

Prologue: The Night Bleeds

The sky glittered with stars, and the crescent moon gave the austere buildings of The City long and foreboding shadows. Not that any of the inhabitants walking the streets could see the stars. The City pulsed with neon lights and noise; even at this late hour, great crowds still bustled along the sidewalks. The throngs would thin out eventually as the night wore on, but the lights never went off, and the stars, and often even the moon, were invisible to those caught below.

Skyscrapers tossed their tall spires into the night, piercing its velvety sheen, the light rain falling like blood from so many wounds. The Tower grew out of the center of the forest of buildings, striking high above the lesser canopies, reaching for the stars. The rain traced its way down the smooth glass windows and concrete walls of the offending structure, dripping off gargoyles, muffling The City's noise and, at last, forming puddles in the streets. It was strange to have rain falling from a cloudless sky, but as none below could tell if there were clouds or not, this went largely unnoticed.

The country hills spread from The City in gently swelling waves, which bore the sustenance of The City on their backs. Small houses dotted the countryside, nearly lost in tall fields that shone in the moonlight. Those in the country largely ignored The City, shipping their crops and receiving payment via The City merchants. Most were inside, fearing the unseasonable cold and the strange night.

At last the final lights went out in the farms, there was work tomorrow, and sleep was needed. But The City pulsed on, more subdued, but still the neon flickered, and thinning crowds went in and out of nightclubs. One patron emerging from an all-night diner glanced briefly towards the sky. The gloomy drizzle caressed his severe features, dripping off his long eyelashes and pointed nose. He gave a nod, as if approving of what he saw, and strolled away whistling tunelessly; soon, he was lost in the haze.

Chapter One: Escape

The smooth, black walls echoed with grunts and the thick sound of a sword hitting straw. The lone figure in the large practice room attacked the mannequins without mercy. Straw hung suspended in the air, the victims of a particularly vicious swipe at the chest. The swordsman slashed again, and then spun wielding a knife in his left hand, stabbing up beneath the chin of the straw head. The impact of the dummy's head on the stone reverberated off the tall ceiling.

The figure stood leaning over his sword, panting. Sweat dripped off his bangs, which hung now over his eyes, having broken free from the leather thong that held back the rest of his dark hair. He stared at his reflection in the polished black-marble floor, his broad shoulders rising and falling as he breathed, his jaw lined with a short, two-day growth of stubble. His ear twitched. With a yell, he spun, flinging his sword out to stop, resting, on the neck of a prim man.

The man blinked slowly, "Sir, it's time to prepare for the feast."

The figure sighed, "I suppose it had to happen sooner or later, eh, Bax?"

"Indeed, sir."

"Ah well, I'll be along in a few moments."

"Yes, sir." Bax turned and paced out of the room.

The figure hefted his sword. He brought his arm back to strike at the remnants of the straw.

"Tarinrandar!"

Tarinrandar dropped his sword with a clatter mid-swing. He swallowed, "Yes, mother?"

"You need to be getting ready for the feast. I sent Baxtin to get you."

"Ah yes, he mentioned that, the feast I mean."

"Then why are you still here?"

Tarinrandar crossed his arms, "Mother, I don't want to go to another of father's feasts."

"Come now, it's your duty."

"But feasts are always so terribly dull."

"Don't pout! Listen," his mother sighed, "I know these formal dinners of your father's can be a bore, but," and she smiled conspiratorially. "I shouldn't be telling you this, but there's going to be a surprise at this dinner which I think you'll find most interesting when it's announced."

"What, has father created a new tax?"

"Oh, Tarin, just please, go get ready."

Tarin humphed and marched out of the room, he fleetingly wished he had a brother or someone who would be forced into these things instead of him.

Back in his chambers, Tarin scowled at the bustling servants in Tower livery. He stood on a block in front of the foldout mirror, his arms out straight like a scarecrow. The servants scuttled around the room, bringing cloth and measuring with tapes. The Head Tailor spun Tarin around this way and that, tilting his head while tutting. Tarin restlessly shifted his weight from one foot to the other, but after a disparaging look from the tailor, he forced himself to stand still, although his eyes continued to rove around the room.

In a corner between the ceiling and the far wall, Tarin saw a spider on its web. He watched it scuttle back and forth as it spun out slender filament, making

concentric circles. Tarin wondered how the spider had found its way into the immaculate Tower, and if he might escape the feast by the same way. His musing was cut short at the poke of a needle, and he glared reprovingly at the tailor.

Soon, Tarin was covered from head to toe in the most gaudily awful outfit he had ever seen. It sparkled with gold thread and jewels. Tarin appraised the hanging gems distastefully; *I'm gonna sound like a damned wind chime when I walk.* "Gared," he called to the tailor, "must I wear this ridiculous thing?"

