

*Tales of Mithrym*

*Scales of  
Justice*



*Jimmy Clephane*

# Scales of Justice

A Tale of Mithrym



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## Scales of Justice

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# Wanted

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The hot sun of Khannath was setting behind the walls and rooves of the great city of Alexia as the thick air of the day began to give way to cool night breezes and the gentle scent of woodfire from the chimneys of the houses.

The tall sandstone structures stood out in clear silhouette against the bright orange of the sky and, for a moment, it seemed that the city was almost at peace. Not a creature appeared to be stirring and the large market squares looked empty and still after a busy day of commerce.

Every now and again the faint sounds of domestic animals could be heard as they began to feed in pens and coops, with grunts and clucks of contentment. Following this came the echoing sounds of doors and shutters being closed and locked for the night ahead. Yes, for a moment, the city was at peace.

CRASH! The stillness was broken as a door burst outwards into the street, slamming hard against the wall and cracking slightly under the pressure.

Noise and light from the room inside rolled out and down the way, followed shortly after by a man. He stumbled at first, almost falling prone as he avoided crates and casks being stored there.

He quickly gathered himself though and looked around pensively for a direction to run in. His dark face paled with fear as his eyes moved quickly and he focused on a clear line ahead.

Pausing only for the briefest of moments, he began to run. He was in pain and he was afraid but right now he had a direction to run in and this gave him new hope, as his stumble turned into a sprint that took him hurtling through the early evening.

The sound increased though as several more figures emerged from the doorway behind him. They were

carrying long pole axes, each fitted with a club or a pick on their counter side. These men were better dressed, in the uniform of the city and in heavy chain and plate armour with tall, ridged helmets.

Their iron-shod boots sounded heavily on the flagstones and they raised their voices in cries and shouts for the man to halt.

He did not.

But as the pack now moved its way through alleys and streets, more of the uniformed wardens appeared from guard posts and lookout points to join the chase, throwing up clouds of dust and echoing loudly in all directions. Still more shouting, and still more armoured men and women came to the hunt.

Tentatively, some of the shutters and doorways of the houses either side of the commotion seemed to open. Not far, but far enough that careful eyes began to watch, hidden and cautious as the figure continued along, quick

to retreat into the shadow as the wardens followed after.

One pair was not quick enough however and one of the running officers stopped to bang loudly on the door. The other windows hastily but quietly closed in response. The price for disobedience was quickly becoming well known.

Further up the street, the running man came out into a large square. Carts and stands sat at rest covered with large blankets and cloth to protect them from the weather of the night.

Across the way, at each exit, the man could make out approaching figures in all directions. Many of the wardens were carrying torches as the light of day began to fade away. His heart raced and his breathing quickened. He turned quickly on the spot looking this way and that for salvation.

Finally he made his choice, running over to a cart near one wall and

throwing off its cover to reveal many boxes and barrels beneath. The square quickly filled with the pursuing wardens but the man's work was fast.

After only a few moments he had begun to climb up hastily stacked crates and casks to reach the nearby rooftop. Gauntleted hands grasped at his ankles but he pulled up just in time and they closed on nothing.

He fell to the flat of the rooftop, panting and wheezing from the effort. Sound behind him quickly roused him though as the wardens attempted to follow up the wall.

Groping hands could be seen in the dull light, reaching up and grabbing on to the brickwork. For a moment a head could be seen, looking over the parapet.

It fell down as a crash was heard below and a commotion rose in the square again as crates and barrels spilled their contents on the officers beneath. The hands did not let go

though and soon the head rose again. The warden pulled up hard and crawled prostrate onto the rooftop as well.

The man was up again though and running fast over the houses. The warden rose to follow, gritting her teeth and snarling as she did.

The man was getting tired now. He could feel it in his muscles. His head was swimming as his mind raced but still he did not give up his flight. The warden was closing in hard behind however, well trained and less fatigued by the chase so far.

The man looked about as they moved. The roof was coming to an end and there was a gap of some two or three cubits to the next house.

Could he make it?

His pursuer was not going to give up if he did not even try. His body screamed in protest at the thought though. He gritted his teeth with fresh resolve and eyed the edge of

the roof. Maybe, just maybe he could do this. As he drew up on the low walled edge he leapt with one foot onto the ledge and sprang. Not across but sideways and back down.

The warden, behind him, continued straight on, landing hard on the roof of the next building. The man stayed low where he was and crawled across to the other side of the building. Sounds of cursing came floating across to meet him but he paid them no heed.

At length he found what he was looking for. An opening in the edge of the rooftop gave way to a ladder down to the street below. He surveyed the darkness carefully, listening for any sounds of his hunters. Perceiving none though, he made his way down.

The street was quiet and a nearby alleyway led through to the working yard of a shop. Boxes, crates and handcarts were stored all about and the paving was well worn by the

passage of many vehicles. The man made his way in and leant up against the crates. At last the pain of it all caught up with him and he bent double, his head spinning, wheezing hard. He threw up onto the ground and coughed. There was no sound around him though. Just the gentle breezes of the night.

In time he straightened up and looked about for a doorway or a passage. There were several, at least one of them appeared to be unlocked, leading through to storage of supplies and animal fodder.

He made his way over but as his hand reached for it he stopped. A sound behind him, a whisper on the night air as it shifted. He turned to look. In that moment the darkness seemed to take shape.

What he had taken for shadows now seemed to move towards him. A pair of eyes, broad and bright, yellow and keen like a cat, looked upon him. A mouth, filled with white teeth that

glistened in the moonlight, opened wide and all he was aware of was bright, green fire ... and then ... oblivion.

# Collaboration

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This was another rooftop. The sun was high in the sky and the city below it was bustling. The air was thick with heat and the sounds of business. A smell of fresh fish was coming up from the docks and many voices were mingled together on the street below.

Derville Anyth, sat on her haunches and looked at the crowd below. In her hand she held tight to her new shortbow. It was sturdy, intricately coloured and curved back on itself where the string held tight and seemed to almost vibrate with anticipation for the hunt. She had knocked an arrow onto it and was poised ready to draw.

Her blue frock coat seemed very much to blend in with the sky above her and had anyone below even known to look up, they would have made out very little of her. Her long, red hair was tied back and her dark

breeches and boots were well hidden behind the parapet of the roof.

On the street below, Elvin Ranlee, a tall man with short blond hair, was striding down the street.

His long, berry-red coat hung down, unbuttoned to reveal his white shirt and breeches beneath. At his waist, his sword hung in its sheath.

He waved to the merchants and businessmen as he passed by, loudly inviting the time of day and comments about the weather. They, in turn, acknowledged him and in some cases greeted him cheerfully.

He rounded on one stall in particular. The table was laid out with boxes and trays of bright stones that glistened in the sunlight. The man behind it all was broad. His long, black beard was thick and curly so that the dark face behind it was hard to make out in full. He smiled at Elvin.

“Good morning, lieutenant, and how may I help you?” His voice was deep and friendly.

“Hello, Ahmed, just browsing really.” Elvin smiled back. “How’s business?”

“The same as it has been for months, my friend. Everyone is browsing but no-one is buying.”

Several other people were gathered round the stall and did not seem to take kindly to this remark. Elvin laughed though.

“Perhaps I could help with that!” Elvin smiled. “I am looking for something for my friend, it is nearly her birthday.”

“For Derville?” Ahmed stroked his beard thoughtfully. “She never struck me as wearing many jewels.”

“Perhaps not. But still, I need to find something for her, she is very discerning and I do not think that the fishmongers across the way

could offer anything better.” Elvin winked. “What do you think?”

This last remark was addressed to another man who was also looking at the gems and jewels of Ahmed’s market stand. The man visibly started to have been spoken to directly. He turned to look at Elvin and dropped a small green bauble he had been holding back into a box on the table. He rallied himself though and focused.

“For whom is this?” He stammered.

“For my friend!” Elvin continued to smile. “She’s quite pale and tends to dress in blues and browns. Maybe something green. An emerald perhaps, to compliment them? Or then again, with hair as red as hers, perhaps a ruby to match? The one you have in your pocket looked about the right colour.”

The man froze. His eyes darted back and forth between Elvin and Ahmed.

The tone of Elvin's voice dropped and his face became far more serious.

“Montu Ur-Atum, by the authority of the Council of Alexia, I arrest you in the name of the Empire of Khannath. If you come quietly and answer all questions when asked, you may be able to ...” His words trailed off and he sighed for Montu had turned on the spot and made to run away. “Stop!” He called after.

Gasps erupted from the crowd around them as Montu began to pick up speed but came to an immediate halt as an arrow hit the ground directly in front of him. He looked up to try and see where it had come from but, hearing Elvin coming up behind, turned and ran back the other way.

Derville jumped to her feet and began running across the rooftops, keeping Montu in her sight as she went. Elvin was charging through the streets behind him, keeping a

short distance behind but always keeping up. Derville stopped and aimed again as Montu made to turn down an alleyway. Another carefully placed shot and the man doubled around and arced the other way. Elvin looked up and smiled.

Running high and low, the pair continued to guide and to chase until suddenly and without warning, Montu stopped and glowered at Elvin.

His eyes burned with fear and fury as he then looked up to spot Derville. Rounding on a nearby street vendor, he seemed to grab at the panoply of food on the stall.

A look of victory was on his face though as he turned back, holding a large pot lid like a shield. Elvin began to approach but Montu bit the air at him, his eyes darting back and forth between Elvin and Derville.

He began to back towards a side street but when neither seemed to

react, he quickly hopped and switched direction.

As Montu ran across the street, Derville loosed another arrow down. The man laughed with delight as it hit squarely in the centre of the lid which he threw down to the ground before gleefully running down the opposite alley.

Derville cursed under her breath and shouted down to Elvin.

“He’s going the wrong way!”

Elvin beckoned to her and she hurriedly made her way down, jumping from rooftop to canopy to ground.

“That path doubles back, we can still get him!” Elvin was saying as she ran to meet him. “You take this way, I’ll take that!”

Derville nodded and the two of them ran to separate entrances. Careful of potential missiles, they each darted from cover to cover until they both

rounded and saw him climbing a wall at the far end.

As they approached though, Montu kicked at the already flimsy woodwork that had allowed him to climb and with a creak and a crash, an aging vine lattice fell at the feet of the two pursuers.

Derville drew another arrow and made to loose it but Elvin held a hand up quickly and signalled for her to lower it.

“Alive,” he said, “that is what they said.”

“But he’s getting away!”

At the top of the wall, Montu waved to the two of them and laughed as he dropped down to the other side. He was in the middle of a storage yard and there was a nice, busy street up ahead. Perfect for getting lost in.

Just then he felt a finger tap him on the shoulder.

