

I let out a breath, relaxing my shoulders. That had been close.

"AY! Hold the fuck up, I've gotta piss," Rand said, and then turned back towards my alley.

*You've gotta be fucking **kidding** me!*

My mind short-circuited and I froze in place. Run or stay hidden? Walk out casually and hope that he didn't recognize me? Cry for help? Turn invisible? Fly away?

Rand was getting closer.

*Fuck, do **something**!!*

I held my breath, slinking further back into the doorway, trying to make myself as small as possible as the footsteps began to slow down.

You pathetic little--

"Come on Rand, just stop. Stop where you are. Just stop and take a piss on the wall. Please," I whispered, cutting C off.

But life didn't work that easily. Rand didn't stop, and with another set of steps he came into view.

For the briefest moment I was still frozen, praying that he wouldn't notice me shrunk down a few feet in front of him, but as he stepped back, eyes meeting mine in drunken confusion, I knew that I had to move. I saw recognition in his eyes, quickly turning to anger as his fists clenched. Time seemed to slow down, and with all of the force that I had in my body I stepped forward and, in the words of C, damn near punted Rand's balls straight out his mouth.

Rand bent over with a grunt, wobbling and falling against the doorway after a moment, but still blocking my exit. I needed to get past him. I needed to go.

Before he got his wits back to him I stepped up and kicked again, this time catching him under the chin and knocking him straight over onto his back, eyes rolling as he fell.

I froze as he crumpled out into the alley, hitting the ground with a loud thump. I wasn't sure what surprised me more, what I'd done or the fact that it had actually worked.

“Rand?” one of the men called.

“Hey! What the hell?!” another shouted.

Cyrus run!

I didn't need to be told twice. I took a step over Rand and took off down the alley, quickly reaching a full sprint in the other direction. It didn't take long before I heard them shout out and give chase, feet pounding on the bricks behind me. I was in good shape and a swift runner, but for all that they were thugs they were also soldiers in excellent shape, and the ground beneath my feet was uneven and slippery. Twice I stumbled and nearly fell on the misplaced brickwork of the long alley, recovering and returning to speed to feel the men closer with each passing moment. I needed to find somewhere busier, find a place where I could lose them and get out of this part of the city. The Port Authority could wait.

There, turn!

I whipped around a corner, but the men were behind me, calling out that I was dead if they got their hands on me.

I turned again, jumping a tiny canal as I realized that we were quickly approaching the harbor. The alley broke out into canals, docks, and bridges, with possible hiding places flashing past me, but I didn't dare stop and try to conceal myself, not with the voices so close behind.

I took another turn, and then another. I was starting to make space now, their drunkenness catching up to them, and it seemed like a few of them had fallen behind. Good. I took two more turns, slid down another alley, sprinted across a street, and leapt through the back of a shop. The shopkeepers yelled at me as I raced through, racing towards the exit and sprinting straight into the chest of a burly woman.

She was taller than me by a few inches and probably weighed well more, but my incredible speed took her off of her feet and we tumbled to the ground, her cursing loudly and myself finding all of the air knocked out of my body. I wheezed for breath and tried to get up, but my vision was spinning and I could only just get to my knees.

“I'm so sorry!” I gasped.

The woman returned to her feet quickly, picking me up by the collar with ease.

“What in the fuck, boy?!” she shouted, in a decidedly non-Edaran accent that I didn't recognize. I scrambled to escape, babbling back to her in the same.

“Have to go-- bad men chasing me-- kill me if they find me!” I responded.

Her eyes went wide.

“You.... you speak?” she started.

“Please, let me go!” I continued. “They'll come for you too!”

I could tell from her darker skin that she wasn't Edaran, and I could hear shouting starting to pick up, my heart racing. I needed to go, now.

“Please!” I repeated.

Making a sudden decision, she swore and put me down, but rather than going her own direction she began to drag me down the road the other way.

“Run boy, follow!” she called back quietly. It took me about a dozen yards to get my feet back underneath me and start to run alongside her, no easy task as despite her size she was incredibly fast and nimble. I didn't ask questions though -- anything was better than the alternative at this point. We vaulted a pair of canals in quick succession, dropped down about 6

feet onto a dock that ran perpendicular, and then suddenly turned and tiptoed along a curb of slippery stone for a few hundred yards. The water running through this part of the city had split the walkways into a multileveled maze, with the bridges and stonework above, docks below, and the small stone pathways that hugged the water even below that.