Gared looked taken aback, "But sir, this is the latest fashion."

"Then may we at least remove these..." Train searched for a word that could adequately convey his level of disgust, and failed. "These... *ridiculous* strings of hanging gems that cover the shirt?"

"Sir, those gems compliment the entire outfit,"

Tarin glared.

"...But if you'd prefer we could," Gared grimaced, "'remove' them and remedy the lack of balance with some silver-threaded boots."

Tarin ignored Gared's mutterings. He didn't want to attend another feast, or any other dignified function for that matter. Formal dinners were such a bore. Even if his father was the regional sovereign, the dinners always consisted of boring courtiers babbling on about this tax or that marriage. Tarin would have to smile politely and bear their prattle with feigned interest, lest he insult someone and embarrass his father.

"All finished, sir, and I must say you look fabulous."

"I'm sure I do, Gared, whether I'd like to or not."

Baxtin entered the room. "Sir, your mother left explicit instructions, you're to go directly to the dining hall, and that I am to escort you."

"Now really Bax, is this necessary?"

"I'm afraid it is sir."

Tarin sighed, "Very well, shall we be off?"

"Very good, sir."

Tarin trudged after Baxtin down the bleak halls of the Tower. *Would it be so terrible to add a little color? But no, that would ruin the theme: depressing.* The dining hall was indeed more colorful, but Tarin was sure that in this case, it was not an improvement. The room was an explosion of gold and purple. It appeared as if some humongous person had vomited gold-leafed eggplant all over. Banners and streamers of the hideous duo of colors hid the walls, some trailing through the air to hang off the ridiculously large crystal chandeliers.

Courtiers and hangers-on mingled, their conversation filling the room to its vaulted ceilings. Tarin wove his way through the various clumps of people. Most chose to form groups of similar interests, such as the merchants, the administrators, and the minor royalty. The groups spent their time glancing

sideways at the other groups while managing to avoid saying anything even remotely of interest.

“Ah, gentlemen, may I present my son Tarinrandar de Dartuan.”

Tarin cringed internally. His father was surrounded by some of his favorite lackeys; now Tarin would be introduced to each individually. He would act polite and smile until his cheeks burned, while thinking he would rather be anywhere else. It was always the same.

Tarin gritted his teeth and bowed, “A pleasure to meet you, sirs.”

“Such a polite boy.”

“Indeed.”

“And handsome too.”

“Truly, you are a blessed father.”

“You are a gifted parent.”

Tarin tuned out their senseless prattle; this night was going to be worse than he thought. A trumpet sounded and the guests excitedly made for their respective tables. Tarin sighed with relief at the fact that the feast would start and he would be spared further introductions. The food was wheeled in on huge carts. The servants placed platters of steak, mashed potatoes, steamed vegetables, sweet fruits, delicate soups, crumbly bread, and fine wine before the various guests, coming to The Sovereign’s table last as was tradition.

Tarin glared at his plate. Idly he pushed his food around with a fork. *Why can't they ever serve something more exotic? I hate potatoes.* Tarin glared around the room again, then settled down, his chin in his one hand, his other manipulating the food on his plate into an inedible slush. Outside his window the rain continued, blurring his view of the bustling dots far below. At least he could see out a window, Tarin consoled himself.

The feast plodded on, some of the guests imbibing far more wine than they should, and found themselves loudly proclaiming their views to people who didn’t care in the least. The plates were cleared and dessert was brought. Tarin merely stabbed his flakey pastry a few times with his knife before shoving it aside.

The ringing of a spoon on a glass brought Tarin out of his brooding. “Ahem,” his father cleared his throat; silence fell instantly. “My good friends, as you well know, I have brought you here for more than just the pleasure of your company, though that is pleasurable enough for any feast.” Polite laughter filled the room; Tarin buried his face in his wine glass to prevent a groan from escaping. “I have an announcement to make. As you know, my son Tarinrandar de Dartuan has been of age for some time now, and as such I have made arrangements for him to be married.” Tarin choked on his mouthful of wine, “He is to be wed to our dear friend and sovereign to the west’s daughter, Alia d’ar Solin.”

Applause broke out which luckily covered the choking coughs Tarin made as he tried to extract the last of the wine from his lungs. *I'm going to be married to Alia?!* Tarin knew that Alia d'ar Solin was the daughter of the most powerful sovereign outside The City, and while it would be rude to say she was ugly, Tarin thought it would be a lie to say otherwise. Worse than that, her personality was such as to make a houseplant seem interesting by comparison.