Suddenly tensing again he turned to see an enormous man leaning up against the wall. The figure was dressed in heavy plate armour and had a greatsword strapped across his back.

Dukki Reptan, sellsword, stood upright and grinned.

“You’re nicked, mate.” The huge man growled.

Montu’s mouth gaped. Dukki’s fist came down. And then ... darkness.

# Bounty

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Back on the other side of the wall, Elvin and Derville worked hard to lift the lattice back up and rest it up against the wall. The wood was old but it seemed solid enough, holding at least well enough for them to get a foothold and pull up to the top. From there they could make out the prone figure of Montu, lying on the paving slabs of the yard. Beside him, Dukki sat whittling away with a small knife at a piece of wood. The two of them smiled and began to climb down carefully to join him.

“Took you long enough!” The big man scoffed without even looking up.

“What can I say?” Elvin said, leaning to check Montu for any signs of injury. He turned back to look straight at Dukki. “We fancied a run first.”

Derville walked over and joined Elvin in his checks.

“He looks like he took quite a blow.” She said, pointing to his head.

Dukki began to stand up.

“He’ll be fine.” He grunted. “I pulled the punch. He’ll have a headache when he wakes up but don’t you worry, he will wake up.”

“Well then, we better get him tied.” Derville began pulling some rope out of her pack. “Don’t want him running away again.”

“I am not sure how we are going to move him though,” Elvin looked thoughtful, “it would have been a lot easier if you had left him able to walk.”

“Oh, don’t you worry about that.” Dukki smiled. “Are you done with those?” He looked at the ropes Derville was tying.

“Yeah, that should hold.” She stood back.

“Right then!” The enormous man scooped the prostrate figure of Montu up in his arms and flung him over his shoulder. “Off we go!”

The way to the wardens office was reasonably clear. Very few people were hanging around there and those that were saw Dukki coming some way off and quickly moved aside to let him by. The office itself was quite small. It was an older and sturdier building than the ones around it. Grey stone had been laid between thick beams of acacia wood over which long banners in the colours of the city hung down between heavy iron braziers that were lit each night.

The two wardens on duty at the door stiffened and held firm their pole-axes as the three of them approached. One craned his head to look at the still unconscious figure of Montu draped across Dukki's shoulder. He rolled his eyes and smirked as the tall man winked and

walked by and passed through the door.

Inside, the entire ground floor was open plan with a counter set at one end. Doorways behind lead downstairs to the cells, upstairs to the dormitories and out back to the stables. Several wardens were moving this way and that through the large room but one, noticing Dukki and the others as they entered, made his way over to the counter and opened a large, leatherbound ledger.

“Have you been hunting again, Reptan?” He asked, looking at Dukki and at the body of Montu.

The tied thief was just coming round and beginning to thrash against the bonds.

Elvin stepped forward and held up a small piece of parchment.

“Montu Ur-Atum,” he read off the sheet, “wanted for smuggling and theft of currency.” He lowered the

paper and looked straight at the officer. “Apprehended this morning whilst robbing the shop of Ahmed al Qasar. You will find the ruby he stole on his person. I assured Ahmed it would be returned.”

The officer nodded and began scratching at the ledger.

“Very good, that will be ten silver, and ...” he began.

Derville cut in though. “Ten? It said fifteen on the order!”

“Ten, Anyth, between the three of you. Five more were on offer for information about the headquarters of operation. Do you have that too?”

Derville scowled.

“No.” She grumbled.

“Then it is ten.” The warden put a small pile of coins on the counter which Elvin took and added to a pouch at his waist.

“Pleasure doing business.” Elvin smiled. “Tell me, has there been any news on ...”

The officer broke in.

“Ranlee, you know I do not get to hear about that. The captain is in the stables though if you wish to ask him.”

Elvin nodded.

“Right you are.”

They made their way through the door at the rear and out into the yard at the back.

Like many of the others in the city, the yard was a large square with a stone perimeter made up of the walls of other buildings or yards. A side passage with a high arched ceiling gave way to the street and allowed for animals to be walked in without having to go through the warden station itself.

The sides of the yard were filled with wooden structures to create stabling,

feeding troughs and storage for fodder and riding equipment.

Not that they had kept horses in here for some time now. Not since better arrangements had been made. The enormous beasts that lived there now were feeding at one of the troughs. Their great forms subdued as they pulled in together to make room. Elvin looked at them as he walked out into the hot air again. No matter how many times he saw them, it still made his skin crawl.

The captain was nearby, watching them feed. He stood with his hands on his hips and a smile on his face. Dressed in the same uniform and armour as the other wardens, he wore no helmet. He was bald, with a short black beard. A broad man who was called athletic when he was younger. Now though, middle age had meant that people would sooner call him stocky.

“Hello, Captain!” Elvin called.

The captain did not turn round but answered in a happy voice.

“Lieutenant!”

“Captain, is there any news about our papers?”

The captain turned at this and his expression changed.

“I was having a good day, Lieutenant, kindly do not change that.”

“Captain,” Elvin persisted, “we have been here for months now and we have more than proven ourselves as law abiding and trustworthy. We have enjoyed the hospitality of the city and done our part for it, but we wish to see the rest of the country.”

“Lieutenant,” the captain walked up and stood close in front of Elvin, “we are grateful for your work but these are dark times. The empire is at war with criminal insurgence and potential unrest. I cannot allow potential spies to go out into the empire.”

“We’re not spies!” Derville broke in.  
“We’re just ...”

The captain raised a hand and narrowed his eyes.

“In that case, your papers will, I am sure, come through in due time. But until then my hands are tied. Until then, be patient and do not cause any upset. You have shown loyalty so far. Do not taint that with insurrection now.”

At this he pushed past Elvin and walked back into the station.

The three of them were left alone in the yard.

After a moment they untensed.

“So now what do we do?” Derville asked.

Elvin sighed.

“I do not know. It seems we have little choice in the matter.”

“I don’t like it.” Dukki growled. “You said it would just be for a few days. I’m no warden’s deputy.”

“I know, I know!” Elvin slumped down to sit on the end of an empty trough. “They seem to be treating us well enough at least.”

“For now.” Dukki growled.

“Yeah,” said Derville, “I don’t want to outstay my welcome though. Do you think we could maybe speed things up?”

“I do not know.” Elvin sighed again.

Derville sat down beside Elvin and thought hard.

“What if we tried the embassy?” She said. “Do you think there could be some of your old army friends there? Maybe they could help with papers.”

“I ain’t enlisting, not even to get out of this!” Dukki roared.

“I just do not know.” Elvin stared up at the sky. “Still, it could be worth a

try. We have nothing else to do for now anyway.”

They stood up and made to leave down the side passage.

Behind them, the beasts were finishing their food. One turned on spot and began to cough as it produced a bone from the food it had been hastily chewing and spat it down on the ground beside Elvin.

Elvin looked up into the scaled and horned head of the creature then down at the decomposing remains of its meal.

“Urgh,” he said with disgust, “dragons!”

# Obstruction

---

The day was drawing on as the three of them made their way to the embassy building. The street on which it sat was, in point of fact, a large open square.

Unlike the majority of other such spaces, this one was unused by any market venders or traders. Even pedestrians seemed to stay to the sides rather than crossing the centre which, in testament to the foreign embassies surrounding it, had been decorated with elaborate fountains and statues of white marble which shone in the sun.

The embassy of Angmark was one of many, joined in an unbroken mews of tall structures which extended around the entire square. The heavy spruce door, enhanced with intricate brass carvings, sat open and inside a long hall tiled like a chessboard lead up to a heavy oak desk.

Behind the desk sat a young woman, dressed in the robes of the Order of Ibis. In front of her were a variety of papers and beside her, floating in the air, was an open leatherbound book of parchment and a fine peacock feather quill.

“Ah, good afternoon!” She greeted Elvin as he stepped up to the desk. Behind him, Derville and Dukki stood quietly waiting.

As she spoke, the quill began to scratch its way across the book. Thin, spidery and very precise letters formed and dried almost instantly on the page. Elvin had grown quite used to the administrators of the orders and had learnt to pay this little heed.

“Lieutenant Elvin Ranlee, ma’am.” He said with a slight bow. “And this is Miss Derville Anyth and Dukki Reptan. We have come to follow up on our application for proof of agency.”

“I see. One moment.” The quill scratched again at the paper and the woman began to look over her desk. “I am afraid I do not seem to have your application here. Are you quite sure you have not received a response at your lodgings?”

“Indeed.” Elvin smiled.

“Very well,” the woman stood up. The book floated higher to keep level with her, “it is likely with one of the civil servants at the moment, let me see what I can find out for you.”

Elvin bowed again and the woman turned and left, her ledger following as she did.

Elvin looked up at the ceiling and started to whistle tunelessly.

Derville and Dukki sighed.

“Same as every other time.” Derville said under her breath.

Elvin was about to respond when he was suddenly jolted to attention.

“Ranlee?” A voice bellowed across the hall. It belonged to a well-dressed military officer in a similar uniform to Elvin himself. “Lieutenant Ranlee? Is that you? How in Een’s name are you, young man!”

Elvin smiled a genuine smile.

“Captain Gregory!” He called back.

“My word, man! Last thing I heard, they had drummed you out on some trumped up medical chit! What brings you to Khannath?”

“Enjoying my retirement, sir!” Elvin shook the captain’s hand. “Off seeing the world, sir!”

“Is that so?” Captain Gregory smiled. “Hardly had you pegged as a man to do the tour, Ranlee. Still, good on you! Have you been far yet?”

“No further than this town yet, sir! Seem to be a bit stuck here.”

“Oh!” The captain chuckled. “Spot of bother with your paperwork, eh?”

“Yes sir!”

“Well, I dare say we can,” he winked, “expedite things a bit for you and your ... errrm .... Friends.”

Dukki snarled.

“Oh do you think you could, sir?”  
Elvin’s heart leapt.

Just then though, the room seemed to spin as a familiar voice cut through the air.

“I hope you were not planning on circumventing civic authority, captain.”

The voice was dry and cold and filled to the brim with its own self-importance.

Captain Gregory stiffened and saluted.

“Certainly not, sir!” He said stiffly. “Just a bit of banter between officers.”

The administrator had returned with a middle-aged man dressed in wizarding robes and a brass chain.

Dukki growled again.

“Notley!” Derville whispered under her breath.

“You may go about your business, captain. I am dealing with these matters personally.” Notley said with a dismissive wave of his hand.

The captain saluted again then, looking at Elvin, he gave a slight shrug, turned on the spot and walked away.

“Mr Notley ...” Elvin began.

“Chancellor!” Notley broke in quickly.

“... Chancellor Notley, my apologies, sir.” Elvin corrected himself. “I must say, it seems a lifetime since we ...”