As we continued at speed, zigzagging and leaping up and down through the bottom two levels of the city, I noticed the voices of the men fading away and then finally disappearing. Still, the woman didn't slow down, turning down a long stone path next to the canals that lead to an enormous drainpipe filled with water. We jumped into it and continued running, our splashing footsteps echoing around us.

Suddenly, she took a sharp turn into a dark passageway that was hidden from the outside. I followed her, but was shocked by a sudden loss of visibility.

"Where are we?" I called out, voice ringing all around me. There was no answer.

"Hello?" I asked, but apart from the splashing footsteps somewhere ahead of me she had no answer. In the dim light I suddenly saw a turn come up, and slid to a halt, nearly running into the stone walls right in front of me.

"Hello?" I called out again, but got no response. I set off at a run, chasing after the faint, echoing trail she was leaving in the dark.

"Wait, stop!" I called out, taking another turn further into the drainage system. "I'm falling behi-" Being lost was suddenly not my biggest problem, because two steps into the next pipe I was clotheslined so hard I backflipped.

Before I even hit the ground I was swarmed, someone punching me square in the gut -- like somehow I wasn't already already winded -- and then two people dove on me. One hooked around my back and neck while the other tied up my legs, locking me in place.

When I gasped for air I drew in water, coughing out any remaining breath. I heard two voices arguing somewhere in the darkness -- above or below or to the side I had no idea -- but all of a sudden the two people locking me in forced me down, face into the water.

They were going to drown me!

Panic had just begun to set in when suddenly I was rolled back over and wrestled up to my feet, gasping for breath. I put up no fight, letting them drag me up to standing as my arms were locked behind my back. I only wanted to breathe, already coughing out water and head spinning from exhaustion.

It was then that I felt a cold, sharp point at my neck.

"I'm sorry," I whispered, growing quiet. "I'm sorry, I... I..."

"Shut up," a male voice demanded, and I did, falling completely silent. In the shadows I could only tell that he was just as large as the woman I had been following.

"Dis him Sera?" he asked. "Dis the boy?"

"Yah, dis him," a female voice said... it was the woman from before. "He speak Sestran, Zon, like a born and blooded one."

"Look like no Sestran I know," Zon answered. "And knowing how to say 'sorry' don't mean he speak Sestran. Boy, you hear me?"

"Yes, I do," I answered. His eyes went thin.

"Name yourself," he said. "What thing has brought you here?"

"My n-name is Cyrus Delgami," I stuttered, before taking a half a breath and trying to continue. "I

was r-running from soldiers, bad soldiers... they were gonna to kill me. I ran into S-Sera and she... she helped me get here.”

“Why do you speak Sestran?” Zon said. “I seen no one looking like you in any of the four nations, and still you talk like you was raised on mine own island.”

It was then that I started to realize -- they weren’t speaking with a strange accent, they were speaking in an entirely different language.

And so was I. I hadn’t even realized it, but I’d switched over when I ran into Sera on the street.

“I... I don’t know how I can speak Sestran,” I said. “I... I didn’t even realize that this was a different language from Edaran and--”

Zon slapped the spit out of my mouth.

“You spit out trash like that I kill you,” he said. “No Sestran in the world are like them *fucking* Eddie boys.”

“I’m sorry,” I said, tears running down my face as I realized my total helplessness. “I’ll... I’ll never... I’m...”

“How you done pissed off them Eddie boys?” Sera asked. “What you did to them?”

“Their leader... Rand... he hates me,” I said. “I don’t know why, I was coming into the city and he pulled a sword on me and got angry... he said I was a... a something. Twerp... Top...”

“Thwarp,” Zon said, voice dripping with venom.

That was it.

“Well boy, is you?” Zon asked. “One of them they call thwarp?”

“I don’t even know what a... what one of those is,” I said, hesitating to even use the word after the chaos it had caused.

Zon squinted his eyes and pressed the knife into my neck, drawing blood.

“You lie,” he said. “And for dat, you die.”

“I don’t know! Stop, please!” I cried out in desperation. “I’m not from here, not from Edara!”

That stopped him, and in the silence that he afforded me I continued.

“I was in a... a shipwreck... at least I think! I’m trying to get home... to Valgardia. I don’t know where I am, and I don’t know what Sestran is or why it’s a different language from Edaran, or what your war is or why people want to kill me! I’m sorry, I just don’t know! I don’t know anything! Please... please don’t kill me!”

