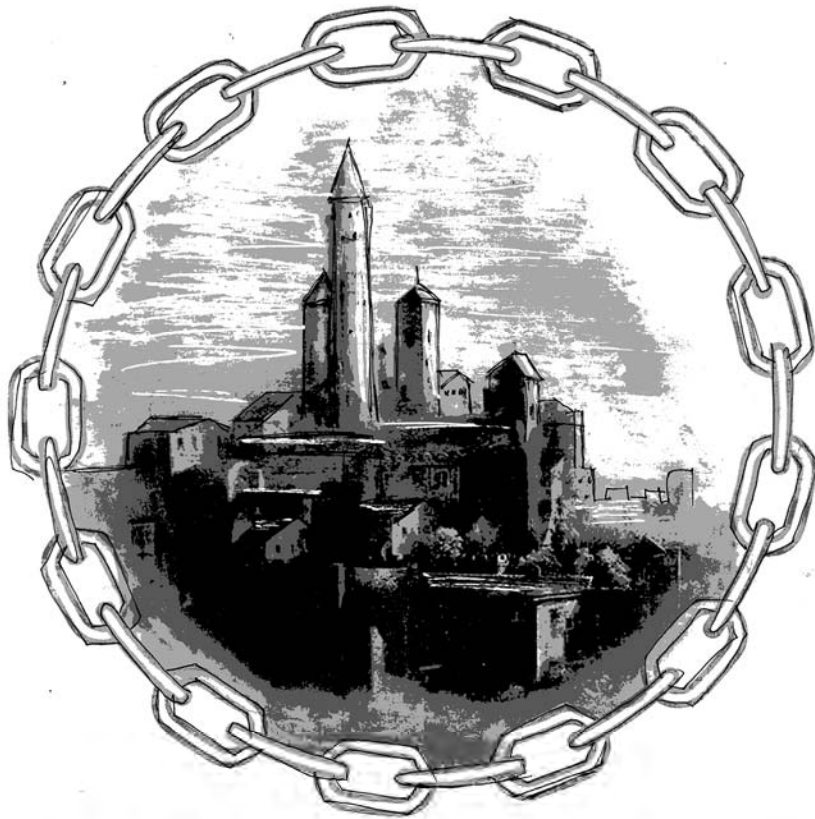


KINGDOM IN CHAINS



J.W. ZULAUF

*****SPECIAL 5-CHAPTER SNEAK PREVIEW*****

Copyright



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### **KINGDOM IN CHAINS**

#### **Kingdom in Chains - Book 1**

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#### **Disclaimer:**

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are products of the author's imagination, or the author has used them fictitiously.

## **Dedication**

*This book is for Daddy. Life wasn't always easy for us, but you did the best you could and taught me how to be a good human.*

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Dedication

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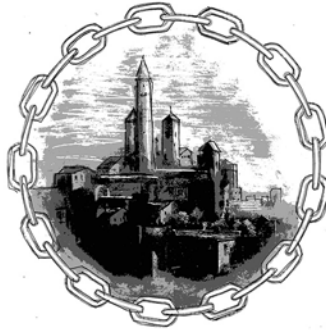
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## INTRODUCTION

Greetings!

Thank you so much for picking up *Kingdom in Chains*, and welcome to the Kingdom of Kuldaire. I've been slowly piecing together this world for some time now, the story having been on my mind for nearly three and a half years. To see it come together is an incredible feeling for me.

To keep this brief, I'll leave you with a fun fact about the map, a thank you, and guide you to my website for more information about Kuldaire and all things JWZ.

I was born at Lake Tahoe. If you're not familiar with it, allow me to summarize and just say it's easily one of the most beautiful places in the world. That place holds a significant place in my heart. In fact, I'm certain my heart could be the very shape of it. This leads me to my fun fact.

I took a topographical map of Lake Tahoe, flipped it on its side, and used that as the outline for Kuldaire. I mapped everything out for perfect measure, and all the lakes and ponds surrounding this beautiful place have shifted to islands and other land masses. Point is, when you look at this piece of land – Kuldaire – know that it's so much more than a generic land mass. It was created with the love I feel for the very place I'm from.

If you visit my website ([www.JWZulauf.com](http://www.JWZulauf.com)), I'll continue to update items and expand the world outside of this book.

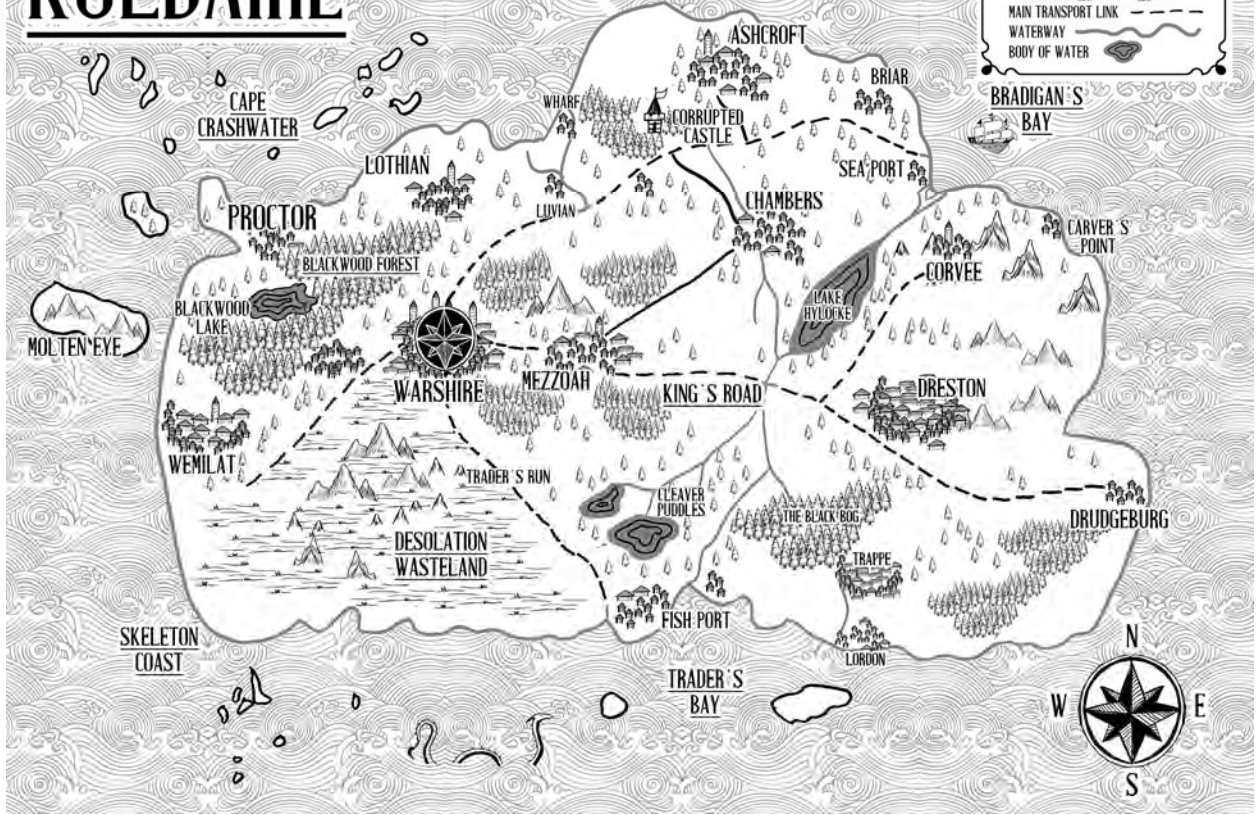
Once again, welcome to the Kingdom of Kuldaire, thank you for stopping by, and I hope to see you again soon!