“Since we were on that confounded vessel together? Yes. Thankfully the time is passing. Unfortunately the memory seems to be forever lodged

in my mind.” He scowled at Derville. “Some things take longer to heal than bruises.”

Elvin sighed to himself and forced a smile.

“I was not aware that you handled matters like this yourself, sir.”

“As a matter of fact, I do not,” Notley moved round and sat behind the desk. He arched his fingers and looked up at the three of them, “but I decided to take an interest, as they say, in this case. Your names are, how shall I put it,” he paused then emphasised, “‘known’ to the kingdom since your escapades and it is necessary to take proper steps. You will, I am afraid, just have to be patient.” He leant forwards and smiled. “Take your time to enjoy yourselves. Why not take in the sights of the city. This really is a very remarkable place, Mr Ranlee.”

“Lieutenant.” Elvin corrected, almost instinctively.

Notley's smile broadened. "Not anymore, it would seem."

"We are doing our best to subsist here, sir." Elvin continued. "But these are not easy circumstances and there is hardly much work for those without documents."

"Well, I am afraid I really cannot help with that." Notley leant back. "You should really consider these sorts of things before travelling. Still, I understand you are making quite the name for yourself helping out the wardens. You may yet earn your rank again."

"I am not a warden, sir. Nor do I intend to remain and become one here." Elvin said, straightening up.

"Aye to that!" Dukki and Derville looked at each other.

"Besides," Elvin continued, "I understand the patriarch is planning to make most of the wardens redundant with the new flying regiment."

Notley chuckled. “And you do not fancy joining the wardens of the air.”

“I do not much care for flying, sir.”

“Well, mister Ranlee, I am afraid I really cannot help you any further.”

Notley stood up and began to walk away. “You have entered this country without papers and will just have to wait for due process. I need to satisfy myself that you are, in fact, worthy of representing the kingdom to the world. Until then, you and your companions are under the jurisdiction of the city. Good day.”

“Why that jumped up little ....”  
Dukki’s voice began to rise.

Again, they heard a scratching sound as the ledger beside the administrator began writing.

“I think perhaps we should continue this outside.” Elvin put an arm round Dukki and the three of them made to leave.

# Long Day

---

Elvin, Derville and Dukki made their way slowly back through the busy streets of Alexia.

“What do we do now?” Derville asked, throwing her hands up in exasperation.

“I say we make a run for it.” Dukki snarled.

“Are you serious?” Elvin scoffed. “And get one of those beasts on our tail? No thank you!”

“Well then what?” Dukki growled.

Elvin sighed. “I do not know, I really just do not know. Keep on keeping on, I guess.”

“Well the hostel ain’t open again until nightfall.” Derville cut in. “Are we walking about until then? Or are we picking up another job?”

Elvin drew himself up with what he hoped was fresh resolve. “We cannot

let Notley have any reason to accuse us of being lazy or disordered. I say we take another job.”

“Sounds good to me.” Dukki clenched his fists. “I’ve got a need to punch someone, might as well be for the good of the city.” He smiled.

They made their way back to the Warden Station. The same officer was still on duty at the desk as they entered and he waved them over immediately.

“Good timing, my friends!” He said with a smile as they walked up. “Are you here for work? We have another bounty that needs to be brought in today.”

“Sounds good to us!” Elvin smiled. “What is the job?”

“Another thief, we’ve been after this one for some time now.” The warden gestured for them to come through with him to the stables. “We have just had news that he is out in the streets and on his way to the

merchants quarter at the moment so time is of the essence. Sergeant Ammon will give you the details.”

The sergeant was a tall man with an athletic build. He greeted the three of them as they walked out into the yard. He was dressed in riding clothes, with heavy boots and a tight holster around his chest and waist holding a crossbow.

“I see we have our feet on the ground then!” He laughed. “Here, take these!”

He handed each of them a find ring with an odd gem set into each.

“Put them on, quickly, we don’t have much time.”

Elvin, Dukki and Derville did so and for a moment the world seemed to spin. They each felt the same sensation though they always described it differently. Words seemed to be flying through their minds, pictures too, like looking and

hearing out of many heads all at once.

Just then the voice of Sergeant Ammon cut through and all seemed to calm down.

“Wonderful!” He said. “Not everyone is compatible with this sort of magic, but I had hoped it would be you three that came on this run. You already have such a close bond.”

The words were all the more unsettling as the man’s mouth did not appear to be moving at all.

“These are a little something that the Artisans Guild have produced for us to help with peacekeeping.” He continued. “They allow us each to see and hear as the others do. The latest, cutting edge of magical engineering!”

Elvin focussed his mind. It was like trying to walk through treacle.

“This is ... most ... novel, sir.” He thought the words out carefully.

“Good job, lieutenant!” The sergeant beamed. “You’ll have the hang of this in no time! Now, help me up!”

Beside them, a dragon had been saddled and muzzled ready for flight. With a bit of help from Elvin, Derville and Dukki, the sergeant climbed on top and the three of them realised that they could see from his high vantage point too. It was almost like looking out of the corner of their own eyes, as if the sergeant’s vision was just on the periphery of their own.

“We have no time to waste now!” The sergeant’s voice continued in their own minds. “We are in hot pursuit. Please remember that you must keep your rings on at all times. It is an offence for an officer to remove it, even a deputy such as yourselves.”

“Aye, sir!” Elvin called up.

Derville’s head was spinning but she focussed ahead of them on the street. Elvin could see it through his own

mind's eye as she picked out the clearest path ahead.

Dukki growled like a wolf on the hunt. They all felt his fury too.

“Let's go!” the sergeant called. His dragon unfolded its wings and, with one broad stroke, lifted into the air.

They ran out into the streets. Heads swimming with the strange sensation. On several occasions Elvin nearly fell over as he tried to dodge obstacles that were not, in fact, in front of him. They all soon adjusted though and Derville made her way up to the rooftops while Elvin and Dukki stuck to the streets.

They were aware too of the flying eyes of Sergeant Ammon as he looked down from high above at the multitude of people below. Various faces, outfits and shapes all moving about on their own paths. Then suddenly, one clear target. The sergeant was looking hard at one man in particular. They could all feel it.

“That’s our man!” Sergeant Ammon’s voice cut through.

Elvin and Dukki broke into a sprint. Side-by-side dodging this way and that through the streets, following the ariel view of the city as seen through the sergeant’s eyes. They could make out their own bodies moving down in the streets far below. The form of the thief too, walking briskly some way ahead. It was invigorating!

They darted this way and that, occasionally even closing their own eyes as they followed the view from above. The thief was barely any distance away now, just the next street, now just a few doors, now just inside the building in front of them! They had seen it! The man had walked in and shut the door behind him.

Elvin and Dukki both opened their eyes and focussed on the door in front of them. They knocked. There was a sound of movement inside.

“In the name of the law, open up!”  
Dukki roared.

The sounds continued inside but the door remained shut.

“Open this door!” Elvin called.

Still nothing.

“Well ...” Elvin gestured at the door. Dukki drew back then slammed hard into it with his shoulder. The wood gave in with little to no resistance, buckling and cracking as the latch tore out of it.

The room inside was dark and the man they had been following was standing in the centre, frozen in fear as he held a large bundle.

“You are under arrest for ...” Elvin began. Terror turned to resolve on the man’s face however and he turned and darted up the stairs to the room above. Dukki and Elvin made to follow but the narrow stairway was hard for Dukki to run up in his armour. The man drew ahead, the sounds of the two of them

getting further behind him. He reached for the door to the roof just as it swung in and hit him hard in the face.

Sunlight spilt into the stairway as Derville emerged and ran down after the now falling man.

The figure hit Dukki hard and both men ended up flat on the floor of the downstairs room.

Dukki sprang to his feet and looked down at the man.

“You’re nicked!” He shouted but then stopped short as he reached to grab at him.

The bundle of stolen goods had spilled out in the crash. Various items were littered across the floor, some now damaged from the fall.

“Bread, cheese, mangos ... what is this?” Dukki’s voice caught in his throat.

“This can’t be right,” Derville rounded down the stairway, “we’re after a thief, wanted for ...”

“I’m sorry!” The man was almost crying as he lay on the ground. “I’m so sorry! I wouldn’t, I didn’t, I mean, I never would have but ...”

“What is going on here?” Elvin cut in.

“Times have been hard, I didn’t mean to start stealing, but we needed to get through!” The man was pleading.

“Is this all?” Dukki looked puzzled. “I thought ....”

“Is this really all you took?” Elvin asked, lowering his voice trying not to sound too threatening.

“Yes, sir!” The man looked up at him imploringly. “Well, this and some the other day. I swear it was never meant to be so much, but it’s been hard and we ...”

“There must have been a mistake,” Elvin sheaved his sword, “hand over what you have taken and we will return it. I am sure that ...”

Just then there was a loud thud from the roof above.

“I am sure that you are not about to circumvent justice, lieutenant.” The voice of Sergeant Ammon sounded in their heads. Moments later, the man himself came walking down the stairway. “Good job, my friends! A thief has been apprehended! And in a fraction of the usual time! This is a triumph for peacekeeping, you should be proud!”

# Resignation

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“What is going on here? This is not right!” Elvin smacked his hand down on the desk of the Warden Station. The captain was standing behind it, a stern look on his face as he held his gaze hard on Elvin.

“It is justice, Lieutenant, it is order!” Elvin stood back as he continued. “Thieves are thieves and are all subject to the same laws and the same punishments. This is how we maintain the peace of this city! It is how we have always maintained the peace of this city!”

“The man was hungry!” Elvin implored.

“He is a thief! Did he pay for the food? Did he take it anyway? He is a thief! And he will be tried and sentenced as a thief! Rest assured we are not monsters, we will not starve him, but he will pay his debt to

society in the mines just as the rest of the criminals do!”

“I will not be a part of this!” Elvin continued. “It is ... it is ... barbaric! It is draconian! How can a civilised country ...”

“Civilised is exactly what it is, Lieutenant! We are not barbarians, and do not dare to look down your nose as if Angmark is so much more civilised than us, as if you were not running around with clubs and bones in your hands long after the Emperors of Khannath were philosophising and dealing with the true questions of the world!”

“I am sorry, but I will not be a part of it!” Elvin fixed the captain. “I resign!”

“Me too!” Dukki called from behind him.

“And me!” Added Derville.

The captain sighed and shook his head.

“I am very sorry to hear that. It is not promising for a warden, or even a deputy, to question the law in this way. It raises questions of loyalty, of collaboration and even of corruption. Are you siding with the criminals? Are you already working with them perhaps? I may well need to report this.”

“You know that is not the case ...” Elvin began, but the captain waved a hand dismissively and continued.

“I will, of course, inform your embassy. And we will have to take whatever action is necessary to prevent ...”