"Yes, thank you," Tarin's father waved down the torrent of congratulations, "the wedding will take place in two weeks. Now, let us propose a toast to the soon to be happy couple." Everyone in the room stood and raised their glasses, some of which were noticeably lacking in drink.

Tarin cringed as all turned to face him, "To happiness, wealth, and good feasts!" they droned. Tarin took a long pull of his wine as the crowd settled again, and the buzz of conversation filled the room. Tarin's mind raced. The last thing he wanted was to marry Alia, though it seemed he had little choice in the matter. *Choice?! I'm the son of The Sovereign! I shouldn't have to marry anyone if I don't want to, it's not like I'll need a wife. Mother doesn't seem to do anything particularly useful for The City, in an official sense. Mother and Father are always telling me what to do. I don't want to. I'm old enough to make my own decisions.*

The evening wore on, and as the crowd thinned, each person felt the need to wish him well. He endured the congratulations and backslaps of the assembled party with a practiced grin, all the while writhing internally. Finally, the last guests trickled out into the rain.

Tarin saw his father turning towards him. Tarin turned quickly and walked towards the door. "Tarin!" his father called after him, "don't you want to know more about your marriage?"

Tarin merely waved a hand back over his shoulder and mumbled something. He most certainly did *not* want to hear more about his "marriage." He'd be quite content if he never heard about it again. Tarin stalked down the arched hallways to his chambers, fuming. He would not stand for this. He was The Sovereign's son! And he'd been of age for two years now.

He slammed the door to his anteroom open. He paced over the intricate Tarisian carpet, trying to devise a way to escape his fate. He finally settled to leaning on his windowsill, staring out at the night. The greasy downpour had finally given up its grasp on the night. Looking out the window, Tarin smiled.

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Tarin closed the door to his room softly, wincing at the click the lock made as it settled into place. He tiptoed into the hall, looking both ways before he proceeded. The idea had come to him while looking out the window. It was simple: he couldn't be married if he wasn't here. So he had gathered a pack of essential things—clothes, money, some extra food, and a sword, one could never

be too careful—and waited until the Tower had quieted for the evening. The Tower never shutdown, and Tarin would have to be careful. This floor, being The Sovereign's residence, was fairly quiet at night, nevertheless security here was the tightest; if he managed to get to the private elevators, he would be free.

Luckily, Tarin knew the security of the Tower as well as anyone. The best burglars were those who lived in the places to be burgled. He felt like the hero in some story, silently, and with great skill, escaping from the fortress that held him captive. Although this presented a pleasing image, in actuality, Tarin was less endowed with skill, and more with luck.

Had this been a true escape it's unlikely he would have made it more than ten steps from his room. As it was, the living wing was empty and shadows reached down from the vaulted ceilings; Tarin stood hunched in those, he liked to think if it as "clinging" to the shadows. It was unnecessary, for he could just have easily walked boldly down the hall. No one was expecting an intruder to come from the inside, and so the attention of all the guards and security was focused solely outward.

Nonetheless, Tarin persisted in slinking down the hall, halting at the slightest sound to listen intently. After assuring himself that the sound was benign, and not some night assassin come to claim him, he would continue. For all that he had come of age two years ago, Tarin still possessed an active imagination, which had caused numerous members of the court to refer to him as "creative" when they were being kind.

Tarin reached the end of the living wing without incident. Now the real challenge began. The corridors surrounding the wing were lit, patrolled, and monitored, to protect those inside. Tarin knew where all the cameras were and the timing of the guards' rounds. His father had educated him in all these things so he might know he was safe. Tarin put that information to work, hiding in the cameras' blind spots and ducking into empty rooms and closets to let the guards pass.

Soon Tarin stood before the elevators. Had Tarin stuck with his original plan and called for the elevator, he would have been caught straight away, as the elevator's sudden and unexpected motion would have drawn notice. Strangely, as Tarin was reaching for the call button, he had the sudden notion that he should take the stairs. Why this was strange is because Tarin had never once taken the stairs to get in or out of the Tower. So it was extremely unlikely that Tarin, on the verge of fulfilling his original plan, would find himself descending eighty-two stories worth of stairs. Yet, as Tarin stood there, his finger poised before the elevator's call button, the thought had struck him *Fool! That's a sure way to be caught!*

This is crazy! Tarin fumed he plodded down another flight, *I'm The Sovereign's son! I shouldn't be wasting my time on these stairs.* Yet he continued on

mechanically flight after flight, his footsteps echoing in the dimly lit stairwell. Once he glanced over the railing and saw without emotion that the stairs continued their back and forth weaving beyond sight.