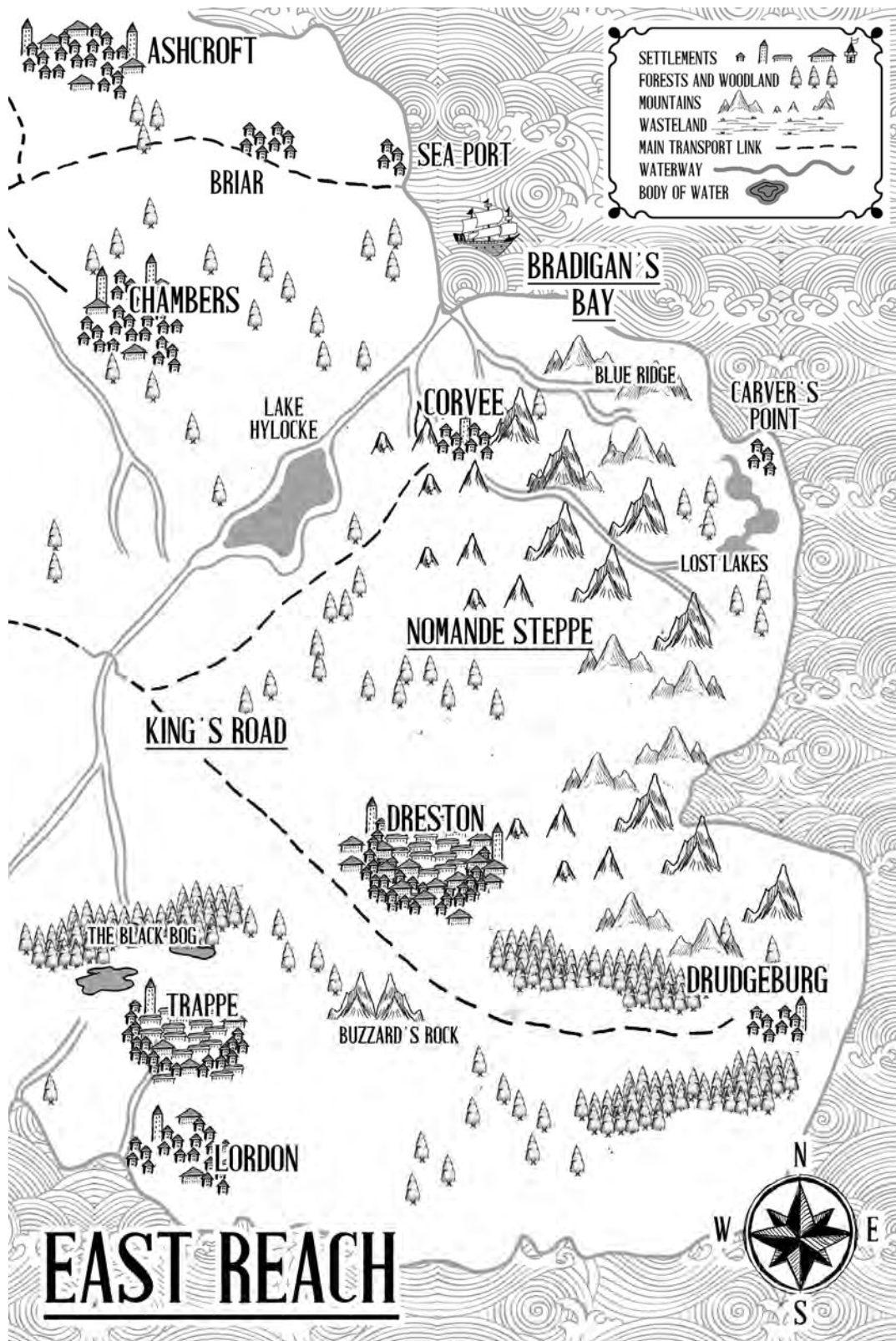
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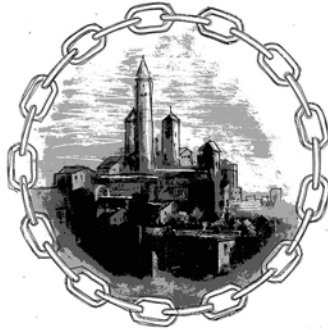
**PUBLISHER'S NOTE:** In the eBook version, if you click on any of the maps below, or the iconic images at the start of the chapters (such as the one right above "Introduction" at the top of this page), they will return you to the Table of Contents for easy navigation. Thank you, and please enjoy!

# THE KINGDOM OF KULDAIRE

SETTLEMENTS  
FORESTS AND WOODLAND  
MOUNTAINS  
WASTELAND  
MAIN TRANSPORT LINK  
WATERWAY  
BODY OF WATER







## Chapter 1 - A New Set of Rules

Barloc and seven other slaves marched through the outer gatehouse of Drudgeburg, an old castle at the end of East Reach. The temperature chilled as they entered the castle grounds, and the familiar sense of dread washed over him at the thought of being sold to a new owner. They pulled a wooden palanquin barely large enough for the slaver sitting atop, the cart's chipped wheels wobbling with each rotation. Old rusted chains connected them in two rows of four, yielding only a yard of space between their shoulders. A handful of guards and another cart remained outside the keep.

A man in a green woolen cloak stepped in their path and signaled for them to stop. "Greetings!" His black hair hung to his shoulders in straight, sharp lines, and white peppered his dark beard. His gray eyes resembled storm clouds, and a mixture of scars and age lines traveled across his right cheek. When he spoke, a row of surprisingly white teeth flashed in the sun. "And to whom do I owe the pleasure?"

The slaver's nasally voice carried over their shoulders as the reigns connecting their chains slackened. "Martin, my... lord.... *You* are Lord Harbor, leader of Drudgeburg?"

Barloc turned to better view the interaction. Martin eyed Lord Harbor from head to toe, and somehow Barloc knew what the slaver was thinking. Traditionally, lords adorned themselves in fancy armor or exotic garb, but this man wore a simple woolen cloak that floated an inch above the ground. His hands, covered with black leather gloves, rested on his crossed arms.

"The one and only." Lord Harbor bowed, not removing his eyes from the slaver.

Martin scoffed and glanced from Lord Harbor to his surroundings.

Barloc used the brief distraction to accomplish the same. The keep stood tall before him, the walls fusing with the sky. The courtyard stretched away on both sides. Six thatched, windowless buildings lined the curtainwall, three on each side of the front gatehouse. Dozens of slaves worked on various tasks around the yard: two men laid hay along one of the rooftops; more than a handful tended a small square of crops; and a tall man in a leather apron beat a hammer against a piece of glowing steel atop an anvil. Guards dressed in all black paced back and forth, surveying the labor, ignoring the arrival of Martin and his cargo.