“Alright.” Elvin hit down at the desk again. “Alright! We are not rebels or insurgents and we are not working with the criminals of this city. But we are ....”

“... hoping to leave as soon as you may.” The captain took over. “And certainly you have done great service in your time here. I am sure that a momentary lapse in judgment will

not prevent you proving yourselves fully. So long as that is all this was.”

Elvin was crestfallen.

Dukki growled slightly and Derville dropped her face into her hand.

“Yes, sir.” Elvin’s voice was quieter now.

“I’m sorry, lieutenant, I couldn’t quite hear that.”

“Yes, sir!” Elvin saluted stiffly. “A momentary lapse, that is all, sir!”

“I’m glad to hear it!” The captain smiled. “And I’m sure that a tenacious team such as yourselves, devoted to peacekeeping, would be only too happy to help out with the night shift tonight!” He chuckled. “Just to show your loyalty, you understand.”

“Yes, sir!”

The captain turned to point at a map of the city hung on the wall behind him. Around it was drawn the outline of the city walls and, beyond

that, various nearby landmarks including the docks to the north and the open countryside to the south.

“We have had reports of an attack made on one of the farms outside of the city.” He pointed to the map. “It is vital that we address the matter as this farm is responsible for our main grain supply. This is a simple job, find those responsible and report back to me tonight. No rings this time, just a bit of detective work.” The captain then picked up a set of papers and held them out to Elvin. “You will get a part of your wish, lieutenant, as this requires you to leave the city! Albeit not far beyond her walls. You will of course be watched, so please do not prove my trust ill-placed by trying to flee. Simply attend the site, and report back on your findings.”

Elvin saluted and the three of them left the station.

Once they were outside, Dukki punched hard at a wall. Cracks left

behind caused a small amount of dust to fall to the ground. The street was quiet though, the sun was setting and the shops and market stalls were being closed for the day. The orange light of the sky gave a warmth to the buildings around them.

They exchanged glances but then each looked back at the warden station.

“Let’s just go.” Derville said. And they left.

The great gates of the city were still open, a host of wardens and Khannathian soldiers posted to them, guarding closely those going in and out. The three of them showed their papers and, after a short delay, were allowed to pass through.

The sky was almost black now as the sun dropped down below the horizon but the moon light on the ground was dazzling. They all stopped, momentarily caught in the calm of the open landscape after so

many weeks stuck inside the walls. The ground was arid and bare but for a few patches of dense dry ferns. In the distance they could make out hills and mountains and, between themselves and there, several large farmsteads on the plains, each built next to a natural spring or reservoir.

The one they were heading for was not far away and they made for it immediately. High above, like a deeper shade in the blackness of the sky, they could make out the moving forms of the wardens, riding high overhead on their great beasts.

The farmer was an older man, his beard grey to the point of almost turning fully white and his bald head revealing his dark skin. He was clearing debris and moving various boxes and crates around the yard as they approached.

“Are you the deputies?” He asked.

Elvin nodded. The man looked concerned.

“We just want to have a look around.” Derville added.

The farmer gestured to the buildings around him.

“Derville, how about you check over the barns. Dukki, have a look at the fields over there.” Elvin drew closer to the farmer. “Can you tell me what happened?”

“There was a raid.” The old man said with a shrug. “They got in last night.”

“And what did they take?” Elvin continued.

“Take?”

“Yes, were they after the animals or maybe the grain?”

“They didn’t take anything.” The farmer shrugged again.

“Well what did they do then?” Elvin asked.

Derville came running over.

“You should probably come and have a look at this.” She said, pointing over to the barn.

Elvin followed.

It took him a moment to take it all in. The building had been quite badly damaged by the attack. Splintered wood was thrown about here and there.

“This looks like an animal attack.” He said, scratching his head. “But what animal doesn’t try to feed at a farm?”

“I think I know.” Derville said, holding up a piece of the broken wood. It was covered in deep scratches and a large patch had been burnt.

“Wait, do you really think that it could be ...” He began.

She nodded.

“... dragons?”

# Footprints

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“But how? And, for that matter, why?” Elvin was puzzling over the scattered pieces of the broken barn. “Dragons are dumb beasts, just lumbering lizards really. Surely they would have been after the animals. You saw them back at the stables. They just gorge themselves until they fall asleep.”

“I know, but you have to admit, this looks a lot like their sort of handywork, doesn’t it!” Derville said, leaning over Elvin’s shoulder to look too.

Elvin straightened up and looked back at the city walls far away in the distance.

“Besides, how would it even have gotten out? I am pretty sure they are chained up at night.” He looked up at the sky. “Well, except for the ones that do the night patrol.”

Just then, they heard the sound of running footsteps and Dukki rounded the barn.

“You need to come and have a look at this.” He said as soon as he saw them.

The two of them ran to follow him.

He had come over from the fields of grain, in the middle of which was a large circle of burned and tattered wheat. It did not look as though it had been chewed at so much as trampled and then set on fire. They stood in the middle of it, staring round in amazement.

“What could have ... ?” Elvin began, but Dukki quickly pointed to several patches of softer earth.

Leaning down, Elvin could make out the shapes of “footprints?” He explained, standing upright again and looking at Dukki. Elvin stroked his chin. “I still cannot believe it though, they could not have slipped out of the city, surely.”

Derville had been thinking.

“They’re not dragons though, are though.” The others looked puzzled. “Okay, not dragon-dragons ... I mean ... dragons are stories, from ages ago. These things, well, they said they found them, right? Somewhere in the wilderness around here. Maybe they didn’t find all of them.”

“That is about the first sensible thing I have heard in a while.” Elvin said with a smile. Derville beamed. “Well then,” Elvin continued, “if that is the case then we should be able to track it back to a nest or a cave of some sort. If we can do that, then we can report it and be done.”

“That shouldn’t be a problem.” Dukki grinned, hopping up and running over to another spot in the field. “It looks like it didn’t fly the whole way, you can see these patches where it must’ve stopped. Maybe that’s how it hunts?”

“Could be, I suppose.” Elvin thought it over. “Well, we have a trail. It seems the only thing to do is to follow it!”

They did so. They were thankful for the moonlight to help them. Without it they could have easily lost the trail at any point. As it is, the landing points seemed to get close and closer together until, at last, they were following a standard trail of footprints through the night.

Before they knew it, the trail had lead them to what looked like a rocky cliff edge. It was a few moments before they realised it was, in point of fact, the city wall.

They had arced their way through the plains and come full circle back onto the city itself.

But what now? Occasionally a warden would pass overhead however there did not seem to be any foot patrol in this area.

“Go back to the main gates.” Derville said to them. “I’ll wait on the other side. Come find me.”

Elvin was going to ask her what she meant but as soon as she had spoken she began to climb the wall. Her hands cleverly finding and using notches and crags in the stonework.

Moments later, she disappeared across the top of the wall. A small shadow in the broader shadow of the night.

With a shrug, the two men made their way back to the gates. It took more time than before to pass through and there were questions about Derville’s whereabouts. They assured the soldiers and wardens that she would be along presently and were, at length, allowed in.

It was hard finding their way to where Derville crossed the wall though. The inner streets of the city curved and crossed and zig-zagged so often that without the sun to guide

one could easily lose all sense of direction.

In time though, they found her. Waiting patiently by the wall.

She signalled down to the flagged street beneath them. Not footprints this time but scratches. Thin lines, that could easily have been missed among the cart tracks, were in patches starting from the wall and heading in towards the city centre.

They continued on until at last they came to ...

“The warden station? So it IS one of theirs?” Elvin exclaimed in a whisper.

“It certainly looks that way.” Said Dukki, pointing to the tracks as they continued to the stables.

“But they would not ... they could not get out of ...” Elvin looked on in wonder.

“Let’s get a closer look.” Derville said, gesturing for them to follow.

Walking up the side alley and into the stable yard, they found the beasts sleeping in their stalls.

“Those padlocks look heavy enough to me.” Said Dukki, eyeing the chains that held each beast in.

“That only leaves one option.” Elvin said gravely. “It must have been a warden that took it out!”

The gravity of this hit them all hard.

Derville nodded. “You’re right.”

“Good evening, lieutenant, it looks like you’ve got some news for me.” The captain had just walked out into the yard. The three of them leapt and turned to face him.

“Good evening, sir!” Elvin called back.

“That sounded promising, something about being right?” The captain walked up close to them.

“We found tracks, sir, yes. We were just confirming what sort of size of creature could have made them.”

Elvin straightened up as he talked, holding to attention as he gave his report. "It would seem the attack was a wild animal."

"Oh, I see!" The captain nodded. "A large one? After the farm animals."

"Yes, sir!" Elvin saluted. "It would seem so!"

"Good work, lieutenant, good work! We'll make a warden of you yet. Well, that should appease the patriarch. We'll double the sky patrol and keep an eye out for any more. Should be sorted in a day or so." The captain slapped Elvin on the back. "Good job. Go get some sleep." He made to walk away. "And see? Things go better when you follow orders, don't they! Good night, you three!" And then he left.

Elvin untensed.

"You lied to him!" Derville whispered.

Elvin shushed her and led them all out of the stables.

He refused to talk until they were back at their lodgings. It was a small place, an attic in a tall building near the city centre. They had minimal supplies there, spending most of their time on duty.

“What is going on?” Derville pushed once they were safely inside.

“Keep your voice down.” Elvin whispered. “I ... I don’t trust this. Any of this!”

He made his way over and looked out of a small window onto the street outside.

“The only way that dragon could have gotten out,” he continued, “was if someone had LET it out. And that means a warden. We do not know which one and we do not know why!”

“So what do we do?” Asked Dukki. “Tell the captain? Or maybe the commander? We could go to the military.”

“No,” Derville stepped in, thinking hard, “no, the wardens here would

just accuse us of collaborating again if we started accusing them of things. It would be our word against theirs.”

“Well then, what?” Dukki continued. “Go to the embassy?”

“No,” said Elvin, “Notley wants a reason to hold us up, he would accuse us of being disobedient or upsetting our hosts.”

“Then what?” Dukki roared. The other two shushed him as quietly as they could.

“I think there is only one thing we CAN do.” Said Elvin. “We have to catch them in the act. I doubt this is the first time one of them will have gone out on a joy ride like this. And I am willing to bet they will do it again.”

“When?” Asked Derville.

Elvin thought. “Tonight, I reckon. They would be happy that things have calmed own now, thanks to us.”

They all shivered at the thought of more work but resolved themselves to go out.

It was getting on towards midnight now as they set up across from the warden station.

All three were positioned on the street top, sat under a low canopy behind boxes.

It looked like it would be a long night ... but, they waited.

