

Chapter One

Beginnings are born in a single moment, by a single event, creating the divergence between what is and what could have been. The harsh "Cawww!" of a blackbird, a startled mis-step, and the crack and skitter of a loose roof tile defined such a one for Ian.

He felt the slate shingle break free under the ball of his foot, as he leapt for the next roof-top. The energy that should have carried him safely across the intervening gap was spent to send the tile clattering back across the face of the pitched roof he'd just traversed. Time slowed as the stars above rotated back out of his vision, and he seemed to float down into the gap between buildings, leaving Amil Kanter's enforcers behind as they pursued him across the roof's peak. The bird shrieked again, somewhere up above.

Ian watched the ground rise up to meet him. He noticed the cracked mortar on the walls rushing past, the smell of rotting garbage piled along the length of the alley-way below, and even the bits of trash whirling in the light evening breeze about the feet of three figures onto whom he was currently falling. The earth seemed to radiate an almost palpable solidity, the hard-pack of the alley floor like stone in the middle of summer. He could see one form

directly below, pointing something at a second, smaller figure held from behind by a third.

Ian's landing pad never knew what hit him.

Ian's knees hit squarely on the shoulders, and the person folded like a scarecrow under the impact, the twang of a cross-bow blending into the staccato popping of a spine breaking, making for a particularly grisly echo off of the alley walls.

Ian felt the wind torn from his lungs, and his teeth cracked together as he bounced up off of the mangled remains. He crashed down again into the dirt, and rolled to a stop on his back.

A few seconds passed in eyes-clenched anticipation of mortal agony. None came. No bones screamed in anguished separation from one another, no vitals spilled out into the dust, as far as he could tell. Deciding he was more or less intact, he opened his eyes, marveling at his lack of injury.

He stared up into the face of a young girl, no more than seventeen, who was looking down at him in surprise, her lips rounded in a small "o" of astonishment. Raven hair fluttered in the warm night breeze, falling from under a woven circlet. She wore light shift of fine material, and her features were pale in the dim light. Behind her he

could see a man lying flat on his back, with a quarrel protruding from his throat, blood running dark into the alley dust, and the glint of a knife clutched in his dead fingers.

Movement and a slight noise drew his gaze from her, and, two stories above at the roof's edge, he saw two forms silhouetted against the night sky. He caught a brief glint of steel as they disappeared, and knew that his miraculous escape would be short-lived if he didn't move. He glanced back. The girl was watching the figures above withdraw from sight. She looked down at him, her questioning expression resolving into understanding. She reached down and grasped his hand, and helped pull him to his feet.

Before he had a chance to speak or move, he heard the sound of booted feet. A small band of armed men burst around the corner and entered the alley. Spying the two, they immediately surrounded Ian, swords drawn. A hard-featured man interposed himself between Ian and the girl. The tip of his sword halted not far from the base of Ian's throat. Ian felt it prudent to raise his hands.

"Are you well?" The man was obviously speaking to the girl.

Ian's mouth opened, but before any words escaped, the girl slipped from behind the man, ducked lithely under the

extended weapon, and came up face-to-face with him, her shoulder pushing the sword-point above Ian's head.

"Buchard, stop, I'm fine! He's not with them." She said, indicating the two on the ground. Her voice was musical, though her tone was an imperious, major key. "If it weren't for him, I might be dead now."

Buchard's eyes moved from their assessment of Ian to meet those of the girl, his confident manner faltering as he addressed her.

"What--?"

"Daddy!" squealed the girl, side-stepping him and dashing toward an older man flanked by more armed men, who had just entered the alley behind the group. He was finely dressed, and Ian's first impression as he lowered his hands was that he was someone of importance. She rushed into his embrace, flinging her arms about his neck. "Oh, Daddy." Shifting from major key to frail minor.

"Yes, yes, dear. Are you harmed? Buchard?" His attention passed from his daughter to Buchard, who had lowered his sword as he watched the girl fly past him. The man indicated Ian, and the two fallen with a gesture. "Are there any others?"

"I've yet to--."

"Daddy, they told me they would kill me if I didn't

give them everything I had. They must have seen me leave the embassy. I know i'm not allowed out alone, but I was only going for a short walk! I just couldn't sleep...I'm sure they would have killed me ." Moving out of minor now into a chromatic theatre.