Lord Harbor smiled and cleared his throat, drawing the attention back to him. "How fares your travels?"

"As well as one could hope, I suppose," Martin said, his jowls wiggling as he spoke. "We were caught in a storm. It didn't bother me much, but this filthy rabble seemed miserable holding the tarp above us." The slaver smiled, revealing crooked and yellowing teeth. "How about you, my lord? How have these days been treating you?"



"Oh, normal, for all that matters. It's tough to keep an eye on so many." Lord Harbor lifted his arms. "Say, you wouldn't want to sell me one of your vanguard?" He leaned forward slightly, looking past Slaver Martin to the guards outside the castle.

Martin's smile fell into a straight line. He wiped sweat from his lip. "I don't sell *free* men, my lord."

"Of course not." Lord Harbor waved the conversation away and stepped toward Barloc, the first of the eight slaves. "I would never think you so inhumane. I was merely commenting on my lack of trusting hands." Lord Harbor moved between them, ducking under their chains, inspecting the manacles. "Whose markings are these, Slaver Martin?"

"You don't have to style me Slaver. Martin will do fine, and it's a mixed bag. Some were Lord Rhotec Helory's. He needed coin to repair winter damages. Some were picked up from the dungeons, and others were traded as we went... and then the story was told." The slaver spread his hands out as if that phrase explained it all.

Lord Harbor lifted his hand to his chin. "The thing is, you *are* a slaver, and your name *is* Martin, so, therefore, you *are* Slaver Martin, is this not so? Also, you don't have the right to address me in any tone you please, for you're on my land, and I'm the man purchasing the king's merchandise. Yes?"

Martin's jaw dropped.

The slaves drew a collective breath and held it.

Barloc's muscles tightened, waiting for the snap of the whip, but it never came. *Only King Sclavus has the authority to speak to a slaver with such indignation, especially some upstart noble at the edge of civilization.* Barloc watched Lord Harbor closely. *The road must have stolen the slaver's vigor,* he thought. *More like drained his purse.*

Martin cleared his throat. "My apologies, my lord. It's been a long journey, as you can imagine."

"I can hardly imagine. I don't travel. I get to live here in the comfort of my castle while men like you do all the hard work." Lord Harbor smiled again and moved to the front of the slaves, his cloak fluttering with each step. "But it's said that slavers are the backbone of the kingdom, which is why you're paid so well.... Speaking of which, what *is* the price for these men?"

"These *slaves*," Martin emphasized the word, "are fifteen gold coins for the lot."

Lord Harbor glanced between the first two.

Barloc met his eyes and quickly looked down.

"Fifteen is high. Is the king inflating the cost for good labor?"

"I can't do anything about that, now can I?"

"No, I suppose not, but let's say the king only requested twelve for the lot, the same price it's been for three moons, and you added a few to further your own pockets. Surely he sent orders with these fine slaves, and I don't doubt for a moment that you can read, Slaver Martin, but I must insist." Lord Harbor's open palm materialized in front of him, inches from Barloc's chest.

The certainty that Martin's whip would graze his ear on its journey to split open Lord Harbor's skin kept Barloc's muscles and shoulders tight, but when it didn't, he chanced another glance back.

Martin's cheeks flushed as he wiped his lips with his arm and opened a worn purse strapped to the side of the carriage. He withdrew two rolled parchments, both with the king's seal: red wax with two intertwined manacles. After inspection, he clapped his hands and laughed. "Look at that. I seem to have mixed up my orders. Yours is, in fact, twelve gold coins."

Lord Harbor smiled. "Of course, and your ability to read through a sealed and rolled

parchment is impressive.”

Martin withdrew his whip and snapped it forward, striking the closest slave’s back. Blood misted the air. “What are you waiting for, scum?”

The parchment traveled down the row of slaves until it passed to Lord Harbor’s hand, where it vanished inside his cloak.

“And my coin?” Martin now held his palm out before him.

Lord Harbor produced a small sack, opened it, and counted out twelve coins. He closed the bag and sent it floating hand to hand until it dropped into Martin’s grasp.

The slaver tucked the coins into his purse. “Let this filth attach me to the other sleigh outside, and I will be on my way.” He lazily lifted a hand and waved. A moment later, three armored men guided the other cart and its eight slaves down the bridge and into position.

Martin gripped his whip and pulled back, ready to strike the slaves, but before he could, Lord Harbor had withdrawn his own and sent it flying between the two rows. The whip wrapped around Martin’s wrist and pulled taught.

The slaves spread apart as far as their chains would allow, gasping.

Blood crawled down Martin’s arm. He reached out with his free hand and uncoiled the snakelike whip, watching it slither away. “You dare attack a servant of the king?”

Lord Harbor flipped his cloak back, revealing black leather armor, and clipped the whip to his side. “You dare come on my land and presume to speak to me any way you please, lie about the king’s cost, then attempt to assault *my* slaves?” He crossed his arms. “Release them and leave, Slaver Martin. The need to endure your presence has expired.”

Martin rubbed his wrist, then wiped blood on his pants.

Two more guards rode into the castle, hands on their steel. They stopped next to Martin and the other three men. “You’ll find my guards are very cautious.”

Lord Harbor slipped two fingers in his mouth and whistled. Feet shuffled all around the entrance where guards appeared, pointing their bows down at Martin and his men. “I’ll also find that your guards favor their lives over your coin.”

Sweat leaked profusely down Slaver Martin’s face and into his eyes. “With slavers vanishing this far east, and this blatant disrespect, you’ll never see me return.”

“I wouldn’t be too sure of that, Slaver Martin. In fact, you can’t be sure about much these days.”

Martin pursed his lips and shook his head, beads of sweat dripping into his lap. “I will tell the king of this. Now, what are you waiting for? Turn this cart around, and let’s be off!”

No one moved. The slaver’s guards held their positions. The slaves all watched, and Lord Harbor stood with his arms crossed.

Martin slammed his fists down on either side of him. “Now! Get this swine off my cart, connect me to the other sleigh, and let’s move!”

Martin’s guards dismounted at once, and within seconds, they unhinged the sold slaves, dropped the chains to the ground, and connected the two palanquins. The carts jolted forward as the slaves pulled onward, and the guards remounted and fell into the march.

Lord Harbor stepped into the center of the entrance and waved his hand. The portcullis lowered shut, but before it did, he faced the slaves and considered each one, walking slowly in front of them.

Two hooded figures emerged from the inner gatehouse and made their way toward the new arrivals.

Lord Harbor waved to one of the nearby guards, a bearded man in a green cloak, and pointed at the slaves. “Remove that chain linking them together so they can line up properly.”

Barloc couldn't help but notice the change in Lord Harbor's accent. He had spoken proper and clean when dealing with the slaver, but now, the southern drawl of the inlands tacked onto the ends of his words.

The guard quietly removed the chain linking them together, and once they slipped free, Barloc fell in line with the other seven slaves.

Lord Harbor paced, his arms hidden inside his green cloak. "Things will work differently here. There is a new set of rules. You'll address me as Lord Harbor or my lord." He stopped suddenly and raised his voice, "How can you possibly see me if you're staring at your feet?"