I closed my eyes, praying to... well to what I wasn’t sure, but the finishing blow never came.

“This boy crazy or delusional,” Zon said, pulling the knife away. “Come in here and claim he come from Valgardia.”

“I might be insane *and* delusional,” I said. “There’s a voice in my head that only I can hear and I don’t remember anything before yesterday.”

Thanks for the shoutout.

“And yet you speak Sestran like you was born on the seas,” Sera said, crossing her arms.

“I don’t like the feel of this boy,” Zon said, raising the knife. “I say we kill him.”

I was about to struggle, to kick out and begin screaming and fighting for my life, when Sera stopped him.

“No, trigga,” she said. “Don’t kill this boy yet.”

“You say we just let him go?” Zon asked.

“Take him to Grana, see what she think of him,” she said. “No Sestran ever turn away another

Sestran, no matter what he may look like.”

“And what if he is a spy?” Zon asked.

“*Then* we kill him,” Sera said.

Zon thought about it for a minute before nodding.

“Bag dis boy,” Zon said, and in a flash there was a bag pulled over my eyes, cloth wrapped around my hands, and I was being lifted up over someone’s shoulder, and carried off into the darkness.

I had no sense of direction as I was carried through the tunnel, only the slightest sense when we were turning one way or another, or briefly stepping out into the light as the group walked through shallow water towards... Grana, that was her name. A Sestran, I guessed, just like Zon and Sera and the two men who were alternating carrying me over their shoulder through the seemingly endless tunnels beneath Sunsetton.

Well, I guessed that we were still under Sunsetton, although with as long as we walked we could have been beyond the walls a time and again. The Sestrans were mostly quiet as they walked, leaving me to think about how far Bram and Trandel and all of my answers were slipping away. Everything had happened so fast, just one piece of bad luck after another. Rand, and then Sera, collisions with the wrong people at the wrong time. Even stretching back to the beach, with my stunning arrival to Edara, and the blank space where my memories of Valgardia had been.

I tried once more to think back to home -- just the word brought a flooding warmth over my body, fighting back the late autumn cold seeping in through my wet clothes. It rarely got this cold in Valgardia, that much I knew, and my heart called out for a warm fire, to be shoulder to shoulder with the others.

The others.

Who?

In my mind’s eye I leaned left and right, trying to see some vision of the long-distant past, some vision of the... ones next to me. It felt like home, this more than anything else. Sitting around a gently crackling fire in late evening, almost ready to fall asleep under the darkening sky.

Back on Edara, the Sestran carrying me dropped down a step, slamming my gut so hard that I gagged, and by the time I was breathing normally again the visions of Valgardia faded to the distant past. I tried, but I could not recapture them.

After that it was only a few more minutes before we arrived, reaching a light in the darkness cast in orange and flickering like torchlight. At a word from Zon the group stopped, and Zon’s footsteps rose from the water to clang onto heavy stone, where he slammed his fist against a hollow sounding metal. There was a shriek of iron sliding past iron, and from beyond the wall a voice requested a password.

“Hossa let me the fuck in,” Zon demanded. “We need to see Grana about dis boy.”

“A boy?” Hossa asked.

“Yes, a boy,” Zon said impatiently. “I said we kill ‘im but Sera like him for some reason.”

“Is you crazy?” Hossa asked.

“Is you crazy, trigga?” Zon turned and asked Sera.

“Hossa shut the fuck up and open the door,” Sera said.

Hossa threw back a pair of barely intelligible insults, but with a screech the metal door opened up. The scents that flowed out on the air were much the same as the streets of the harbor -- herb smoke mixed in with the tantalizing smell of meat and undercut with salty air -- only here they were more intense and maybe a little cleaner than they had been outside.

We left the water behind, stepping out onto metal with clanging boots and making our way inside.

I was still completely blind, but from the echo of things we walked down a long hallway and then entered a much larger room through another screeching metal door. There were murmurs as we arrived, some of happy greeting, some of slight confusion as they saw me, but we moved quickly through the room and to the back.

Somehow I guessed that this wasn't the first time someone had been carried in here blindfolded.

Which, if you think about it, is honestly a pretty fucked up thought. What if we're about to be killed and eaten?

"Why would you think that??" I whispered.

I don't know. Pretty fucked up though, right? Right?