"Who knows what else they would have done to me before that, though. Unimaginable atrocities! I'm sure I would have been begging for death at their merciless hands! But then..." She swooped out of her father's arms and ran to stand at Ian's side.

"...just as I thought I might never again feel the sun on my face, a savior leapt out of the darkness. With brutal force, he smote my assailants, crushing the life out of one, even as he turned the man's own weapon against his hapless partner!" She grabbed onto Ian's arm. "My life was snatched from the brink of death by this man, father!" As her crescendo crested and broke, all eyes turned upon Ian. There was a short moment of silence.

"Well, I..uh...."

"It would seem that I am in your debt, young man." The girl's father said, stepping forward and grasping his hand in a firm grip."Many thanks to you."

"Well, I...it's...uh..." he began again, but even as he spoke, he caught a subtle hint of movement across the

lamp-lit street. Though he couldn't locate the source, he was certain that Pice and Zeke were now waiting in the darkness of the alley immediately across. His troubles were obviously far from over. He forced himself to concentrate on his lagging response.

"...nothing, really. I'm just glad it turned out alright." He said, recovering. His composure dropped into place finally, and he shrugged. "I'm glad that I could help."

The girl was watching him in apparent adoration. However, Buchard seemed skeptical, and looked about ready to say so, so Ian pushed on.

"Sir, your daughter is very brave. She reacted well, and showed no fear. Either she is very intuitive, or she's been well taught. Actually, I...fell...into the middle of the situation, quite by accident. I can't imagine what brought her to so vulnerable a state."

Buchard's expression hardened even further. The girl's interest in Ian didn't seem to be lost on her father. He hesitated for only a moment before he responded, looking pointedly at his daughter.

"Ah, yes, that will merit some looking into. Southward has changed since our last visit. At any rate, this only solidifies my misgivings.

"I appreciate your intervention. It has meaning beyond what you could know. Would you accompany us ? I'd like to thank you again for your assistance."

Ian made calculated demurring noises, and was rewarded as the man dismissed them with a wave.

"No, I insist. Acts of chivalry are rare. I want you to be compensated against the risks you took on my daughter's behalf, and also, perhaps, to ask an additional boon of you."

Buchard snorted explosively.

"Sire, what do we know of this man? And what of Pintree? He and the Harborward should be made to pay for such abysmal protection of visiting dignitaries!"

"Buchard, please. We'll discuss this at length later. I wish to leave for home at once. I've had my fill of Southward hospitality."

"Yes, Sire." Buchard's deference was instantaneous. A curt gesture sent his men's swords back into their sheaths. The girl's father turned again to Ian.

"What is your name, young man?"

"Ian, Sire."

"Well, then, young Ian, I am Jared. This is my daughter, Ariannah, if you've not yet been formally introduced. This also is Buchard, captain of my guard. He

is responsible for my safety and that of my family." The old man's gaze was strong and intelligent, and Ian struggled to conceal his surprise. Captain of his guard? This man was a king! The possibilities (and consequences) set his mind awhirl. The old man continued.

"Buchard, send someone to the embassy, and have our liaison relate details to the palace. Make it clear that Pintree's passage rights are in jeopardy if abject apologies and trade considerations don't make their way to my doorstep." Buchard nodded, and motioned a man to his side, giving instructions as he preceded Jared out of the alley into light of the charm-lamps. Jared motioned to Ian.

"Ian, please. Accompany us." He turned away and moved into the street after Buchard, seemingly confident that Ian would follow. Ian's hesitation was broken as Ariannah pulled him into motion, having stood silently as her father spoke.

"Come on." She whispered.

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Ariannah continued to cling to Ian's arm, and the rest of Buchard's men fell in behind as they left the alley. Ian glanced surreptitiously across the street, but

still saw no evidence of Kanter's men in the shadows. He knew they were there, and would follow until they caught him. Amil Kanter did not believe in loose ends, and Pice was tireless. In an effort to preempt unpleasant visions, he spoke to Ariannah.

"Well. You're obviously not from around here." He said.

As she glanced up at him, he thought he saw hidden thoughts descending as her gaze brightened, but couldn't be sure.

"No, no. We're from Myr-isle. Have you ever been?"

This time he couldn't mask his surprise.