The two hooded figures arrived, taking their places on either side of Lord Harbor. He nodded at them. "Now, where was I? Ah, yes. You'll address me as Lord Harbor. This large brute to my right is Sir Vigorionous, styled Sir Vigor. Address him as Sir Vigor only. He hates the title Master and Vigorionous is an awful job on the tongue."

Sir Vigor stood a foot taller than Lord Harbor, and even under the large, green cloak, he was as thick as both Harbor and the unnamed figure together. He drew back his hood with gloved hands, revealing a shaved head and oily, black skin. Two thick eyebrows lined his wide eyes, and a goatee faded into a design of three lines progressing up each cheek. A scar crept from under his facial hair, explaining the unique pattern. The damaged skin prevented the growth of hair and the opposite cheek was groomed to match. A hooped earring hung from his right ear, and two small flaps dangled where one used to be in his left.

"And this is Madam Constance." Lord Harbor directed his hand to his left.

Madam Constance drew back her hood.

Out of habit, Barloc glanced away but not because he wanted to. It wasn't often he'd seen a woman this close, and out of all the women it could have been, she was easily the fairest. Long, brown hair billowed past her shoulders, and she, too, wore the same black leather gloves as Lord Harbor. Her soft, olive complexion blossomed from beneath her hood, revealing high cheekbones that ended just below two almond-shaped, green eyes.

She scanned the line of slaves, slowing enough to meet their gazes. When she arrived at Barloc, he stared at his feet, warmth climbing into his cheeks.

"These are two members of my council. First and foremost, you will respect them, hopefully without too much trouble. All of the Green Cloaks are masters in one sense or another, so mind yourselves around them." Lord Harbor moved to the first slave in the line. "What's your name?"

The slave blinked rapidly. "I'm sorry, my lord?"

"Your name, what is it?"

The man's eyebrows knitted together and he didn't respond.

"Did I confuse you? Don't you have a name?" Lord Harbor persisted.

Still, the man remained silent.

Lord Harbor pivoted around and returned to his place between Sir Vigor and Madam Constance. "Let's make this clear now. I'm not playing games with you, as some may have in the past. When I speak, I'm direct. My words are law. If I ask your name, don't fear retaliation. Simply answer the question. The only warrant for retaliation is insubordination.

"I'm a reasonable man. Now, down the line, I want your names. First and last if you have one." He pointed to the slave on the left end.

The man spoke, but his voice broke as if he hadn't used it for some time. "A-archer, my lord. My name's Archer Redkin."

"Next," Lord Harbor said.

Madam Constance held a piece of parchment where she scratched down each name.

Barloc did all he could to avoid dropping his attention to the ground, away from his new master's eyes. "Barloc, my lord."

"No last name?"

"Maghild, my lord. Barloc Maghild."

"Thank you." As the words left Lord Harbor's mouth, the slaves straightened up and cast subtle glances to one another.

*Thank you?* Barloc closed his eyes and lowered his head as if he were hit. He waited a moment before lifting his gaze.

Madam Constance scribbled down each name upon announcement until they had all been recorded, and the parchment vanished into her cloak.

Lord Harbor clapped. "Well, that will do it for records. You've come from all over the kingdom. The saying 'all is fair in trading bodies' has led you to be captured, disrespected, and treated like scum. You've been thrown from hand to hand like no more than a game of Stone Toss. The king's slavery doesn't target one, but all. Sclavus doesn't care what color your skin is, who your parents are, or where you were born. If you can't produce the coin to cover the king's tax, you lose your freedom.... But this can end here for you." He slipped his hands into his cloak. "If you follow my instructions, you can be free in thirty days. If you don't, you'll be here until you decide to follow orders."

Barloc scanned the row of slaves. All of them appeared to react in different manners: some opened their mouths in shock; some tightened their jaws wearing unbelieving looks; some held fear etched into their features.

"You've no reason to believe me. You should question everything I'm saying. If you've learned anything up to this point in your seemingly useless lives, it's that you can't trust a soul outside your own.

"Every day will be filled with labor. You'll be given a new quest each morning. Upon completion, you'll be rewarded and moved onto the next. Your wrist manacles will be removed after the completion of your tenth consecutive day, your legs on the twentieth, and your freedom comes on the thirtieth.

"If you can't complete the quest given to you, you'll be sent back to day one and start from the beginning. We currently have one man who refuses to make it past his thirty days. Maybe he's afraid of freedom after so many years of enslavement, maybe he's simply dumb as a stone.

"If you strike a guard, you'll be brought back to day one. If you run, you'll be made an example of, and that's not something you'll like. If you speak without being spoken to... well, you get the idea.

"You'll be given a new name, a loin cloth, sandals, and nothing more. As you complete your assigned tasks, you will earn more clothing."

Lord Harbor addressed his two counterparts. "Have I missed anything?"

Madam Constance and Sir Vigor shook their heads.

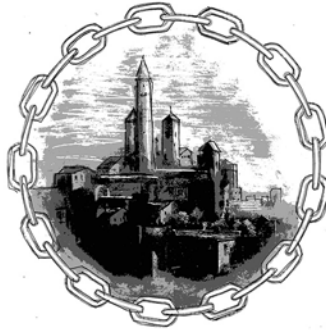
"Very well." Lord Harbor turned back to the slaves. "I don't care about your past. I don't care about the guilt of your old lives, your lost loves, or your families. Here, everyone starts fresh, and they work their way to freedom. Do you have any questions regarding my expectations? This will be the only time I'll ask, so speak now."

Silence filled the air between them until Barloc stepped forward. "Do you speak truly about freedom, my lord? If we complete your quests, we will be freed?"

Lord Harbor nodded. "I'm a man of my word. You just have to follow the rules."

Barloc lowered his head and returned to his spot in line.

"In that case, men. Welcome to Drudgeburg."



## Chapter 2 - Initiation

Lord Harbor's voice crashed through Barloc's mind, followed by a wave of images: *I'm a man of my word*. He pictured home, though home had been destroyed, and talking with his father, though his father was dead.

He compared himself to the slaves standing down the line. They ranged in age, color, and health, and he hated that he'd just traveled across a kingdom alongside them yet knew nothing about their lives.

Barloc stood an average height compared to the other seven, and his skin held the same almond color as his eyes. His facial hair grew only on his lip and chin, and his scars and cuts from being whipped lined his back and arms.

"Follow me." Madam Constance interrupted his thoughts, stepping past the line of slaves.

Sir Vigor took the rear, and together they advanced toward the pavilions lining the inside wall of the outer bailey.

Chains scraped the gravel with each small step. The slaves moved in unison, a practiced march from tugging Slaver Martin across the kingdom.

Horses brayed from the stables across the yard while the steady banging of the blacksmith's hammer rang in the air. The murderous caw of blackbirds called down from the ramparts, and behind him, different colored flags poked up from the ground. Beyond those, in the dead center of the yard, stretched an old table with stools lining one side.

At the first pavilion, a patchwork of lumber, pieced together by various cloth and rope, stood a guard in black leather. He gripped a metal tool in his fist beside a waist-high barrel, and on the table behind him sat a small pile of manacles.