Half-an-hour later, Tarin stood panting on the ground floor. Two doors led out of the stairwell. One led into the Tower's lobby, the other directly onto the street. The latter could only be opened from the inside, and was wired with an alarm, but one that would only sound if the door was forced open from the outside. This was on account of one of Tarin's ancestors. This particular ancestor had a special fondness for a certain exotic dancer at a nearby club. He would enter the stairwell from the lobby, as if he were to climb them, but exit right back onto the street. He had the alarm wired such so that he might escape discreetly and not alert his wife, who was renowned for her poor temper.

Thus, Tarin was able to slip out into the night without notice. The air was heavy and the scent of the recent rain hung in the air. A thick fog wafted over the streets, obscuring Tarin's view; all he could see was the fuzzy outline of some neon signs from the all-night diner across the street. For the briefest second as he looked into the swirling mass Tarin felt that he should go home. Indeed, he almost turned on the spot and walked back into the Tower. But the moment passed and Tarin steeled against the cold mist that soon enveloped him.

Chapter Two: Encounter in the Fog

This rain sucks. Kairn mulled over the thought, then decided it was lacking. *This rain really sucks.* Satisfied that her feelings were adequately expressed, she stepped from her shelter under a doorway into the dingy alley. Glancing quickly up and down the length of the street, she trudged off, shoulders hunched against the damp, condensed mist dripping off the wisps of her bangs that managed to escape from under the bandana tied around her head. Nothing stirred in the shadows, and all sound was muffled by the fog, except for the light tinkle of rain on trashcans and windows.

Kairn glowered at the dirty street. *This night's a bust.* No one of any means would be out tonight, so it was pointless to be out in the rain. *I should just go home, and hope tomorrow turns out better.* At the thought, Kairn hefted her money pouch. It was far too light, *And some rich snob is snuggled up warm inside with a pocket full of coin that should be weighing down my money pouch.* Kairn knew that she was near desperation, and that if tomorrow didn't turn out to have a much better selection, if this rain continued, she would be destitute. She scowled at the thought, trying to dismiss it, but a worry line creased her forehead as she glared about.

As she turned out of the alley on to the main boulevard, she froze. *Footsteps!* Kairn ducked back into darkness of the alley, pressing herself flat against one of the walls, breathing heavily. She dared not hope that her luck had changed. *Get a grip!* She chided herself, and slowed her breathing, listening intently.

The footsteps grew slowly louder. A figure stepped in front of the alley's mouth; Kairn held her breath. The figure walked by a few feet from her, yet was barely visible through the fog. Still, Kairn noticed that he was richly dressed with his long hair pulled back with a leather thong; the style of the upper class.

Kairn suppressed a squeal of delight, this was better than she'd hoped. This was no merchant or shopkeeper; here was one of the very wealthy. This night wasn't going to be such a bust after all.

She slipped silently from the shadows of the alley, rain dripping from her dark hair. Crouching, Kairn slipped a knife from under her coat. Slowly, she crept closer, stalking her prey. Now she was close enough to see her victim clearly. He was young, maybe a year older than herself. On his shoulders was a rucksack, stashed under a heavy, waterproof cloak. Kairn groaned internally, and looked hopefully for the sign of a dangling money pouch or an open pocket. No such luck; there was no way she could pull this off without notice.

Kairn raised her knife and called "Hold it you-" At her words he spun, grabbed the wrist of her knife hand, and twisted so that the knife fell clattering to the sidewalk. Before Kairn could breathe, he had snatched her other wrist and pinned her, with her arms above her head, against the brick wall of a building.

Kairn struggled against his grip, "Let me go!"

"No." he said simply. This enraged Kairn. She struggled more furiously with no effect. After a minute Kairn relented, panting. "Are we quite finished?" her would-be victim drawled. Kairn glared at him, and although he was too close for her to kick, she managed to throw a knee, which caught him on the hip.

He spun slightly with the impact, releasing one of Kairn's arms more out of surprise than anything else. With it, she grabbed the wrist of the hand that still held her and pivoted, throwing him into the wall. Now she had him pinned with his arms above his head. "Any more clever remarks?" she snarled.

The boy shrugged casually, then pulled his legs up. He slid downwards and, unable to support his weight, Kairn leaned forward off balance, knocking her head on the wall. Meanwhile, the boy had dropped to his knees. He grabbed her around the waist, then sprung forward off the wall, tackling Kairn onto her back. There was a scrabbling of legs and arms, and then the boy was on top of her, straddling her chest and pinning her arms above her head.

Kairn blinked, still a little dazed from the blow to her head. "You know," he commented conversationally, "you have a very impolite way of introducing

yourself." Unable to do anything else, and too incensed to speak, Kairn simply hissed and snarled inarticulately at him.

The sounds of approaching feet forestalled any further comments. Soon a small group surrounded them. Kairn groaned. One of the surrounding persons chuckled coldly, "Well, well, looks like we're interrupting a little party."