"Myr-isle?!"

"Yes. You've heard of it, then."

"Yes, I've heard of it. I guess that all makes sense, then." He said, indicating the alley-mouth behind them with a nod of his head.

"Like I would carry the family fortune around up my skirt? Please. At any rate, they were no match for you, were they?"

Ian wondered at the ramifications. Here he was, trotting along with the King and Princess of the wealthiest kingdom in the known world. If he weren't undoubtedly being shadowed by Amil's vengeful right hand, it would be a dream

come true.

They passed under Paden's Arch, just as the timepiece in its tower chimed the fifth hour, the faerie tones wafting away from its glowing face out over the still sleeping city. Once through, Ian could see the charm-lit streets falling away toward the bay, bejeweled strings ending at the blackness of the water.

The city and port of Southward was built in terraced sections along the eastern slope of a horse-shoe shaped, deep-water bay. It was bounded by sea-cliffs at the southern edge, and the Arie river, which flowed into the bay around a small island at the bay's apex. A fertile valley began along the western curve of the inlet, and ran along the Arie northwest into the heart of the province. As its name would suggest, Southward was the southern-most point on the northern continent, and was the hub for all trade routes up into the provinces. Truly a city of opportunity for anyone with two spare ounces of creativity to rub together. He loved Southward, and had done fairly well, right up until the last. He cursed inwardly at his recent plummet from grace. How had Amil known? It was a sure thing! Rather than dwell on it, Ian decided to ignore it, as the party descended through the city from the high streets toward the waterfront.

"Why doesn't your father call the Marshall? It would seem to me that he'd want them to investigate an attack on his daughter." Ian said to Ariannah after a few silent minutes. She shrugged dismissively.

"I don't know, but Daddy is very wise. I trust his judgement. I'm safe, thanks to you," her eyes were bright as her gaze met his, "and I'm sure he will see that Lord Pintree makes amends." She made a petite little wave with her hand. "I say, let the local authorities clean up the mess. Besides, now that you are with us, I know we have nothing to fear." She finished, clamping onto his arm again for emphasis.

Ian felt a blush creep up his neck in spite of himself.

"I doubt my presence makes you any safer than this armed entourage."

"Buchard and his men didn't save me, you did. And what an amazing feat that was." She gazed dramatically skyward. "It was sooo exciting. Look," she said, extending her forearm, and staring at it in simple delight. "I get goosebumps just thinking about it! I feel safer with you than with...oh, twenty of Buchard's men! Her outstretched hand returned to its vice-grip on his arm. There was a momentary pause, then she abruptly let go of him, and

chimed, "I think I'll just tell Daddy that. Be right back!"

She skipped on ahead of him.

Ahead, Jared and Buchard were wrapped up in some sort of debate. Two of Buchard's men had taken up point, preceding the king a short distance as they passed through the winding streets of the merchant district, with its darkened shopfronts, and the occasional lighted window in the apartments above. What little traffic there was made way for them. Ariannah caught up with Jared, and pulled on his arm, interrupting Buchard in mid-sentence. Jared smiled indulgently at her as she bounced exuberantly alongside him, giggling while she spoke. A few exchanged words, a glance back at Ian from all three of them (during which Ian suddenly found the surrounding architecture most absorbing), and a final squeal brought Ariannah hurrying back to him, a triumphant smile on her face.

"Father agrees with me. I think he is going to ask you to come home with us. Isn't that exciting?"

"What?! Come home with you? What for?"

"Why, to be my Protector, of course. What else?"

"You've got to be kidding me."

"Oh, but you must come! Please, please, please?" She whined. "I know you would just love it there. Everything you've heard about Myr-isle is true. It's as beautiful as a

waking dream."

"I'm sure that's true. Tales of its wealth certainly abound. However, that not really the poi--."

"Oh, yes! Myr-isle is the richest kingdom in the world, I think. Men travel from both continents, and even from as far as Endsea archipelago to seek my hand in marraige, can you imagine?" She pulled the circlet from her head, looked quickly at her father striding ahead of her, and then tossed it aside with a subtle flick of her wrist. It disappeared under raised walkway. She shook her head, then ran her hands through her dark hair. The faint smell of expensive soap tickled his nose. "That's sooo uncomfortable."

"I imagine."