"You're not helping!" I hissed, disguising the outburst as a cough, worried that I'd be found out. Even though I told myself that C's suggestions didn't mean anything, that there was no chance that they would go through this much trouble just to kill and eat me, I still jumped when another door screeched open and we made our way into another, smaller room.

It was warmer in there, lit by torches that I could sense in each corner of the small space.

Leaving me slung over the shoulder of the still-unnamed men, Zon and Sera stepped forward and saluted the residents of the room.

"Captain," they said, smacking an arm to their chests.

"Zon, Sera, Rega, Bo, you are late," a woman said, somewhere out in front of me.

"It is my fault captain," Sera said. "I was late to meeting with the others."

"When we are late we die," the woman responded. "Do not let this thing happen again."

"I am sorry captain," Sera answered, and cloth shifted like she was bowing.

"Why has this thing happened?" the woman asked.

"A truly strange thing, captain!" Sera said, snapping to the men holding me, who walked forward.

"You have brought me a body?" the woman asked.

"A boy," Sera said. With a snap of her fingers I was slung forward and forced to my knees on the ground, bag still tight around my head.

"Him speak Sestran like a native, but look like no Sestran, Nord, Sandren, or Eddie boy I ever seen," Sera said. "I found him runnin' from the Eddie boys and brung him here."

There was silent from the woman across from me.

"Dis boy is fucked up in the head." Zon said. "Him spit trash, say he hail from Valgardia like a crazy one. I say we kill him."

Again, there was silence from the other woman.

"You tell me he look like some stranger, and leave him with a bag on him head?" the female voice asked. "How will I decide him life and death if I can not see him?"

There was a quick set of curses and muttering between Zon and Sera, and suddenly the bag

was torn from my head, nearly tipping me over. I blinked as my eyes adjusted, quickly assessing the room.

In front of me sat an older woman, probably in her late forties and much shorter than Zon and Sera -- maybe closer to my height -- but for some reason she looked just as threatening as the other massive Sestrans. Between us was a roughly carved wooden desk bearing an insignia of crossed swords behind a rose, which matched a tapestry covering the back wall in full color, as well as the crests on the chests of two men in front of me, each dressed in blue-and-brown robes and armed with slightly curving shortswords

The woman behind the desk, who I had to assume was Grana, wore similar colors to her men, although the hand-crafted patterning and layering of her outfit -- lined with gold and accented with jewelry -- told me that she was unmistakably in charge around here. All of them bore the same light-brown skin as Zon and Sera, and something else that I had only just recognized -- startlingly deep blue eyes that seemed almost to ebb and flow in the firelight.

As I had been looking, so too had Grana, and at last our gazes met.

"Him eyes..." she said. "Him eyes are like nothing I have seen, not in any kingdom between fire or ice. Boy, you say that you is from Valgardia. Is this true?"

"Yes ma'am," I said. "I woke up on the beaches of Slantshore a day ago with no memory and I've been trying to return ever since. I'm trying to get to the Port Authority to see if I was in a shipwreck and try to figure out how to get back."

Grana nodded, looking at the two Sestrans behind me.

"You is right Sera, him speak Sestran like a true born and blooded one," she said, and then turned back to me and switched to Edaran. "And what about the language of the Eddie boys?"

"I speak it as well," I answered, effortlessly switching back to Edaran.

"And this one?" she asked, in a third language.

"I can speak it," I answered.

"A fourth one?" she asked, switching again.

"Yeah, I understand it," I answered.

"And yet you speak each one like you are a natural," she said. "Boy, what is your home language?"

I paused for a moment, thinking for far too long.

Come on, what was the language of Valgardia? Surely there was a Valgardian language, right?

I opened my mouth, trying to picture what I'd say to one of the... others? But nothing came.

"I don't know," I said, in Sestran. "I'm not sure that we even have a language."

"Not even sure... boy, is anyone looking for you?" she asked. "Anyone from this kingdom of Valgardia?"

"No," I said. "Well... at least not that I know of... Bram and Trandel might be looking for me... two Edarans."

Grana laughed harshly.

"If the Eddie boys could find this place or any of our others we would have been dead a long time before me," she said. I began to feel uneasy, like something was off. Zon and Sera both shifted slightly.

"A boy with strange gold-and-black eyes... a boy with no land, no language of him own, and no one left to follow him," Grana mused. "What a treasure the spirits have brung us."

“A... a treasure?” I asked nervously.

Grana smiled like a beast about to devour her prey.

“I think that I will keep him,” she said, and snapped her fingers.