"Line up." Madam Constance withdrew a parchment from her cloak. "First order of business is replacing these manacles. Lord Harbor is kind. He has never been one to brand his slaves. After, I will assign your new names. This will be the only name used. I advise you to remember it. Failure will only hinder your progress here at Drudgeburg."

The slaves lined up while Madam Constance used the table to scribble on her parchment. She cleared her throat, drawing everyone's attention. "Because you were purchased on this fourth day of May, a red-letter day for the Nativity of Saint Mirillion Jace, you will be coded with the letters MJ, and then your number, one through eight."

The guard knelt in front of the first slave and removed his fetters with ease. After dropping the old chains into the barrel, he clasped the new manacles around the slave's ankles.

Madam Constance guided the slave toward Sir Vigor, who stood off to the side. As he walked by her, she announced his new name as MJ-1.

On his turn, Barloc watched the process, and by the end, he understood how the bindings functioned. First, the guard fixed a pointed pin atop the dowel and tapped it with a hammer. Once the pin sat secured, he placed a pair of wide-mouthed pliers around the manacle, and upon squeezing with both hands, the pin shot out of the bottom, breaking it free.

Madam Constance announced his name as he walked by. "MJ-7."

MJ-7. The name sounded empty, made up. His father brushed across his memory, and as he walked toward Sir Vigor, he vowed to never forget his name, no matter how hard they tried to take it away from him. His new chains allowed a better stride and the metal used was much lighter than his old ones.

When MJ-8 finished, he joined the rest of the slaves, followed by Madam Constance.

Sir Vigor leaned down so she could whisper in his ear. When he pulled back, he nodded and promptly departed.

Barloc watched him go—a tower with legs.

"Follow me." Madam Constance turned her back on the line of newly shackled slaves.

Barloc imagined one of the slaves racing up behind her and wrapping his hands around her throat. *Why would she turn her back on eight new slaves? How easy would it be to take her down and amass the others to rise against the masters?* He braced himself, fearful that they may act, but shook the idea away once he saw that they all moved at the normal, broken pace. Guilt washed over him at even thinking such a thing, especially after all these promises of freedom, but he also knew that thoughts of hope were poisonous.

They arrived at the next pavilion where another guard, also clad in black leather, stood in front of a table with a stack of folded clothes and another of sandals. Next to him, a steel barrel blazed with a fire that licked up the sides and danced in the air. At their approach, the guard raised his arm and silently directed MJ-1 to the fire.

Madam Constance stepped to the table and scribbled without looking up from her parchment. "Remove your clothes and burn them."

The other slaves watched as the guard grabbed MJ-1's shoulder and forced him to face the fire. He took a blade from the table and carved off the slave's clothes until he stood naked. Cinders floated through the air like fireflies as his old clothes fell into the flames.

Barloc only felt so bad for him, knowing his turn was six slaves away.

The guard handed MJ-1 a dirty loincloth and worn-down sandals.

The slave lingered with the loincloth gripped in his fist, and as if a voice inside calmed him, his jaw slackened, and he slipped it on. When the guard motioned for the next slave, MJ-1 took his place beside Madam Constance, adjusting his new clothing.

Madam Constance watched indifferently as each slave went through the process, and on his turn, Barloc stepped in front of the fire, embarrassed. He had never been naked in front of a woman outside of his mother, and that was when he was a small boy. When the guard handed him his new clothes, he shot a glance over at Madam Constance, who watched with still features. He looked away quickly and donned his loincloth and sandals before his old clothes caught fire.

After the final slave had been processed, Madam Constance turned away from the pavilion. "Follow me."

The slight comfort Barloc experienced when he received a longer chain and lighter fetters had deserted him alongside the weight of his old clothes. As dingy and worn as they were, they were his. Now he walked nearly naked and vulnerable.

They arrived at the next pavilion to find another guard holding a straight blade. One by one, the guard shaved the slaves' heads and faces.

Barloc's new masters had wasted no time in breaking them down. They made it a point to slap on new manacles, strip away their identities, and burn everything they owned. The words Lord Harbor had spoken about freedom faded fast.

At the next tent, the smell of food sent Barloc's stomach into somersaults. He approached two tables with four stools, and at each spot, a russet steel plate supported healthy portions of meat, potatoes, and vegetables. *Where are the eight guards waiting to eat the food in front of us, to add insult to injury?*

Madam Constance stood before the slaves, her face a mask. When she passed over Barloc, he caught and held her gaze. He didn't want to appear weak after having been stripped of everything, but in the end she won because his eyes turned back to the food.

She lifted her hand and waved it over the tables. "Your day is far from done. Eat, drink."

The slaves stared at one another as if waiting for someone else to move, to set off the trap.

Barloc tentatively took the first step, and when none of the guards rushed into the tent, he took another. By the third, the other slaves followed.

Madam Constance withdrew her parchment and sat down on a stool at the end of the first table, facing the slaves.

Barloc wolfed down his food, not taking the time to enjoy the flavor. The meat sloughed from the bone, and the potatoes had been softened with goat's milk, a taste reserved for free men. On the last bite, he allowed a moment to savor the juices.

One of the slaves whispered into Barloc's ear. "Meals like this? I'll never leave."

He quickly looked up at Madam Constance, who continued to watch silently from her stool.

The slave had taken the first step of his own, because full bellies made brave men, and the others began speaking to one another in soft voices.

Barloc watched Madam Constance scribble once more. He ignored the others and remained fixated on his plate, enjoying the warm food in his stomach.

A few minutes later, Sir Vigor emerged from the inner gatehouse, followed by three guards.

Madam Constance pointed behind Barloc. "Why didn't you finish your food, MJ-5? Surely you're hungry."

The slave shifted in his seat.

"Did you eat a big meal before arriving? Is that why you didn't touch your plate?"

He cleared his throat. "I... I don't feel much like eating after what you just did to me."

Madam Constance crossed her arms. "And what is it that I did to you?"

MJ-5 ran his hand over his freshly shaven head. "I loved my hair. That hair was all I had left, and you took it from me. So," he pushed the plate to the edge of the table, "I'm not hungry."

Madam Constance nodded, quickly removed her parchment, scribbled on it, and stowed it away. "Very well. Follow me." She turned her back once more and together they marched across the yard, arriving at a large square outlined by a low, wooden fence.

"Line up." Madam Constance took her spot next to Sir Vigor.

The slaves fell into formation on one side of the square with the three guards on the other.

Sir Vigor removed a haversack from his back and threw it in the center. On impact, the bag blew open, sending up a cloud of dust. When it settled, wooden training weapons scattered the ground.

Barloc scanned the pile, noting a staff, shield, sword, and many other weapon types he'd never seen before.

Madam Constance pointed at the first slave. "MJ-1, step into the battle square."

The slave hesitated but crossed the small barrier. His dark skin gleamed in the sunlight. Scars covered his torso and back, and an old slaver brand bubbled up from his right bicep. Tattoos in tribal designs danced around his shoulders. His muscles bulged with each movement, like thick cords underneath his skin.

The closest guard stepped into the square and moved to the weapons, grabbing the sword. Before MJ-1 could react, the guard struck the slave on the shoulder, knocking him off balance. The slave dove at the bag, seizing a mace, but the guard slammed his wooden sword across his back.