"As I was saying, someday, I'll be Queen, and the man I marry will rule with me over my kingdom."

"I'm sure they're lined up out the city gate."

"Of course." She said matter-of-factly. Then she sighed. "But I never like any of them. I can never know if they want me or to get control of trade and the Guild for themselves. Daddy won't force me to marry anyone I don't want. He says it is my responsibility, and that I must choose. I want to marry someone who will love me and cherish me, and protect me..." She trailed off, losing

herself in the unspoken continuation of her thought.

He was about to respond when she snapped back to attention. "I just thought of something else I need to tell Daddy." And she was off again to Jared's side. Ian shook his head. How strange could life get in a single night. As he watched Ariannah talk to Jared, he suddenly realized where they were.

They were approaching the Seawall along the Cartage, the main thoroughfare servicing the piers beyond. He could see the masts of several ships above the top of the wall, rocking slightly in the swells. At its terminus, through Psalter's Arch, he saw the charm-light at Pilgrim's Finger across the bay, dimming in the pale light of dawn. They passed under the Arch, and Buchard left the company toward the Harborward's building. Two men moved smoothly from behind them to flank Jared as he continued onto the closest pier. The only ship moored there was a large, triple-masted cavral, flying a standard that matched the emblems on the tunics worn by Jared's men. Formed of sea-stone, accented by weather-darkened woods and hammered metals rimed with salt, it loomed up over the quay, rocking almost imperceptibly in the gray water. Ian could hear the wind sighing through the rigging, and the creak and pop of the great stone masts. Charm-lights still glowed dimly in the

dawn, hung from lines running fore and aft, and clustered about the spell-caster's platforms on both the fore- and poop-decks, where the Guild mages stood while forging a course through the turbulent waters of the Sweep. Men moved up and down the fore and aft gangways, loading materials onto the great ship. It was obvious that Jared's departure had been fairly imminent, anyway. As they neared the aft gangway, Jared stopped, sent the two point guards aboard, then turned to Ian.

"Ian, if you would just accompany us aboard for a moment, it would give me a chance to present you a more substantial thanks for your assistance, and also an opportunity to discuss another matter that could be mutually beneficial. Won't you?" He finished with a smile, and gestured toward the foot of the gangway.

Ian's fascination with Jared's ship ended where the quay did the same, and a lifetime's worth of cold fear of boats and open water took over. Ian felt his skin go clammy in an instant.

"Really, Sire, that's not necessary, I should take my leave now, anyway. I've got several pressing appointments this morning...." He trailed off as Jared's brow dipped slightly, his smile still intact. It was plain he was not used having to make requests a second time.

"Nonsense, young Ian. I'm sure your other arrangements will understand. You'd be doing me a favor. Please." He continued with a slightly more emphatic wave toward the foot of the gangway.

Absolutely not, Ian thought.

"Well, I guess so...." He said.

Jared nodded and turned to board the ship.

Ian felt Ariannah's hand push at the small of his back to get him moving. At the same moment, he heard a harsh "CAWWW!" from up above. His head jerked up, and for a fraction of a second, he glimpsed a blackbird staring down at him from the crow's nest. A single word, "unbelievable", echoed through his head as he felt his foot catch on a cast-iron cleat, and he pitched forward with his arms outstretched. For the second time in only a few hours, time slowed.

He watched in horror as his extended hands met Jared's back. Jared was shoved forward, exhaling explosively as the wind was driven from his lungs. At that same moment, several sensory impressions impacted Ian at once. Something blurred across the space that Jared had just occupied, right in front of Ian's face. He could feel the wind of its passing. There came a sharp report, and a cloud of stone-chips and dust burst from the side of the ship next to him.

From above and behind, he heard the distant, yet unmistakable twang of a cross-bow. Ian tried desparately to get his foot out ahead of himself, as Jared had fallen directly in front of him, but one foot caught behind the other. In a final, heroic effort not to land on the fallen monarch, Ian pushed off with all his might with the one leg that was still in contact with the ground, and he sailed over Jared. The last thing he saw before impact was the gangway railing rushing toward his head. There came a burst of light behind his eyes as he collided with the ironwood support, and then darkness stole the rest of his senses as he felt himself falling. He never felt the shock of the water, or the dimming of the light as it closed over his head.