# The Hunt

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At least an hour passed as the three of them held their vigil. There seemed to be little activity from the warden station with seemingly no-one coming or going for a time. On the higher stories, lamps were extinguished as the last of the day shift went to sleep and there was a cool stillness to the air of the street outside. At one point the large front door, now closed for the night, opened as the corporal on duty stepped out and lit up a cigar. Orange lamp light spilled out as they watched her. The scent of tobacco drifted down the way. The nearby shops and houses were still and quiet though, with doors bolted and windows shuttered from the night. At length, the woman returned inside and the door was shut again.

“This is no good.” Derville whispered in frustration.

“We have to wait.” Elvin whispered back.

“I’m going to get a better look.” Derville shifted and began to climb a nearby trellis to the roof above.

“Wait!” Elvin called after her. Dukki and Derville both shushed him as the sound echoed and carried down the street. Derville dropped quietly back down and knelt beside him.

“What?” She whispered.

“We need some way to signal if we see something.” Elvin explained, looking back over to the station.

Dukki held out a hand. In it was the ring he had been given that day by the sergeant. He smiled.

“No, it’s too risky.” Derville whispered.

“Not if we don’t talk.” Dukki said, moving to slip the ring on.

“Someone could be watching.” Derville made to stop him.

“So what? They won’t know it’s us. They’ll just see what we see. And that’s what we want isn’t it? They’ll know who’s letting dragons out!”

“It is a risky plan.” Elvin stroked his chin. “But I reckon we can manage it.”

Derville sighed.

“Fine.” She said, pulling out her own ring and slipping it on.

They all felt the same dizzy unease as before as they became aware of each other’s vision.

Derville quickly turned away from them though so that neither was in sight as she made her way to the roof above.

From the rooftop, Derville could make out the stables behind the station. The enormous beasts were asleep in their pens. There was the sound of a shutter as the last of the lights from inside the station went out and the whole area plunged into darkness.

Under her breath, Derville cursed the darkness.

She was about to make her way back down until she realised that she could make out movement. A shadow, lost in the greater darkness. It was odd to watch, almost like a greater emptiness, but it had a form.

The others saw it too.

Large feet were treading lightly on the ground and then, for a brief moment, green light flickered as a large, broad mouth opened and closed.

Elvin and Dukki craned to look closer.

It was at that moment that their luck began to shift though. Dukki, who had been leaning hard on a wooden crate, leant further forward to get a better look. His large hand, propelled by the weight of his body and the plate armour on it, splintered the wood and the crack rippled out into the night.

Elvin had already ducked back down but Dukki, transfixed by the face of the creature, found himself looking up into two wide yellow eyes. The mouth opened again and there was a grumble that turned into a roar as the green light grew again.

Dukki did not wait to find out what was next though.

He sprang to his feet and headed off down the street.

He could hear the feet of the dragon following behind him and, in his mind's eye, he was dimly aware of Elvin keeping pace while Derville followed on the rooftops above.

He ignored these images though, keenly focussing his mind on the path ahead and looking for any possible escape.

He ran. Keeping pace as he had never managed before. All the time aware of the feet running behind him. He continued down the street until it opened out into a market

square. Over to one side he could make out a merchant's cart and a number of boxes beside it. He could use them to reach the roof! But then what? No, that thing could fly. And he, most certainly, could not.

Elvin continued along the street, sticking to the shadows and staying at the side as much as possible to avoid drawing attention to himself. He could see Derville's view too, looking down on the running beast. It struck him at about the same moment it did her too.

"There is no-one riding it!" He could not help thinking it. He was sure he could hear Derville sigh as he did though.

"You're right." She replied. "Just keep quiet though and don't let it out of your sight!"

They ran on.

Back in front, Dukki began to run for the wall. The beast followed him. At the last though, he offered up a hasty

prayer to Castilla as he swerved to the side and reached for a nearby door.

It was unlocked!

He almost fell through the doorway as he then hastily spun on the spot and slammed the door shut behind him.

The dragon came to a halt outside. Dukki could hear it sniffing.

Slowly he began to make his way through the, apparently empty, house.

It was a small building, only one room deep and with a ladder to the upper floor.

At the rear, he could see another doorway to the yard behind. He crept over and tried the handle. The door swung in and the cool night air drifted in with it.

Back outside, Elvin darted behind a cart and Derville held firm on the rooftop as they watched the creature.

It paced up and down then, perceiving that its prey was gone, spread its wings and took to the air. Derville threw herself flat onto the rooftop as it passed overhead. It seemed to have missed her though.

Hiding from the night, they could both see clearly through Dukki's eyes as he made his way out of the back of the building. The yard behind led onto a warren of twittens and paths that cut through the mass of buildings. He cautiously made his way along, looking for a way back.

Suddenly, there was a sound. More footsteps.

These did not appear to be animal though. Something in the sound put Dukki in mind of boots. Moments later, he was dimly aware of a figure running through the night. Ducking back into the shadows, he watched as a young woman ran past. She was holding a bundle and far off he could hear the sounds of pursuing wardens.

They did not seem to know where she had gotten too though. Shouts and cries of “try that way” and “she can’t have disappeared” could be heard in the distance.

The woman clearly knew she had evaded them too as she stopped and caught her breath, checking the package she was carrying before looking around for another direction to head in.

Dukki was about to step over to her when he felt an odd shift in the air.

The shadows seemed to become darker somehow as everything fell into all too sharp a focus.

Heavy footfall could just about be heard as a pair of black wings folded and the woman turned to see what was there.

Green fire engulfed her.

# Arrest

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“What is the matter with you!?” Elvin slammed his fist hard down onto the desk at the warden station. The captain, standing behind it looked stern and held his gaze with Elvin. “A woman has died!”

“Lieutenant, I don’t know what you think you saw but as I have told you, our beasts are all accounted for!” The captain’s voice was frustrated by resolute. “You say you saw an animal attack? Very well, we will look into it. But who was this woman? Why was she out after curfew? I am prepared to look past your own indiscretion on the matter, a deputy could perhaps be forgiven for overtime, but she should not have been there.”

“What we think we saw?” Dukki roared and pushed past Elvin, laying his hands flat on the desk and locking eyes on the captain. “It was one of them! One of those, those ... dragons of yours! It killed her!”

“For the last time,” the captain ignored Dukki and looked straight at Elvin, “all of our beasts are accounted for. So it could not have been one of them. No one should be out after curfew, so the city will take a dim view of this woman purposefully endangering herself in this way. And finally, on that point, who was she? What remains are there for us to even investigate? There is no case here, lieutenant. Now get out of here and get some rest. The three of you have more than worked enough in the last day!”

Dukki growled under his breath then, pulling up straight he turned on the spot and walked out, punching the doorframe as he did. Derville turned to follow. Elvin and the captain looked at one another until Elvin sighed, dropped his head and followed.

Catching up with the others outside, Dukki was still brimming over with rage, whilst Derville was sat at the side of the road thinking. The sun

was up now and they had barely slept.

“We have to do something.” Derville said as Elvin walked up.

“I agree, but what?”

“Tell someone, tell anyone!” Derville threw her arms up in frustration.

“What? Just to get shouted down again?” Dukki turned on them.

“No, she is right, we cannot leave this here.” Elvin said. “If the authorities will not listen, then we must at least let our own people know.”

He began leading them back to the embassy. Dukki and Derville followed silently as Elvin’s mind rushed with thoughts. They had to tell someone, but they had to find someone who would listen!

The square was as empty as usual and the doors to the Angmark Embassy were open again for business. The three of them went straight in. Their hearts fell though

as they realised that they would get no easy access to anyone else there as Notley himself was standing by the main desk.

The man looked exhaustedly at them as they walked in but composed himself and greeted them straight away.

“Ah, good morning again.” He said through thinly veiled annoyance.

“Chancellor,” Elvin began, “there has been a serious incident in the city. It is vital that we speak with the military attaché. The lives of citizens and visitors from Angmark alike could be in danger.”

“Captain Gregory has left this embassy, Mr Ranlee.” Came Notley’s reply.

“What?” Elvin was shocked.

“Unfortunately he did not get on very well with city officials. His views were a little too,” he paused then continued, “upsetting. In the meantime, you may present any

evidence,” he scoffed, “that you may have to me!”

Elvin fought to compose himself.

“Sir, one of the beasts, the ‘dragons’ as they call them, it escaped last night and it killed a woman! The authorities are not willing to investigate. We are quite sure this is not the first occurrence though!”

Notley sighed.

“You are not a scientific man are you, Mr Ranlee?” Notley’s voice was edged in mockery.

“Sir?”

“These creatures, these ‘dragons’, how much do you even know of them?”

“We saw it, sir! With our own eyes!”

“Eyes may be deceived, Mr Ranlee, but a keen mind cannot be. I have made an extensive study of this country in my time here,” Elvin fought back a scowl, he knew well how little time Notley could have

spent doing so, “and while their ways may seem different to ours, their civilisation ... well ... it works! We could learn a lot from them you know! These creatures that they have taken to using, these are a recent addition certainly, they were discovered a few years ago, I believe, in the remoter deserts. Some scholars say they are perhaps descendants of the old dragons. But this is neither the time nor the place for fairy stories. These beasts may look similar but they are far more witless, nothing like their narrative ancestors. They are useful pack animals though, and quite susceptible to commands from a strong willed handler. They could not ‘break out’, any more than a pet dog could break out of a locked house!”

“But sir, they did!” Elvin cut in.

“Mr Ranlee, that is quite enough! I am encouraged to deny your papers entirely if this is how you plan on behaving here!” Notley drew himself

up with all the pomp and vigour he could muster.

Elvin was about to speak but he drew back and saluted.

Turning on his heel he marched to the door. The others followed ... though Dukki took a moment to make a gesture to Notley first.

As they caught up with Elvin they found that he had stopped at the doorway. Outside they could make out the figures of about twenty armed wardens, standing in a broad semi-circle.

“What is going on?” Elvin whispered under his breath.

Sergeant Ammon stepped forward.

“Lieutenant?” The sergeant called. “Concerns have been raised about your behaviour these last two days. We should like you and your companions to come with us to answer some questions.”

“What is the meaning of this?!” Elvin called back.

“Please come down and we will escort you back to the station.” The sergeant continued in a loud, formal voice.

“This is absurd!” Elvin turned to look at the others. He saw Notley walking over to see as well.

“No, Mr Ranlee, this is justice. If you will go about making a mischief then there are repercussions. Those of us that represent the crown here at the embassy may enjoy some liberties in the city, but I have told you before that there is an expectation that travellers such as yourself acclimatise or, at the absolute least, obey the law!”

“You want us, come get us!” Dukki shouted to the wardens.

“Mr Reptan,” the sergeant called, “we will not compound your misdeeds with our own. Come out of the embassy and we will deal with

you officially and under our own jurisdiction.”

“They can’t come in?” Derville said, turning to Elvin. “Maybe if we ...”