MJ-1 rolled, gasping in pain. When the guard pulled up the sword to attack again, the slave lunged at his ankles and brought him down. He gripped the mace and went to swing it at the guard's face, but before he could, another guard jumped into the square and removed it from his hand.

MJ-1 rolled to his knees and lifted his arms over his head.

The defeated guard stood and returned to his spot outside the arena.

"MJ-1, back of the line. MJ-2, enter the battle square."

The second guard remained, wielding the mace he had removed from the slave. MJ-2 didn't stand a chance. The guard wouldn't even let him near the weapons, and finally, when the slave tried to dive under him, it ended with the mace smashing into the back of his head.

MJ-2 fell hard, his face connecting with the dirt, blood splattering on impact. All three guards removed the motionless slave.

Fury burned inside Barloc. *First, they build our hopes up with the prospect of freedom and then tear it all down. Now they beat us into the dirt.*

The guards alternated each fight. MJ-3 and MJ-4 fell quickly. When MJ-5 stepped in, Barloc noticed that the man couldn't fight. His arms visibly shook, and his knees wobbled as the guard moved slowly around the square.

The guard noticed this, too, and allowed the slave to grab a weapon. MJ-5 made a feeble attempt that ended with one solid crack across the back of his skull.

MJ-6 landed a couple blows against the guard, but he fell to the same fate.

Barloc sighed and entered the square.

The next guard grabbed a quarterstaff. He moved as if he desired the skill but lacked the practice.

After watching six battles, Barloc could tell by the guards' blocky movements and poor posture that they weren't well trained. He remained still, waiting for the guard's advance, and when it finally came, he slid under his attacker and grabbed the shield from the pile. In one swift motion, he slipped his arm through the holds and parried a blow.

Five more attacks followed, and five times Barloc dodged or parried. A second guard entered the fight. Though much harder, Barloc managed to evade their blitzes. When he felt his energy wane, he ran to the opposite side of the square and dropped his shield, kneeled to the ground, and bowed his head.

Both guards approached on either side.

Stars bloomed across Barloc's vision and he leaned forward, barely catching himself. Another hit bashed against his back, but he remained kneeling. More blows followed, each striking harder than the previous, and after seven solid hits, he fell forward.

"Enough!" Sir Vigor's voice boomed like a cannon blast. The ground reverberated through Barloc's chest.

The guards immediately dropped their weapons and left the square.



Barloc pushed to his feet. Every bit of him wanted to glance at Sir Vigor and Madam Constance, but he fought the urge. Instead, he fell in line with the other defeated slaves.

MJ-8 entered the ring. He placed his hands behind his back, a symbol that he would not attack, but the guard still advanced, swinging his sword viciously. The slave managed to dodge three of the attacks, though the fourth caught him in the leg and brought him to his knees.

The guard slammed two solid blows onto MJ-8's back before tossing the weapon aside and exiting the square.

Finally, Barloc allowed himself to glance at Sir Vigor and Madam Constance.

After scribbling on her parchment, she stashed it back into her cloak and whispered into Sir Vigor's ear.

Sir Vigor pointed at the guards. "You two, take MJ-2 to the Healers, and you, gather the weapons." He led the three guards and MJ-2 toward a series of small cots, just past the stables, while Madam Constance directed the seven bruised slaves to what appeared to be the final tent.

As they marched across the bailey, the deep sound of a slave horn bellowed through the air, and with it, the slaves around the yard stopped working and lined up at each of the thatched buildings.

When they arrived at the final tent, Madam Constance withdrew her parchment and said to the guard, "Take those five." She identified everyone but Barloc and MJ-8.

Panic stormed his chest and mind. He knew he'd gone too far, and now he'd pay. Sweat formed across his forehead and palms.

Once the others left, only Barloc, MJ-8, and Madam Constance remained.

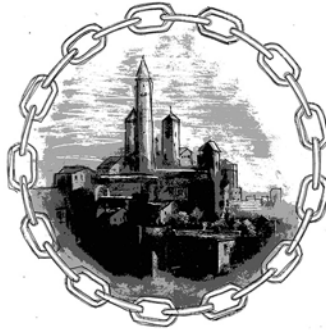
"MJ-7," she said. "Why didn't you fight in the battle square? Why did you let those guards beat you?"

"Lord Harbor said not to strike a guard, Madam."

Madam Constance smiled. To Barloc, it helped complete her beauty. Small creases lifted with her cheeks. "You *were* told this. Eight slaves were told the same thing. You and this sheep were the only two that listened." She pointed at MJ-8.

"MJ-7, you resisted nothing as we replaced your manacles. You moved quickly. You held your head high while your possessions were burned. You said nothing as we stripped you of everything. You didn't speak during the meal, and you didn't strike a guard in the battle square.

"This man kept his eyes on you. He saw you were quiet during the meal, so he, too, remained silent. He saw the beating you took and followed suit.... The point being that Lord Harbor gave all eight men the same, clear instructions. The first quest, which I thought obvious, was to make it through this day. Now those six will start over, and because we can't cut any more hair, burn their clothes, rename, or rebind them, they will spend tomorrow in the square until they learn what I consider to be quite obvious. You two move forward."



### Chapter 3 - Becoming a Hero

The cot pressed hard against Barloc's back, and no matter which way he adjusted, the chains strapping his ankles to the top bunk bore into his bones. Each time he fell asleep, he woke from pains cutting across his back, legs, and arms. His muscles burned where the guards had struck him, and his head pulsed as if dehydrated.

He assumed his new master's plan was to make the slaves sore and tired, so when they finally received decent rest, they would feel thankful. This explained the beating they took in the battle square.

The slave horn bellowed, rattling the walls and bunks, jarring Barloc away from any chance of rest. The sound reminded him of Sir Vigor's voice.

As the horn's blare faded, two guards burst through the door and unlocked the slaves. Silently, everyone marched outside where they lined up in front of their bunkhouse.

Slaves and guards filled the courtyard. The sheer quantity of them overwhelmed Barloc. A long line of guards stood before the slaves, one for every three, each wearing the same black leather.

In the center of the courtyard, Madam Constance and Sir Vigor sat behind a long wooden table.

Sir Vigor bashed a mallet against a small gong. As the crash faded, the guards from the first bunkhouse led their slaves into a line in front of Sir Vigor. A second crash brought forth Barloc and the rest of the slaves from his bunkhouse. The others remained, waiting for their turn. As each slave approached the table, Sir Vigor and Madam Constance searched for their name on a parchment and assigned them their quests.

"Name?" Madam Constance asked, not raising her eyes.

"Ba... MJ-7, Madam."

Madam Constance flipped the parchment over. "Report to Master Sapper at the mine. Stand at the blue marker and wait for your escort."

Barloc walked around the table toward a series of markers poking up from the ground. Each slave around the blue marker wore different gear, a variation of tunics, sandals, pants, and gloves. Those with more gear also had slightly longer hair and scruff on their faces—signs that they'd progressed.

Another group of men formed around the green marker. Among them, Barloc noticed all the MJ slaves he'd entered Drudgeburg with. All except MJ-2, who had been injured in the battle square, and MJ-8, who had just joined him at the blue marker.