"Get lost Liron!" Kairn tried to be commanding, but only managed to sound rather out of breath.

Liron chuckled, "But it seems you could use a little help there."

"I don't need any help, not from you! Now beat it!"

"You don't understand, our help isn't optional, is it boys?"

The crowd around Liron laughed. The boy, who was still absently holding Kairn's arms above her head, had watched the exchange with a look of confusion spread across his face. Liron pulled out a knife and the group spread out to surround the pair on the sidewalk. The boy's expression changed to one of alarm. He looked Kairn in the eyes and jerked his head towards the surrounding crows. She nodded.

Slowly, the boy got off her, and they both stood, back to back, facing the crowd. Liron laughed, "Going to fight us all, are you?" Kairn opened her mouth to snap off a comeback, but nothing came out, they were outnumbered three to one, and she didn't think much of their odds. To her surprise the boy spoke, "From the looks of it, I don't think you'll be much of a fight."

Liron snarled, "Get them!" and the circle of bodies closed in around them. The boy struck first, kicking one straight in the knee. The figure cried with pain and surprise, and crumpled to the ground, by then the boy had already moved on the next one.

Kairn noticed a movement just in time to avoid being hit, which reminded her that she had her own problems to deal with. She dropped to one knee to avoid another punch, grabbed the ankle of her assailant, and pulled hard, tipping him backwards onto the pavement. Kairn stood back up and quickly assessed the situation. Three of the original half-dozen were on the ground, one clutching his knee, the other two were coughing and sputtering, hands on their throats.

As she looked, the boy hooked one of the attackers under the arm, with his hand resting on the attacker's shoulder. The boy rolled the attacker forward, so his torso was parallel to the pavement, and threw his knee into the attacker's stomach. The unfortunate assailant promptly vomited, and fell to the ground retching. This happened in the space of a second, and Kairn couldn't help but be impressed, *He's good.*

By this time, the one attacker she had downed had scabbled back to his feet, and had managed to sneak up behind her. Kairn felt an arm go around her throat, squeezing. Unable to breathe, Kairn thrashed out, trying to hit the

assailant behind her. Her attacker couldn't help gloating, he thrust his face forward over her shoulder and hissed in her ear, "Looks like you're out of tricks, this'll teach you not to mess with—" but exactly who she was not to mess with was cut off by the fist Kairn hurled up into the attacker's now exposed face. She felt cartilage break, and turned as the grip around her throat loosened to see the attacker staggering backwards, hunched over, cupping his nose while blood streamed between his fingers. Kairn threw a kick into his chest, and he fell moaning on the ground. Kairn spat at him, "That'll teach you not to gloat." She massaged her throat, and mumbled "Idiot."

Looking around warily, Kairn saw there were only three people left standing: the boy, herself, and Liron. Liron looked wide-eyed first at the boy, then her, and without further ado, he spun around and ran. Kairn turned to the boy, "You're not half bad."

The boy inclined his head, accepting the compliment, "You did well yourself."

Kairn smiled mirthlessly, "You don't have to humor me."

The boy shrugged and said "I think this would be a good time for introductions. I'm Tarin, and you are?"

Kairn was taken aback—*Why the hell would this be a good time for introductions?*—but she said "Kairn, charmed I'm sure, but we should really get out of here before more show up or these recover." At this Tarin looked around absently. Kairn noticed, "What's wrong?"

Tarin coughed, "I don't have anywhere to go."

"What?! A rich boy like yourself ought to have a snug mansion waiting for you."

Tarin was startled, "Ah... what makes you think I'm rich?"

"Well it's obvious; look at the way you're dressed, your hair..." Kairn trailed off.

Tarin's mind raced, he couldn't tell her who he was, and he certainly didn't want to go home. She was a bit of mystery; she had managed to sneak up on him, he had taken control of the situation, but still, he was both impressed and surprised that she had managed to get so close without his notice. Not to mention that she fought very well, untrained and unrefined to be sure, but better than he would have expected nonetheless. Maybe he could convince this Kairn to take him in, if she thought their circumstances were similar, she might be empathetic. *If I hid with her, Father would never find me*, "Oh these," Tarin patted his shirt, "I uh... stole them."

Kairn cocked an eyebrow, "Really?"

"Oh yeah, I stole them off this... guy, he was really rich, I uh, thought they looked good, so I stole them and, uh... put them on."

"What about your hair?" Kairn sounded unconvinced.

“What, that? Oh, I uh... just think that... think that it uh... looks good is all.”

Both of Kairn’s eyebrows climbed high on her forehead when Tarin said this, “And why, again, don’t you have a place to go?”