Her voice trailed off though as Notley moved.

“Oh, be off with you, you confounded nuisance!” He shouted and shoved Derville hard through the doorway. Elvin and Dukki rounded on him as Derville stumbled, only just catching her balance as she fell out into the square.

“You vile creature!” Elvin shouted rounding on Notley and grasping the hilt of his sword.

“Now, now!” Notley said, backing away slightly, a faint tremor in his voice. “Do not do anything rash!”

“Elvin!” Derville called. Wardens were attempting to grab her hands and bind them. She was dodging as best she could but more were closing in.

Elvin and Dukki turned and ran out to her. Behind them, the doors of the embassy slammed shut.

“Sergeant!” Elvin called. “Wardens! Listen! Please!”

Sergeant Ammon walked up to Elvin, a pair of shackles in his hands.

“Lieutenant Elvin Ranlee, you are under arrest for disturbing the peace, spreading false rumours and inciting anger ...”

He did not finish though as Dukki’s fist came round at him. The sergeant ducked backwards and Dukki stumbled slightly as Elvin drew round him and grabbed Derville by the hand, pulling her through the temporary opening in the mass of people.

They ran.

Away and down an alley.

It was only a matter of moments before they realised they had not been pursued.

Hiding as best they could and glancing back at the square, they could see that in the confusion the wardens had not spotted which direction they had gone in.

This was a small victory though as they watched, with dread and trepidation ... as Dukki was led away in shackles.

# Voices

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“We have to go.” Derville put a hand on Elvin’s shoulder as they watched the last of the wardens march away. A couple stayed behind and were beginning to walk the perimeter of the square. It was only a matter of time before they would be found.

“Okay, come on.” Elvin stood up slowly and they began walking further down the alley. At the other end they quickly ducked down again as they spotted another warden standing on duty on a nearby balcony.

“They’re everywhere!” Derville whispered. “How are we going to get out? We’d need eyes in the backs of our heads to spot them all!”

Elvin reached into his pocket. His hand met the cold metal of his ring. He drew it out and looked at it.

“I think that may be our only option.” He said thoughtfully.

Derville winced. Then she sighed and drew out her own ring too.

“I’m not happy about this, I hope you know that.” She said as she slipped it on.

Elvin did likewise.

“Me neither, I promise you.” She heard his voice in her head. “Now come on. You go high, I will go low!”

It was slow progress at first. Every time they found an empty alley or passage, another warden seemed to come on duty. They began to feel as though the whole city were after them. Slowly though, they were able to move along. They took it in turns to watch the other as they each timed their movements perfectly to dart behind the backs or over the heads of their would be captors. The sun was high in the sky as they made their way further along to their lodgings, hoping beyond hope that the wardens would not be there yet and they might be able to collect some of their things.

They did their best not to speak as they went but as time went by their fear grew with it.

“Where do you think Dukki is?” Elvin began to wonder, and Derville heard it.

“I don’t know. They said the station but ...” She stopped as she ducked down to avoid another pair of watchful eyes.

“I do not believe that for a second.” Elvin scoffed internally. “My opinion of their tactics has somewhat lessened of late ...” He stopped as well as he slid behind a doorway and waited, eyes closed, watching through Derville’s vision until he had been passed.

“I know,” Derville sighed, “we have to get out of here. Get out of this city. But we need Dukki ....”

“I SEE YOU!” They both fell to the floor as the voice boomed inside their heads.

Derville dared a look first, she raised her head and began to scout around for any signs of movement. The rooftop seemed clear though, with barely any sound from the street below.

Elvin then opened his eyes too and started to look about him. They could both still hear it though, a cold and painful laugh inside their heads.

Together they began to look up. They gasped. High above them they could make out the figure of a warden, riding atop a dragon, circling around. It began to descend in sharper and sharper turns towards them. All the time, the voice continued.

“I SEE YOU!”

Derville leapt to her feet. There was little reason to hide now, they had been seen.

She bolted across the open roof and jumped to the next building. High above, she could now hear the

flapping of the wings as the creature and its rider came closer and closer.

Up in front she could make out another edge, this time with a long jump to the next. She looked about quickly and then spotted a ladder fixed to the rooftop leading down to a yard below.

As she approached the edge, she skirted the parapet and rounded on the ladder. With a flourish she jumped and landed feet and hands on the rungs and began to climb down as fast as she could.

The yard was empty. The remains of a small outbuilding were leant against one wall and the paving under foot was worn and uneven. Back on the rooftop the rider pulled hard at the reins of the dragon and it veered around, landing hard on the ground in front of Derville. She was trapped.

On the beast's back, the warden drew a small crossbow and loaded a quarrel into it. Extending a hand out,

the steel tip was pointed directly at Derville.

Derville closed her eyes. As she did, she realised that she could now see the wardens back!

Elvin leapt from a balcony and landed hard on the warden, knocking both of them off the dragon and hard onto the paving below.

They struggled for a moment, the glint of the quarrel passed by Elvin's face but he brought a hand round and caught the crossbow hard, hurling it towards a wall where it cracked and fell to the ground with a twang and a splintering of wood.

With his other hand, he brought round a fist and punched the warden squarely in the face.

The figure slumped down into unconsciousness.

Derville ran over and the two hugged one another as anger turned to anxiety as they took in their predicament.

“What do we do now?” Elvin asked. “They are bound to have seen us come this way! There are probably a score or more of them running here as we speak!”

“I know, I don’t think we can trust to sneaking anymore.” Derville looked Elvin up and down and then looked at the resting shape of the warden.

There was no way that they could walk out of this as they were, and they were no match in combat with the whole force of the Alexia City Watch. Their options seemed to be few at best.

“I think we’re going to have to be clever about this.” Derville said at last. “How are you for play-acting?”

“Me?” Elvin looked shocked. “What has that got to do with anything?”

“I mean, I think we can get into the station, maybe even into the prison. We could try and find Dukki. But it would take a bit of deceit.” She half

smiled. “If you think you’re up to the task.”

Elvin looked down at the warden.

“Do you mean ... ?” He was beginning to understand.

“They wouldn’t suspect it. And you’re about the same build. You could say you found me and arrested me.”

“It is a risky plan for sure!” Elvin said. “But I do not think we have much choice. It could work though.”

He began to reach down and pull at the warden’s clothes.

They both jumped to their feet though as a voice behind them spoke.

“YOU ARE ASSUMING THAT I WILL LET YOU LEAVE”

# Motive

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The sun cast long shadows down from the bars of the window of the cell as Dukki came to. He winced at the pain but chuckled to himself. No-one had ever taken him without a fight, he was sure that at least three wardens had worse headaches than him at the moment.

He stood up and looked around. The cell he was in was made up of iron railings fixed into heavy stone walls. The room itself was enormous, divided up into barred cubicles. Every one of them seemed to be filled. His own had a dozen or so people besides himself.

“Well,” he said with a stretch and looking at the nearest inmate to him, “I’ve woken up in worse places, to be sure.” The man did not look interested in conversation. “Name’s Dukki, what are you in for?”

He turned to look at Dukki.

“I am Montu Ur-Atum, I am a criminal.” His voice sounded timid and broken.

“Oh I see.” Dukki’s own voice dropped somewhat as the smile drained from his face. “I thought you looked familiar.”

“We are all criminals here.” Montu continued. “We are the property of Khannath. We are to work the mines.”

Just then, the large door to the cell chamber opened and in walked two wardens. Unlike those that Dukki had seen most days, these were not wearing armour but rather leather jerkins under their tabards.

“The criminals will rise!” One of the wardens shouted, banging a heavy truncheon on the bars.

The prisoners all stood up.

Dukki, deliberately and with some dramatic flair, sat down. He placed his hands behind his head and whistled.

“The criminals will rise!” The warden bawled again.

Dukki pretended not to hear.

“Cell six!” The warden shouted. The other walked over and unlocked the door of the railings by Dukki. They walked in and stood before him. “Stand!”

Dukki stretched and stood up. There was a mild gasp from some nearby as he straightened up, a clear foot taller than the jailer.

“What is your name, criminal?”

Dukki made an elaborate bow, bringing his head down low in front of the wardens.

“Dukki Reptan, your honour.” He said with a flourish.

The truncheon came down hard on his head and he fell prone.

“You are a criminal!” The warden barked. “You are the property of Khannath and you will learn obedience! Get him up!”

Several of the other prisoners moved over and helped Dukki to stand. His head was spinning but he managed it, making eye contact with the wardens and smiling.

They snarled at him then stepped out of the cell. The spring in the lock clicked it back into place with a snap.

“Listen up!” The warden called. “Double shifts are called for! You will begin work in one hour! Those who refuse, will be hanged!”

They left, slamming the large doors behind them.

“More? Now?” Gasps erupted around Dukki. “We will die if we have to go back down there now?” Groans and quiet shouts around the room echoed this sentiment. “We will die if we don’t!” Came another voice. “Is this the end of us?”

Dukki spat blood then, putting a hand to his head, he straightened up and stretched again.

“I don’t know about you folks, but I can’t say as I’m enjoying this place. I tell you what, I’ll give you another choice if you like!” He walked over to the bars. Something metallic glinted in the dim torch light as he raised his hand and, passing it through the bars, began to work the lock. “You can go with, and die.” Click, the door opened. “You can stay here and die.” The door swung open. “Or you can come with me!”

Elsewhere, across the city, in a yard, Elvin and Dukki looked up.

“You can talk?” Elvin chided himself for such an obvious question. The beast loomed over him and Derville. Somehow he was sure that, if it could, it would have been smiling. He and Derville exchanged looks then each reached down and removed their ring. They felt the world shrink as they stopped perceiving one another’s vision.

The dragon growled in a way that almost felt like laughter.

“I DO NOT NEED YOUR CHILDISH TOYS!” The words sounded out inside Elvin and Derville’s minds. They each drew back in surprise.

“But how are you ... ?” Derville started. She and Elvin stared in awe at the creature.

“MY BROTHERS AND SISTERS HARNESSSED MAGIC LONG BEFORE YOUR ANCESTORS COULD EVEN SPEAK!” The voice sounded fiery and fierce in their heads, it was scornful and deriding.

Elvin and Derville looked to one another again then Elvin turned and faced the Dragon.

“How old are you?” He asked.

“I AM YOUNG!” The dragon bellowed. “I AM STRONG!”

Elvin began to side step slowly. He kept his eyes fixed on the dragon’s own. Derville begin to move the other way.

“You are a child?” Elvin asked.

“I AM GROWN! I AM THE YOUNGEST OF AN ANCIENT RACE! THE HAMMERS! THE MOUNTAIN MAKERS! I BURN WITH THE FIRE OF MY FATHERS AND MY MOTHERS!”