When Sir Vigor and Madam Constance finished processing the lines, the guards led their

groups around the outer bailey. The blue group marched toward the portcullis, the exit.

Barloc surmised that his group consisted of twenty slaves with four guards on horseback, driving them forward. It wasn't until he stepped onto the gravel road that he noticed the weight of improper footwear. The jobs he would soon be forced to do in thin sandals worried him. If the small stones dug so deep while walking, how would the conditions of a mine fare?

They stopped before the gates of Drudgeburg. Slowly, the steel frame lifted, and when he passed through the barbican, he walked under two murder holes cut into the stone ceiling. Old oil stained the grates, and the thought that they had once been used sent a chill up his spine. He pictured being trapped in the small section while hot oil poured from above, burning him alive, melting his skin away.

The water in the moat lay stagnant with a green, oily film. Spikes made from thin trees poked out in every direction. Even climbing across them would prove difficult, and as he walked past, he noted the wood appeared freshly cut. Barloc thought it strange to have so many reinforcements at such a small keep. He'd seen at least thirty guards in the bailey that morning; to have such extravagant defenses made him wonder who they were trying to keep out. *Or in.*

"I'm Master Sapper!" a man standing at the end of the drawbridge bellowed, making his voice larger than it needed to be. His accent was almost as thick as he was, though he stood shorter than all the slaves. Something told Barloc that it wasn't fat underneath the green cloak. The man's cheeks swallowed his beady, brown eyes, and when he spoke, black and yellow stains shared equal space across his teeth.

"Yer gonna load these carts with the stone blockin' a collapsed mine. Yer gonna work with a pickaxe and shovel." The man directed a hand to two large carts with a horse tethered to each. Beside them scattered more than twenty wheelbarrows, each with a shovel and a pickaxe resting inside. "We'll make one trip by noon, eat, and run the final load. Today *will* be hard."

Barloc suppressed a yawn and glimpsed back at the castle, the sleepless night weighing on him. Two towers stood tall like sentinels on both sides of the drawbridge. Arrow slits littered the walls, and the outer battlements ran tall and jagged like crooked teeth. Ivy meandered up a stone belfry, and though it had only been a day, he hadn't heard the bells and wondered if a vicar lived there. Another tower stood behind the belfry, higher than any other structure at the castle. Its thickness and spiraling windows suggested that rooms lined the inside walls.

Sapper climbed onto his horse. "Stay close." When he mounted, his cloak lifted just enough to reveal the bottom of his coiled whip. "For those who're new, ya may be back. As ya can see, we pull slaves from all over because work is work, and it needs to be done. The rules are a little different with me, ladies. If ya run, I'll kill ya. If ya fight, I'll kill ya. If ya do anything outside of transport stone, I might just kill ya. I don't have time to chase slaves. I have a hard job because I'm a hard man. Now, let's go!" Master Sapper led the way, followed by the caravan of slaves and the four mounted guards.

The sun beat down with a physical, hot weight, and between the pickaxe and the shovel, small blisters pushed through Barloc's calloused hands. Early on, one of the stones slipped from his grip and landed hard on his right foot. Blood seeped from underneath his big toenail.

Once the two carts were full, Master Sapper rushed the slaves to load stones into their wheelbarrows. He mounted his horse and rode in small circles around them. "Yer each responsible for yer own tools. If ya lose them, ya won't eat."

On the journey back to the castle, they moved sluggishly and in single file. Barloc spent his attention trying not to tip his wheelbarrow.

When they arrived, Master Sapper instructed the slaves to pile the stones on the left side of the moat. Dead-beaten grass circled the ground by Barloc's feet where he assumed old piles had

recently been, and by the time the carts and barrows emptied, the stones stood taller than him. Once the last one had been placed, Sapper led the slaves to a large oak tree in front of the castle. After instructing them to sit, he sent one of the guards into Drudgeburg.

MJ-8 sat next to Barloc and cast him a tired look, which he ignored.

A few minutes later, the guard returned with a line of fully-clothed women slaves.

Barloc's mouth dropped open and his eyes grew wide. *Women in chains? Here?*

The women approached in a march of their own, their ankle fetters dancing across the ground, kicking up dust with each step. They wore what easily could have been a burlap potato sack turned into a dress of sorts, and filth covered their arms and cheeks. Their hair, too, had been cut short.

As they approached, Barloc clearly saw that their wrists were not bound. Proof of what Lord Harbor had promised walked toward him with trays of food in their hands.

Barloc's mouth watered at the sight of hot rice and vegetables. The moment the trays hit the slaves' hands, they devoured the food. When everyone finished, the guard guided the women back to the castle and Sapper commanded everyone to stand.

As they returned to the mines, Barloc thought on the women slaves. *How perfect was it that they showed up with food and without wrist manacles, right when we were so exhausted?*

These thoughts drove further into his mind when he began loading the carts a second time, and he decided it was just another piece in Lord Harbor's sick game. He wanted to break the slaves' hope and faith. He wanted them mindless, tired laborers.

They loaded the carts and wheelbarrows much slower the second time around, and Sapper made it clear how unhappy their progress made him. "I'll personally flog each of ya if we return after sundown!" He no longer sat under the tree. Instead, he rode on his horse, making his whip pop in their faces.

Barloc threw the final stone onto his wheelbarrow, and maybe because he knew it was the last, it seemed so much heavier than the rest; his legs quivered from fatigue.

The rest of the slaves topped off their piles as well, though while MJ-8 finished his, the unbalanced stack of stones toppled to the ground. With a loud bang, he lay half buried underneath the efforts of his labor. All around, the slaves stared, unmoving. Even Master Sapper remained still, watching with his arms across his lap, whip hanging by his side.

Barloc ran forward, adrenaline and concern erasing his fatigue. Grabbing at everything he could, he fought to clear the rubble from MJ-8. The heavy, jagged stones tore the nail from his pointer finger, but he pushed past the pain until he cleared enough to roll MJ-8 onto his back.

A soft clapping came from behind him. He faced Master Sapper, who remained on horseback. "Well, done, Hero. Ya saved another maggot's life!" He continued to clap. "Ya see this, ladies? We've got a hero." The slaves remained silent. "The only problem is... I never told ya to be a hero."

Master Sapper kicked over Barloc's cart. The rocks toppled with a loud crunch. "Ya may want to start fillin' those barrows." He smiled at Barloc. "If ya think ya don't like me now, see what happens when we return after sundown." He smiled again, showing every stained tooth in his mouth, and guided the horse back to the tree. "And if anyone helps them, may yer gods save ya."

Tears of frustration streamed down Barloc's face. His gaze shifted from MJ-8, who lay with his eyes moving back and forth behind closed lids, to the two scattered stone piles, and then the watching slaves. For only a moment, Barloc stared at Sapper, wishing for the strength to fight. Poisonous images barraged his mind. He caught his fists clenching as he pictured strangling Master Sapper with his own whip. Pains gained purchase as his adrenaline tapered. His fingers

dug deep into his palms, pulling him from his trance.

Wasting no more time, Barloc flipped the wheelbarrows upright and loaded the rocks. He worked as fast as his failing strength allowed, though the sun descended with no regard for his duties.

Barloc placed the final stone on the cart once more and went to wake MJ-8. It wasn't until Barloc slapped him across his cheeks that he finally came to.