Tarin stammered, “Well that’s because, well, because my er... hideout was uh... busted, busted by the authorities, so I uh... can’t go back there or I’ll be caught.”

Kairn stared at him blankly for a moment, *Hideout? Authorities? Who does this guy think he is?* Finally she spoke, “Far be it from me to question such a solid and believable explanation.” Tarin smiled internally with satisfaction: she had bought it. “And that’s quite the problem you have there,” Kairn continued, “best of luck with it.” and she turned and walked briskly back towards the alley from which she had first emerged.

Tarin stared after her for a moment, then ran to catch up, “Hey! Wait!”

“What for?” Kairn called back without stopping or looking back.

Tarin had now caught up with her, “For me, that’s what for!”

Kairn kept walking, not looking at Tarin, “And why would I do that?”

“Aren’t you going to offer me shelter for the night?”

Kairn shrugged, “No.”

Tarin stopped short, mouth open, *People don’t refuse me, I’m The Sovereign’s son!* Remembering that he was no longer in The Tower, Tarin shook the thought away and again ran to catch up with Kairn, who had turned back into the shadows of the alley. When Kairn was back in sight Tarin cried “You owe me!”

Kairn stopped abruptly next to a trashcan and turned to face him, “How do you figure that?”

“Well, I did save you back there, against that mob.”

Kairn glared, “I wouldn’t have been in that situation if it wasn’t for you.”

“What?!” Tarin stared incredulously, “Now you’re the one who can’t figure right, *you’re* the one who tried to rob me.”

Kairn tossed head and crossed her arms, “Well, anyway, I could’ve handled it.”

Tarin snorted, “Oh sure, six against one, those are great odds, how could you not have succeeded?”

Kairn glared daggers at him, “You’re not improving your case.”

“Look,” Tarin tried to sound sincere, “all I’m asking for is a place to stay the night, just one night.” When Kairn still didn’t look convinced, Tarin racked his brain, trying to think of something else to say. *Think! What do these common types like? I can’t offer her money, she’d rob me blind in my sleep if she knew I had coin, but I need a place to stay, someplace I can’t be found by Father. And she seems to know her way around, so she might be able to tell me where else I could hide.* Tarin’s stomach

gave a complaining gurgle, *Damn, how can I be expected to think on this empty stomach.... That's it!*

Kairn began to turn away again, "Wait, please." Tarin called again, "I have some food, I'd be willing to share it as... as payment for lodging."

Kairn eyed his pack hungrily; it had been a long while since she'd had a decent meal. Kairn inhaled deeply, then spoke as if she regretted every word, "Fine, I can put you up for the night. Only the night, mind you."

"Thank you very much, I won't be a bother, I promise."

"You had better not, or I'll throw your ass out, got it?"

Tarin smiled reassuringly, "I'll be the perfect houseguest."

Kairn eyed him a moment longer, then spun and strode off down the alley, ignoring the cats that ran across her path to feast on an overturned trashcan. Tarin hunched his shoulders against the mist, thrust his hands in his pockets, and followed after her into the shadows.

Chapter Three: A New Bed

Kairn led the way through the damp streets, not once looking back or acknowledging the boy who followed her. That's not to say that Kairn wasn't always aware of Tarin, tensed for the slightest indication of attack. *I can't believe I'm doing this! Letting this strange boy stay with me, it's crazy!* but Kairn knew that she needed the food. And were she to be completely honest with herself, a feat rarely achieved by anyone, she would acknowledge that she wouldn't mind a little company.

Tarin silently followed Kairn through the twists and turns of the alleys. The fog had thinned quickly as they walked, letting Tarin see more of the backstreets through which they walked. He did not like what he saw. Everywhere was filth; every building he saw was neglected in some way, showing clear signs of the apathy that was born from poverty. Tarin tried not to look too close, or breathe too deep lest he smell the refuse, and instead concentrated on following his host to be.

Now that he was so far from the Tower District, with its bright lights, grand buildings, and comfortable familiarity—and moving further away with every step—Tarin began to feel anxious. It was all well and good to avoid marrying Alia, but he hadn't anticipated having to hide in the dirt and grime, or that he would have been in any real danger. When Kairn indicated they'd arrived, Tarin's reservations grew.

They stepped through a small gap between two buildings into a courtyard of sorts, though associating the space with anything courtly tarnished the word. The courtyard was formed by the buildings that pressed in on the five sides,

there was no space between the buildings save for the one they stood in. Tarin grimaced as he took it in; nothing was neat. Some of the buildings jutted in front of the others making a jagged line, and none of the courtyard's sides were the same length. The façades of the buildings seemed to sag with their own dilapidation, the bricks and stones were chipped, every gargoyle he could see was missing a hand, or a head, or some other part, and the canopies that hung over the doorways were tattered and sagging. Worse, the tallest was no more than eight stories, significantly less than the Tower's one-hundred-twenty-five. Although The Sovereign's residence was only on the eighty-second floor, it was high enough that Tarin felt sure he wouldn't feel comfortable sleeping someplace so close to the ground.