I think that I tried to run, but before I could figure out how to get up off of my knees without my hands the bag was thrown over my head and I was punched in the gut again. The air went out of me and before I knew it there was a knife held to my throat, and I froze.

“Dat’s a good boy,” Sera said, as the cloth around my hands was replaced with rope tightened until it cut my skin.

“Bring dis boy to the ship,” Grana said. “We are done with this place.”

“Please, wait!” I cried out, and all of a sudden there was silence.

“I’ll do anything! I’ll pay you any amount of money! I just want to get back to home, I’ll give you anything! I just... I just want to get to Valgardia.”

Grana laughed cruelly.

“Boy, there *is* no Valgardia,” she said. “I have sailed the seas for a half a century and seen every shore and island, and none of these places have been that mythical kingdom. You are from nowhere, you have no people, and now you will be our treasure.”

“Wait, please!” I called out, but the bag was tightened around my head and I was dragged out through the same door that I had come from.

I didn’t struggle as we made our way back through the tunnels, and barely paid attention to where I was being taken.

No Valgardia? That was impossible.

If my heart ached this much just to lose it, there was no way that had never existed.

So I sunk into the pain that it was lost, rather than the fear that it would never be found. I was no closer to finding Valgardia now than I had been when I had been with Bram, but in a way, I wasn’t any further than I’d been either.

A mythical kingdom.

They had all known about Valgardia, that much was sure. They had only laughed when I’d claimed it as my home.

And where there were stories, there had to be truth. *Someone* had to know.

I just prayed that that someone wasn’t supposed to be me, with a shot memory and a voice in my head.

The only thing that signaled we had left the tunnels was the changing sound of the Sestrans’ boots on the ground. Suddenly, rather than splashing through water and stepping on hard stone, I heard the creaking of wood underneath their feet, and the growing smell of the sea again. I could hear voices above me as we approached what had to be the port, but before I could even think to cry for help Zon flicked a knife to the side of my throat and reminded me that if I screamed I was dead.

A few minutes later we were stopped at another door. Zon and Sera exchanged words with another guard, mentioning that I was Grana’s new “treasure” and getting a harsh laugh in response. The door opened and we walked up a set of stairs, into what sounded and smelled like the hold of an enormous ship. It was damp and musky, the smell of smoke and sweat heavy

in the air and a few scattered Sestran conversations around us.

“Hey Zon, where ya headed?” a man called out.

“This boy a little treasure for the captain,” Zon shot back.

A crowd behind called out in jeers and a chill went down my spine.

“Him too small for ‘er,” a female voice went. “Leave ‘im to us.”

“No, this a special request,” Zon answered, and another door was opened, ushering in a fresh breeze as we stepped out into open air.

“Be happy Valgardian,” Zon said. “Of all the prisoners that come and go, Grana’s ones the most well treated. You be a good boy and life will go okay for you.”

I nodded as we continued to walk, stopping when I bumped into a railing, what felt like the edge of the ship. Suddenly, the bag was removed from my head for a moment.

“Zon what are you doing?” Sera hissed.

“Dis boy... he wanted to see the Port Authority,” Zon said with a laugh. “I am showing it to him.”

My eyes adjusted to the light again and there it was, a hundred yards away from me, an enormous building surrounded by crowds of hundreds all with their own work to do. All around us there were ships and barges ranging from big to massive, the ones that I’d seen on our way down to the city, and they were all docked on massive rows of platforms lining the entirety of the cove.

“Right under the Eddie boys’ noses,” Zon said, pointing out ahead of us, where the plaza leading up to the Port Authority was lined with men in the same green uniform that I’d grown used to seeing. They were on alert, stopping shipments here and there, checking cargo, and seemingly none of them looking out to the prow of the boat where the five foreigners stood. My heart sank as I watched, knees almost buckling. From the deck of the boat we could see out above the tops of the first row of buildings, to where I knew Bram and Trandel were either still waiting, or looking for me, or... well Bram had told me not to get lost, and stick my head where I wasn’t supposed to. There was a good chance that he’d already written me off for dead.

I hoped that he would miss me, at least a little bit. I knew that I would miss him.

“Alright boy, enough staring,” Zon said.

“Can I have just a few more seconds?” I asked.

“If you try anything-” Zon said.

“You’ll kill me, I know,” I answered.

“You had better watch yourself with the disrespect boy,” Zon threatened.

I nodded, closing my eyes and breathing in and out.