Elvin began to move backwards. In a flash though, one great leg of the beast rose and he found himself knocked hard to the ground as talons clicked against the paving either side of his head.

“AND I AM SMARTER THAN YOU, CHILD OF EEN! TELL YOUR FRIEND TO STAND BEFORE ME TOO!”

“Derville!” Elvin called. She ran round, lowering her bow.

“NO TRICKS NOW! I AM NOT IN THE MOOD FOR GAMES!”

“What do you want then?” Derville shouted up to it.

The dragon growled a deep laugh again.

“YOU HUMANS MAKE SUCH GOOD SPORT! TO WATCH YOU SUFFER,” it pressed its enormous foot hard down onto Elvin’s chest, he gasped and gaped for air, “TO WATCH YOU TEAR EACH OTHER APART. YOU ARE THE TOYS OF A FALSE CREATOR! YOU ARE THE PLAY THING OF AN IDLE HOUR!” It brought its head down close to Elvin, flashes of green sparked in its jaw. “LOOK UPON ME, CHILD OF EEN! I AM THE HAMMER! I AM YOUR DEMISE!”

Elvin struggled under the weight but, with a great effort, began to talk.

“What is your end game? What do you want? To kill us? You could have done that by now!”

Again, the dragon growled a menacing chuckle.

“WE WILL, CHILD OF EEN, WE WILL KILL YOU ALL. IN OUR TIME AND IN OUR FASHION. WHEN YOU TURN ON YOURSELVES, WHEN YOU KILL

EACH OTHER, WHEN THE CITY FALLS TO CHAOS AND DISORDER, WE WILL FEED AT THE TROUGH, WE WILL DEVOUR THOSE THAT RODE US, THEN WE WILL COME FOR ALL THE OTHERS!”

At this, Derville dropped her bow hard onto the ground. The dragon’s head darted up to look at her as she spun round, picking up the cross bar of the shattered bow of the warden and flinging it hard at the beast’s head.

It bounced off, landing away to the side.

The dragon roared with laughter.

“FOOL! DID YOU THINK THAT WOULD STOP ME?”

“No,” said Elvin with a smile, “but this might!”

In his hand he held the fallen quarrel. Its tip glinted in the sun as he swung it hard at the dragon’s leg. It arced down and then ... shattered.

With another of its legs, the dragon quickly pinned Derville too.

“YOU ARE PROUD AND YOU ARE FOOLISH, CHILDREN OF EEN, AND I WILL END YOU NOW!”

Just then, sounds erupted from the street nearby. They could make out the sounds of the approaching wardens.

The dragon reared up. It made no audible sound but in their minds they could feel its purring anger.

Elvin’s muscles ached but he knew an opportunity when he saw it. He sprang to his feet and, taking Derville’s hand too, they darted away.

“I WILL COME FOR YOU!” They heard the voice as they ran. “REMEMBER THAT!”

They did not stop though, scrambling up the ladder to the rooftop then away.

Into the square stepped the captain, the sergeant and a handful of other wardens. They took in the scene. Their fallen comrade, groaning as she started to come to. The dragon, sitting obediently by its handler.

“You may add evading the watch and attacking an officer of the law to their crimes, sergeant.” The captain said, removing his helmet and wiping his brow.

“Yes, sir!” The sergeant took out a notebook and scratched at it with some charcoal.

“It’s a shame, they were good deputies, they could have had a better end than this.”

“Sir?” The sergeant looked puzzled.

“New orders, Ammon, from the patriarch. Evasion of the law is now a capital offence. Kill them on site.”

There was a pause, it seemed to last an eternity.

“Yes, sir.” The sergeant replaced the notebook and began issuing orders to the wardens.

Elsewhere on the rooftops, Elvin and Derville made their way across the city.

“We have to do something.” Elvin said.

Derville stopped and looked at him.

“I know, but what?”

# Prison Break

---

Dukki walked up and down the cells, unlocking each in turn and letting the doors swing in. The faces of the prisoners were on him. Many looked terrified. Their clothes were ragged, and their faces paled by long work, little light and poor food.

“Well?” He said, turning on the spot to take them all in. “What’s it to be?”

“They’ll kill us!” One of the prisoners called out.

“They’ll do that anyway, one way or another!” Dukki replied. “I ain’t saying it’s better on the run, but come on, at least you’d be free to feed yourselves! To sleep when you want to!”

“You are the one who put me here!” Came Montu’s voice.

“Me too!” Shouted others.

“Yeah, and I’m here too now!” Dukki said, staring them down. “Turns out

I was on the wrong side, but they had me working or starving. Seems that's what they've been doing to you too! Now what's it to be? These doors lock themselves if you fancy sticking around. I ain't staying to debate you! But it seems to me that you ain't exactly got anything to lose. You belong to Khannath, do you? Well I don't! I won't!"

A short man with wispy white hair stepped forward. His face and his arms were scarred. He was thin but strong and his face was resolute.

"I won't," he said in a cracked voice, "time was that they said Khannath was ours. Now they say that we belong to Khannath? I lived in this city all my life. This is not what I worked for. To be made a slave by my own people! I am with you!" He walked over and stood beside Dukki.

"Righto," Dukki said, "seems to me we'll need something to fight our way out with, mind." He looked around for any sign of store room.

They must have put his armour somewhere. And his sword too. But where? He was roused from his contemplation though as another voice sounded out.

“I’m with you too!” A woman called out. She was young, her face dirtied from heavy labour. “This was our city once, I say we take it back!”

“Right, steady on though, we’ve got to ...” Dukki was cut off sharply though as more voices joined in.

“No more!” Cried one. “This must end!” Came another.

Before he knew it, the room was filling with sounds and cheers.

“Bloody hell,” Dukki thought to himself, “this isn’t a jailbreak, this is revolution!”

“Stop!” He shouted. The sound echoed around the chamber. They did stop, all faces turned to look to their new leader. Dukki turned on the spot and took them all in. Haggard, tired, grim but

determined. Then something struck him. “Where are the guards? Why haven’t they ...”

They all craned to listen as, just outside, the world seemed to explode.

Outside, on the rooftop, Derville and Elvin were running. They came to another break but could see, standing watch on the next building, more of the wardens. How were they going to get away? This was impossible!

They dropped down onto the street below. A crowd of people were milling about, the markets still busy with trade. Lowering their heads, they tried to fall in step with the rest of the people. This did not last long though as a shout was heard from the other end of the way.

“There they are!” called a warden.

High above, they heard the now all too familiar sound of large flapping

wings as they saw a dragon soar overhead.

Elvin reached out to one side and, gripping hard on a fruit stall, pulled hard causing oranges, mangoes, pears and dates to spill across the street. People shouted and darted out of the way as he and Derville ran.

The air around them whooshed past, almost knocking them down, as they felt the heavy wing beat overhead.

Derville looked ahead of them at more people, more stalls, more boxes and produce. Her mind was racing as she considered her options.

“Elvin!” She called. “When I say ‘duck’ ...”

He was ready though. “Got it, aye, sir!”

She smiled.

“Duck!”

They both dropped down as they felt the swoop of the beast gliding down behind them.

Another moment and it would have grabbed them in its talons. As it was though, the claws grasped at nothing! The beast, heavy with momentum unincumbered as it has missed its quarry, hit the ground hard, rolling headlong.

Shouts and cries rose from the crowd as well as gasps as both rider and dragon careened into the stalls ahead, spilling yet more wares and striking panic as the creature rolled and leapt to stand among the people.

It rounded on Elvin and Derville as they stood up again. Derville was smiling still as she looked straight at it.

“Oh, and I thought you were strong!” She said in a mocking tone.

The dragon leapt at them on all fours, claws out.

Derville pushed Elvin to one side and jumped to the other.

The beast landed between them.

At this point the crowd around were getting frantic. Those merchants that could, began to wheel away carts and stalls. The others were hastily bagging what they could and making to leave. Onlookers were shouting and beginning to run until the whole street was in absolute chaos.

“Keep it up!” Derville called to Elvin. “They can’t keep up with is through a stampede!”

The two of them ran again. The dragon bounding after them each time.

Wardens too now joined the rout as one street became a whole quarter with people fleeing the grounded beast. It swung and clawed and bit at Elvin and Derville as it went but soon, with a grunt of frustration, spread its wings and rose up into the air again.

The gust of hot air it threw down floored many, including the two of them. Derville rose quickly and called up to it.

“Oi!” She shouted. “Come on then!”

Elvin jumped up. His heart was racing as he watched the dragon straighten up and begin its descent at Derville.

“No!” He shouted, grabbing her around the waist and pulling her down.

Green flames erupted from the jaws as once again the beast was robbed of its target.

Flames erupted with a crash as the dragon careened into the wall behind them.

A flash and a crash as stonework, brickwork and splintering beams flew in all directions.

The dust settled to reveal a gaping hole in the building and, standing beyond it, Elvin and Derville could hardly believe their eyes ...

“Dukki!”

# Surrounded

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Elvin and Derville ran to Dukki as he stepped out of the prison. They both hugged him tight as he grinned from ear to ear at the sight of them.

In spite of all that was going on, they could not help but feel relief at the reunion.

Elvin laughed.

“You are a lot thinner without your armour on, you know!” He smiled. Dukki looked down at himself. Shirt, breeches and boots. Not exactly properly dressed for a fight. He laughed too.

“I could do with a bit more on, to be sure!” He smiled as well.

They turned to look as more prisoners were filing out through the wrecked wall of the jail. Some had stopped and returned though as a second room had become visible

through the debris. Many items were held there in racks and on shelves.

Dukki turned and ducked through to join those already hard at work retrieving their confiscated goods.

A strange stillness seemed to fall on the whole area as people began busying themselves. The crowd around the wreckage has stopped trying to run in favour of seeing what was happening. Through the hole in the wall of the jail they could make out the prone figure of the enormous beast, buried under rubble, seemingly unconscious ... although a gentle rising smoke and green light gave a stark reminder that it was probably not dead.

Dukki emerged from the wreckage, buckling on the last of his plate. His sword hung once again at his back and his helmet glinted with the midday sun.

He smiled.

“That is just about enough!” Came a voice from the crowd. A warden stepped forward, pole-axe raised. His face still dripped with sweat from the exertion of the chase. “You are all criminals!” He continued. “And you!” He pointed his weapon and Elvin and Derville. “You are under arrest!”

He made to advance on them but stopped as a small piece of masonry arced through the air and clanged off his helmet. He stumbled backwards to laughter from the crowd.

“Oh stow it!” Came a mocking reply from the crowd. “We’ve listened to you and done what you said long enough!”

“That’s right!” Came another. “And where did it get us? In chains! Mining!” More cheers and jeers from the crowd erupted. “You think you can arrest all of us, do you?”

Just then, more figures push their way through. A score of wardens

now stood there, weapons raised. They helped their comrade to stand.