As for the courtyard itself, the paving stones were uneven, and many were broken or missing completely. Trash was scattered everywhere; small pieces of paper rustled in the wind and stray cats fed off small piles of refuse. In the center of the sea of concrete an old seesaw and swing-set sat on a small square of brown grass, no more than twenty feet to a side. Climbing vines overran the play equipment, rendering it unusable.

Kairn glanced sideways at Tarin, gauging his reaction; it was clear that he wasn't happy with what he saw. *Well that's just too bad; if he doesn't like it, he can find somewhere else to stay.* It seemed that Tarin knew what she was thinking, and his expression quickly lost any hint of disapproval.

"So, where do you live?" he asked in what he sincerely hoped was an upbeat manner, although his face ached at the effort of keeping a disapproving scowl hidden.

Kairn gestured towards a gray brick building, "Over there." And she marched off across the courtyard. Tarin followed, trying to avoid stepping in anything unpleasant, wrinkling his nose at the smells. They walked past the swing-set, which squeaked as it swayed in a breeze. Tarin shuddered, *This place just keeps getting creepier.*

Kairn led the way up to the small, grey brick building; a sagging awning covered the three steps up to the door, and rain still dripped through its holes. Tarin expected Kairn to pause before the door to pull out a key, but she simply walked in. Through the doorway Tarin could see that the walls were covered in faded, peeling wallpaper, and where the paper had peeled off completely he saw that the walls rotting. Hesitating on the steps, Tarin suppressed the urge to turn on his heel and leave. Instead, he steeled himself, and followed Kairn inside. They wound through the hall and up a flight of stairs, which Tarin didn't trust in the least, and thus never let go of the handrail.

At the end of this hall, Kairn stopped before a door and drew out a brass key, patina with age. She fitted it to the lock, and with a little effort managed to

force it to turn. Tarin stepped into the dark room after her. There was a soft click and a dim light flickered on overhead.

The apartment was small and sparsely furnished; there was only a single tattered armchair in a corner; a lopsided table and two wooden chairs with broken armrests filled most of the room. Next to the table was the kitchenette, which filled the rest of the room. There was a single door across from Tarin through which he glimpsed a sleeping-pallet. The only other feature to the place was a small and grimy window, which looked out on the deserted courtyard.

Since the only light came from the dim overhead lamp, Tarin thought the whole place looked very depressing; he even conceded that the austere foreboding of the Tower was better than this. He was astonished that anyone could live here, in such a cramped, somber place surrounded by such squalor.

Kairn gestured expansively at the room, "Here we are; kitchen's over there, I'm sleeping in there," she pointed to the bedroom, "you're sleeping here," she pointed under the table, "and the bathroom's down the hall. Any questions?"

Tarin blinked, *Down the hall? A public restroom? Shouldn't I, as the guest, get the bedroom?* Tarin wisely kept these thoughts to himself, he'd come this far, and he was not about to lose a place to stay now. All he said was "Uh, no, that's fine, everything's fine."

Kairn crossed her arms, "Splendid. Now I held up my end, where's the food?"

"Just hold on a minute, try being a little patient."

Kairn's eyes flashed at him, "Excuse me?"

Tarin stammered, "What I meant is... I meant that the food's right here," Tarin slipped off his cloak, threw it on a chair, plopped his rucksack on the table, and pulled a loaf of bread from it. "See? So there's no need to get worked up."

"I see." Kairn said slowly, her eyes still smoldering a little, and then she blinked and shook her head. "Well, let's eat."

Tarin heaved a silent sigh of relief, *This having to be polite to people thing is more challenging than I thought.*

Tarin unpacked the food, he thought he had brought enough for a day or two, but that was for one person; the pile of food on the table looked small for them both. He thought he might have to argue with Kairn, that she might consider the meager spread he offered not enough for payment, but when he saw the happy way Kairn eyed the small pile, the thought evaporated.

Kairn took her eyes off the food long enough to fetch some rather battered wooden plates while Tarin shoved his rucksack awkwardly under the table. They sat and began to eat in silence. Tarin shifted his shoulders uneasily as Kairn ignored him completely, focusing on her food, and making little grunts of pleasure as she ate.

"Ow!"

Tarin looked up at the sudden noise, "What?"

Kairn shot him a suspicious look, "Something under the table fell on my foot." And she reached down and rummaged under the table.