It wasn’t the end of the world. I was alive. I was healthy. And if Zon was right I would be treated well. Whatever that meant.

And who knows, maybe the people who roamed the seas would be the best ones to ask for information.

I breathed in and out again.

Goodbye, Sunsetton.

I was about to turn and be led to my prison when C stopped me.

Wait...

“What is it?” I murmured.

Cyrus... what’s that smell?

I breathed in and out, catching an interesting scent coming from somewhere off to my right. I turned around, confused.

“What is that?” I asked.

“What is what, boy?” Sera asked.

“That smell?” I asked. “It’s not smoke... is it?”

“Boy, is you crazy?” Zon asked.

A voice from the side of the boat called out.

“Hey Zon, something on the side of the boat!” they called. “A smoking barge.”

Zon and Sera looked at me before dragging me over to the railing of the boat, looking down at a barge drifting by that seemed to be billowing black smoke.

“A fire on board,” Zon said. “The poor bastards will lose everything.”

The barge continued to float past us, straight towards the Port Authority.

“Where is the crew?” Sera asked, looking out into the wake of the barge. “I see nobody.”

“Of course there is a crew, where do you think these things would have come from?” Zon asked.

As the two began to bicker, the cloud of smoke behind the barge really hit us, washing over the front of the deck.

I coughed hard, and suddenly felt incredibly lightheaded. There was another smell layered in under black smoke, and I’d noticed one more thing.

There were no flames.

Cyrus, you need to get out of here right now!

“C?” I asked.

Cyrus, leave! Get off this fucking boat I don’t care if they try to kill you! Go!

I took a step back from the railing.

“We need to get off this boat right now,” I said to the four Sestrans. “We need to go. That barge is...”

“Boy, what is you talking about?” Zon said. “A burning barge is of no concern to us.”

DAMN IT CYRUS GO!

I began to back away from the railing faster, sliding towards the back of the ship and suddenly unable to hear the sound of Zon threatening me to come back. I needed to be gone. I needed to be away from that barge, I could sense it.

Just as Zon began to step forward towards me, death in his eyes, I looked back at the barge in time to see it just touch the dock at the front of the Port Authority.

In the smoke, there was another insignia, different from the Sestrans’. A gear with seven smaller gears inside, each with seven smaller gears inside them, and even more inside those. I was sure that if I had been able to see them, there would have been even more, all interlocking down to the smallest detail even beyond human eyesight.

“What is that?” I whispered.

But my question didn’t matter for very long because an instant later the barge disappeared, replaced by a crushing blackness, and the world slowed down to a stop.

It was as if someone had taken what my eyes were seeing and turned it into a painting, a painting that was being slowly drowned in black tar. First the docks were consumed by darkness, and then the plaza filled with people, some looking with vested interest at the barge but the majority unconcerned. Not long after, the entire building of the Port Authority

disappeared, and then so too did the ships in front of us, and the dock where lines tied us to shore.

Too late, I realized that my eyes had been playing a trick on me, and what had seemed as flat as tar on a painting was coming for us just as quickly as it had come for the rest of the port. The front of the ship disappeared from view, and then the helmsman, and then I saw Zon and Sera and Bo and Rega consumed in the blackness in an instant, never aware even for a moment. But I was. As the dark horizon grew ever closer it grew even slower, creeping towards me, and yet still I was unable to move.

Only able to watch, and witness what I knew was my own death.

But then I heard it.

High, High.

Low, Low.

For a moment, my entire world went to black, but then everything around me was lit up in roaring red light.

There was someone in front of me, glowing like a fiery god and standing tall against the wave of darkness. From their hands came a torrent of gold-and-red flames, flaring forward and curling back around us like a shield against the black. Even as the darkness swept past us, completely surrounding us and consuming the rest of the ship, they stood tall with long black hair and cloak whipping behind them.

I watched as they single-handedly held back the all-consuming dark that had wiped the port off of the map, their fire burning strong and bright as the hungry emptiness passed us. And even as we were engulfed in darkness, the whole of the world seemingly gone beyond us, we were safe. I had been saved.

For a final moment, it appeared as if the world reached a total standstill, and it seemed as if the person in front of me was about to turn around.

And for some reason, I knew deep in my heart that if they did, I would know their face.

But they didn't. And then like it had never been there the blackness around us disappeared, taking with it the flames, my rescuer, and whatever parts of the world the darkness had touched. I fell.