“If necessary,” one of the wardens shouted to the escaped prisoners, “and if you do not come peacefully, we have orders to execute on the spot. This ends here!”

Time seemed to stop as silence fell again.

“No!” Came a shout. Not from the prisoners this time though but from the crowd behind the wardens. “No! This is too much!” The wardens turned to see that the crowd of onlookers was facing them, anger in their eyes. “You pick us off one by one! My father! My sister! My children!” Different voices joined in as the crowd rallied on them.

It was then that the wardens realised that they were surrounded on all sides.

“Stop!” Elvin’s voice cut through the air. “Please!” He looked around at the mass of people. Prisoners,

wardens and civilians alike. “Please stop fighting! This is what they want ... not the wardens, not the leaders, but them!” He pointed to the body of the dragon. “Those creatures have been driving you mad! Turning you against each other! That is what they do! This ...” he turned on the spot gesturing to the chaos around them “... this is what they want!”

There was a murmuring from the crowd.

“Is this what your city was like before?” Derville asked. “Is this what it was like before the dragons came? Did you live in fear then? Citizens in fear of the law, wardens in fear of the people?”

“This cannot end with a fight,” Elvin continued, “that will only draw deeper divides! We have to end this! Before they rip this city,” he corrected himself, “before they rip all Mithrym apart!”

The effect was slow, like the pitter patter of stones that begin an

avalanche. The echo of Elvin's words died down and the square fell silent once more until, after what felt like an eternity, there was the sound of metal falling on stone.

One of the wardens had dropped his pole-axe. It fell to the ground as he then removed his helmet. His dark face glistened with sweat as his scruffy black hair moved in the breeze. He looked around at the crowd and at his fellow officers.

"I will not fight." He said, and stepped over to stand beside Elvin.

Another echo sounded as a prisoner dropped the brick in their hand and stepped over too.

"Me neither." He said.

One by one and then in droves, wardens, prisoners and civilians alike joined together, casting down their weapons. Some wardens, seeing the numbers against them, ran. Likewise some civilians with them. But before long the square was

joined as one body of men and women coming together. Some smiles and some tears as reunions happened between many divided, fathers and daughters, mothers and sons, partners and friends that had not seen each other since the arrests had begun.

In time though, they all turned again to look at Elvin, Derville and Dukki.

“What now?” Derville whispered to Elvin.

“Now?” Elvin replied. “Now we make one last visit to the Imperial Square.

“To the palace!” Someone shouted from the crowd. The call was echoed by the rest and the whole mass began to move. Ahead of them, the streets seemed clear. Many eyes looked out of open windows as they passed and some people ran out to join them.

Before long they spilled out into the square. The many embassies round the sides and there, in the centre at the far end and up many stone steps,

was the palace. The purple livery of Khannath fluttered in the breeze.

They walked in, and then continued further and further towards the foot of the steps as the crowd continued to push from behind. Rank upon rank of Alexians filed in until the whole square, normally a solemn and quiet place, was alive and buzzing with excitement.

“What is going on here?” A woman dressed in the robes of Order of Orha came running down the stairs. Behind her were several other officials. Elvin, Derville and Dukki noted Notley following at their heel. “This is a place of government! Of order! Disperse this very minute!”

“And you three!” Notley called out, pointing a finger down towards Elvin and Derville and Dukki. “I might have known you would be behind this! You are a disgrace to the kingdom! To the world!”

“This ends today!” Elvin called back.

The crowd cheered.

“No, lieutenant, it does not!” A voice boomed down from high above them. They all looked up in amazement and horror as they saw Sergeant Ammon riding a dragon and holding a cocked crossbow.

He came to land on the steps of the palace and stood high in the stirrups as he trained the end of the quarrel on Elvin.

Around the square, more dragon riders came to land. Many on the rooftops but also one in each street leading off. Each held a crossbow as the mouths of the dragons began to glow with green fire.

“You heard her honour!” The sergeant called. “Disperse! This is not a battle! This is an insurrection, led by a foreign agent! Are you spies and assassins? Do you live for Angmark or for Khannath? Loyal citizens, go home!”

A ripple of fear ran through the crowd and, at one far end one of the assembled lost his nerve and turned to run. A crossbow bolt thudded hard into his chest from the bow of the warden guarding that exit. The dragon beneath reared up and pinned down the injured, prone figure.

“Disperse!” The sergeant called again.

The crowd drew in as close as it could as the dragon riders held position at every exit. Sergeant Ammon moved his crossbow this way and that as he took them all in.

“Disperse!” He called again. “Very well!” He jumped down from his dragon and began walking towards Elvin.

Just then, a chill ran through the assembled people as a laugh was heard. It was a cold, grim and heartless laugh but, more than that, it was not coming from the sergeant or any of the wardens or even the

leaders. They felt the laugh, inside their minds, cutting straight through loud and clear.

Ammon turned to look behind him as his own dragon rose up on its hind legs and spread its wings wide. Green fire spilled from its jaw as the voice of the beast was heard by everyone in that crowd.

“BEAUTIFUL!” It chuckled. “LIKE ANTS TOILING AND TURNING BENEATH THE EYES OF THEIR MASTERS! HOLDING UP GRAINS OF SAND AS IF THEY WERE METEORS!”

The sergeant shook as the reality of the situation gripped him.

He raised his crossbow and, trembling, inadvertently triggered it.

The beast laughed again, loud and deep, as the quarrel shattered on its scales.

Around the square, the other dragons cast down their riders. Many ran to join the crowd. Some,

not so lucky, were pinned by the beasts.

The officials on the steps backed away, down into the square.

“YOU HAVE BEEN FUN!” The dragon roared again. “BUT YOU ARE RIGHT! THIS ENDS NOW!”

Green flame erupted from its mouth, engulfing the entrance to the palace and setting the banners and tapestries ablaze.

“FEED, MY KIN! TODAY WE DINE!”

In little time at all, the city was burning.

# Escape

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Fires were burning everywhere. Thick black smoke billowed and rose from the buildings as the whole city burnt. Sandstone structures collapsed in on themselves as ancient beams buckled and brought down whole blocks of the city. The air thickened with dust and echoed with the shouts and cries of the fleeing people. The roar of the dragons could be heard in all directions.

Elvin, Dukki and Derville ran down the remains of one street. Derville had pulled her scarf around her face to shield her from the smoke. Elvin and Dukki each held up rags to do the same but were forced, time and again, to stop and cough in the thick, hot air.

At length they came to an overhang of the city walls. Stooping under the rock face they huddled and looked about for any sign or hope of escape.

Beneath them, the ground itself seemed to echo with the thudding of large feet. They drew in closer to avoid detection. Derville craned forward to look up though as she realised that the sounds were not, in fact, coming from inside the city.

She gestured wildly to the other two and they quickly darted away as the wall itself began to creak and groan under an immense pressure. Moments later, the rock began to crumble. Large pieces of stone hurtled down from the heights above, smashing hard into the ground and throwing up more and more dust into the air.

Another dragon stepped through. Its scales gleamed as the remains of the defences fell from them. Its enormous head, far larger than any of the beasts they had seen so far, looked this way and that.

Onlookers were dumbfounded and halted in their flight as they looked upon it though.

Its scales, hard and bright, were a vivid red!

The great creature, perceiving the black dragons moving through the city, raised its head and roared. This was not like the growl of the dragons they had met before, this was a deep, ethereal sound. It made the ground shake and the air, heavy still with smoke and dust, seemed to clear.

This was a roar that could have shaped the earth beneath it. The creature beat its feet against the ground and it seemed to echo like the fall of a hammer on an anvil.

Each and every one of the black dragons stopped what it was doing and looked towards the newcomer.

They roared in response. A sound that seemed almost childish in comparison.

There was a look of fear mixed with excitement on their dark faces as they took it in. Then, each in turn, they rose into the air like a swarm.

Black against the bright sun, casting grim shadows on the ground beneath them.

The enormous, red dragon roared again. Its mouth glistened with white hot fire as it did.

There were words in that roar. Old words. Older than humanity and older than the hills themselves.

The black dragons flew towards it as the red dragon spread its enormous wings and, with one almighty torrent of air, it ascended into the sky.

The people of the city looked in wonder as the dragons flew away.

Fires were still burning but the air seemed to have cleared somewhat. There was a lull in the sounds of chaos and people began to emerge from the wreckage of homes and business to look upon the destruction in the wake of the beasts' departure.

“Stop them!” A voice called. Derville quickly turned to look, springing up

ready to run. The words were not aimed at them though.

A woman had strode out into the street and was pointing towards several of the city leaders who were making their way with Notley and some of the other embassy staff in tow.

A crowd was forming again and it quickly engulfed them.

“Peace!” Someone called from the crowd. “That’s what they promised us! That’s what they said those beasts would bring!” Jeers came from the crowd.

“Please!” Notley called out. “This is not a matter for me, I am an emissary, this is not my ...”

But his words trailed off.

“Your embassy burns! Like all of our city! You are just another fallen leader!” Came the response of the crowd.

“Should we do something?” Derville whispered to Elvin and Dukki.

They watched as the crowd began to hold and bind the leaders.

“No,” Elvin said after a time, “this is not our city, this is not our fight.”

“Aye to that!” Dukki growled.

They turned and made their way slowly but surely through the wreckage of the wall. Outside, the air was clear and the road to the hills was empty.

To begin with, they moved from cover to cover. In time though, they came to the main road itself and began to walk. Then, when they saw the hillside close ahead, they broke into a run.

They climbed and scrambled their way up through willows and palms and ferns until they came to the very top. Then, at last, they rested.

“What in Een’s name has happened!?” Dukki shouted to the

sky as he slumped down on the soft ground.

“Things seem to be changing.” Elvin said as he dropped his things and sat down beside him.

“But what was that? That thing!” Derville asked, looking around to see if she could sight the dragons as they flew away.

“It was a dragon,” Elvin said, wiping his forehead, “least ways, it looked like a real one. What do you know about them?” He turned to look at Dukki. The great man had often been an endless source of fairy tales and monster lore.

Dukki just scratched his head though.

“Don’t ask me,” he said with a shrug, “Granny didn’t tell those sorts of stories. Real dragons? That’s religious, that is. Proper, old, dawn of time stuff.”

“This isn’t the end, is it?” Derville looked back at them. The dragons

seemed to have disappeared beyond the horizon now.

“No,” Elvin stroked his chin, “I hazard this is just the beginning.”

In time they stood up again. They stretched and then re-buckled their packs and checked and re-sheaved their weapons.

They turned to look, on last time, at the city of Alexia. Smoke was still rising from the smouldering remains of most of the city. Beyond it, the sea glinted and glistened in the afternoon sun.

“Come on,” Elvin said, turning and walking away, “time to go.”