"Hey! You can't paw through my stuff!" and he snatched his bag out from beneath the table, almost falling over backwards in his chair as he hauled it into his lap.

Kairn pointed at the bag, "That's what hit me!"

"What? My bag?"

"No, that thing sticking out of it. What is that?"

Tarin followed the line of her finger to the protruding hilt of his sword, "You mean my sword?"

Kairn's eyes widened, "A sword? Where, in all the rotting sewers, did you get a sword? No one uses swords."

Tarin's brow furrowed, "What do you mean?"

"What do *I* mean?! What do *you* mean?"

"Why don't people have swords?"

Kairn looked completely taken aback, "You really aren't from around here, are you." It wasn't a question.

For a brief moment Tarin panicked, he was caught; she knew he didn't fit in, that he wasn't from around here. *Wait...* and he had a way out. "No, I'm not."

Kairn nodded once, "Where are you from?"

Tarin said the first thing that came into his head, "I'm from the city of Seiarj." A part of Tarin took a moment to appreciate the irony that the city he was pretending to be from was the one for which Alia's father was the sovereign.

While Tarin was contemplating the dark humor of the universe, Kairn's own mind was contemplating Tarin. He was something else. It *would* explain things if he was from another city, all his strange behavior, his odd hair and clothes, his obvious lack of knowledge about The City's streets, but still something didn't seem right to Kairn. He seemed almost too unconcerned with everything, as if he had never had to worry about how to get his next meal, or anything else for that matter. His laid-back, commanding attitude just didn't gel with his story.

She cocked an eyebrow at him, "They use swords much in Seiarj, do they?"

Tarin nodded enthusiastically, "Oh yeah, everyone's got one."

"And how did you end up here?"

"I told you; the authorities were looking for me so I thought I would, er... make myself scarce. I thought The City would be the perfect place to come, no one could find me in a city this big." He echoed the last, almost to himself, "No one."

Kairn sat a moment longer in the chair, then stood up abruptly, “Well, it’s been a lovely chat, but I think I’ll turn in.” She needed time to process this Tarin character. She couldn’t find an obvious flaw in his story, but he still made her itch whenever she considered him. She made sure to lock the bedroom door behind her.

Tarin heard the bedroom door’s lock click and snorted, *How rude*. Tarin rolled his eyes and dismissed the thought, and Kairn with it; he had more pressing concerns. Tarin stood and left the apartment, after making sure the door wouldn’t lock behind him. As he walked down the dark hall, Tarin noticed that all the doors were cracked and peeling, their numbers faded almost to invisibility, and some showed splintering around the handle, as if they’d been kicked in. At last, he found a door that had no number and no lock.

Upon opening the door, he nearly spun around and fled. That bathroom was the most disgusting thing Tarin had ever seen, and he had been to numerous feasts filled with the most appallingly sycophantic courtiers imaginable. Grime and what-Tarin-didn’t-even-want-to-think-about covered the walls and floor, the stench of mold and filth permeated the air, and undulating masses of flies crawled over every surface. If his need weren’t so urgent, or if he were less proper, he would have left then and found a nice, clean bush with which to relieve himself. Holding his breath, Tarin approached the toilet, careful not to look at it lest he lose his resolve.

Although he had been careful not to touch anything, Tarin still felt grimy as he left the bathroom. *That’s not a bathroom, that’s a test of will power. How can these people use that facility?* Tarin reentered Kairn’s apartment and realized he was exhausted, having missed most of the night’s sleep.

Using his cloak as a blanket and his bag as a pillow, Tarin managed to settle himself on the floor beneath the table such that he was not terribly uncomfortable. Thoughts began to drift through his mind as he lay there staring up at the swirling wood on the table’s underside. He had always imagined that the common folk were a rather docile lot, but Kairn was fierce and strong-minded, she could also fight, not so well as he could, of course, but he was still surprised at what she knew. There was one thing she didn’t know, Tarin smiled to himself, *She wouldn’t be so tough if she knew who I really was*. Somehow, though, Tarin wasn’t so sure about that.

He was shocked that someone like her could live in a place like this, that anyone could. He hadn’t expected the luxury of The Tower— not that he had ever given much thought to the living conditions of the common people— but neither had he expected such a place as this. *That bathroom will give me nightmares for years*, he thought, and shuddered at the memory.

Tarin’s face twisted in a grimace no one could see in the dark, now *he* was living in the same conditions, in the same squalor and filth. Still, a part of him

thrilled at the notion: here was something different, something exciting, something he had never expected. Even as he cringed at the thought of being so far from everything he knew, he never once regretted running away. Gradually his thoughts slowed, his eyes closed, and in his mind swam a vision of the vast, unexplored streets of The City, alight with the dim glow of neon.