MJ-8 glanced at the row of watching slaves, to Sapper, the guards, and then the wheelbarrows before he understood what happened.

Barloc held a significant disdain toward the slave for not being stronger. He gripped the wheelbarrow's handles and waited for Sapper to mount.

The walk back proved to be long and relentless. Every hill or dip in the road acted as an obstacle, and the sun had long since fallen, which made it harder to guide the barrows.

After walking for a while, Sapper pulled his horse alongside Barloc. "Why did ya help the slave?"

Barloc ignored him.

Sapper cleared his throat and asked again, louder.

"What good would it have done leaving him under all that stone?"

Sapper considered the question and looped around the long line of slaves. "Ya won't make it ten days if ya play the hero. These people wouldn't spit in yer throat to keep ya alive. I could have ya back at day one, ya know?"

Barloc ignored his taunts and focused on the castle's towers looming ahead, his pace quickening at the sight.

Sapper shifted to Barloc's other side. "Do ya hear me? I can make it to where ya never succeed here. I bet I can have Lord Harbor make ya my personal servant."

Barloc slammed the wheelbarrow down and rounded on Sapper, who reached for his whip. The line of slaves and guards stopped, a few drawing in sharp breaths.

"What do you want from me?" Heat rose into Barloc's cheeks as he released all the rage he'd gathered since arriving at Drudgeburg. "What did I do wrong?"

Sapper began speaking, but Barloc cut him off. "Because I didn't watch a man die today, I'm being punished?"

Sapper moved his horse closer to Barloc, leaned down, and backhanded him, knocking him off his feet. "Yer being punished because ya think yer a hero, and yer not. Yer a slave and ya need to understand that." He leaned onto his elbows and peered into Barloc's eyes. "Why is it, out of twenty slaves, yer the problem?"

"He would've died!" As the words passed over his lips, he knew he'd gone too far. He stood, turned his back on Sapper, and lifted the wheelbarrow, figuring any damage was done. His punishment would now happen no matter what was said. When he took a step, he anticipated the burn from the whip.

Sapper rode down the line of slaves. "MJ-7 has given you all the honor of not eating a meal tonight. Ya can all thank the hero in yer own special ways." He rode back to the front of the line and stopped before Barloc. "This is going to be a rough journey for ya, MJ-7."

Barloc ignored him and focused on the castle, which appeared greatly different at night. An orange, effulgent glow surrounded the courtyard, and smaller ones lined the battlements, lighting it up like a beacon. Above Drudgeburg, the stars shined bright in the cloudless sky.

When they arrived, the slaves unloaded the stones into another pile. After, the group of slaves and guards silently followed Master Sapper, who hailed the gatehouse. The bridge lowered and they entered.

Sapper stopped and turned to Barloc. "This isn't over, Hero." He spoke to the guard inside. "Take them to their quarters. Make sure they don't eat, and if this one asks for a Healer," Sapper pointed to MJ-8, "send him directly to me."

The guards spread out, taking the different slaves to their respective bunkhouses. Barloc followed with MJ-8 by his side. *Now look what I've done.* He glanced over to MJ-8 who walked with his eyes on the ground. Cuts and scrapes lined his features and something terribly sad hid behind his eyes. *It's just not fair.*

The guard guided them to a different bunkhouse than the night before, and as he walked past the slaves already in their bunks, each one silently glared at Barloc and MJ-8, clenching their jaws in the dim torchlight. The men he'd arrived with stared at him, and what he saw in their eyes scared him more than anything Master Sapper could ever threaten him with. He saw broken men who resented MJ-8 and Barloc for making it one day closer to freedom while they took another long day of beating.

By the time the guard had clasped the manacles around his ankles, he'd realized that the unspoken bond between the slaves had broken, and all the MJ slaves he entered Drudgeburg with were now against him.

The guard double-checked his fetters and stopped for a moment. Their eyes connected, and he pumped his mouth open and closed repeatedly as if he had something to say, but after a moment, he only shook his head and walked away.

One final thought passed through Barloc's mind before exhaustion overcame him: *not just the masters... now the slaves, too.*



## Chapter 4 – Another Day at the Mines

Master Sapper bore down on Barloc, snapping his whip, forcing him to run. A cacophony of chains rattled around him so loudly he attempted to jam his fingers into his ears and lost his balance, splitting his chin on the ground. When he looked up, faces floated in and out of the blanketing darkness: slaves he hadn't seen in years, each crying or screaming.

Barloc jumped to his feet and wiped the blood from his chin. The slaves approached him with their hands out, moaning like zombies. The whip cracked again, and at the same time, a blade appeared in his fist. He swung at the oncoming slaves, cutting each down into a pile before him. When he couldn't swing anymore, he lunged onto their backs and pushed as hard as he could, slipping on arms and legs and heads – anything to get away from Sapper.

A small ledge materialized above Barloc, and he knew it meant safety. The bodies shifted like broken ice on a pond, forcing him to lose his balance and drop his blade. Before he could jump, another figure appeared, its features bedimmed inside a green hood. Ignoring it, he lunged for the edge, but once he got to his feet, the clandestine figure grabbed Barloc and threw him back down the pile of bodies into Master Sapper's grasp. Sapper pulled him so close their noses touched, and when he opened his mouth, a deep and terrifying growl blasted out.

Barloc's eyes burst open, and he gasped, clawing at his chest where he was sure Sapper's hands had been only moments ago. The slave horn tapered off, and the weight from the manacles still wrapped around his ankles told him that it was just a dream. He rubbed his eyes, his muscles burning from the simple act of lifting his arms.

He still couldn't shake the images of Master Sapper while he waited in line at the sorting table. He focused on the ground, ignoring the leering glares from the surrounding MJ slaves.

"Name?" Sir Vigor asked.

"MJ-7, sir," Barloc's gaze shifted to Madam Constance while Sir Vigor searched the parchment. Sapper's last words danced in his mind: *this isn't over, Hero*. He somehow knew that he would be sent back to the battle square, back to day one.

Sir Vigor set the parchment down. "You're to report to the red marker, where you'll be fitted for new footwear."

*Surely Sapper would've carried through with his threat.* Barloc caught his mind trailing, quickly stepped from the table, and walked toward the red marker.

Five slaves huddled around the flag, each wearing a different amount of clothing, much like those from the mines on the previous day. One man with a dusting of a beard nodded at his approach. The others ignored him and rubbed their hands together, an attempt to keep warm against the morning chill.

MJ-8 joined the group and stood silently by Barloc, who now watched the lines. Sir Vigor and Madam Constance processed the slaves faster than the previous day, and before he knew it, the red group marched toward the tents.

The guard at the booth, a thick man with small scars covering his face, forced Barloc to sit on a stool while he performed his duty deftly, weaving cloth upon cloth, sewing, and stitching. In only a few minutes, Barloc's feet were covered in a type of cloth boot.

Barloc had always considered himself strong and tough, but it wasn't until then that he realized how feeble and soft feet could be.

As he waited for the red group to finish, Sir Vigor arrived and pointed at Barloc and MJ-8. "You two, come with me."

Barloc wasted no time and followed Sir Vigor across the yard, taking two steps for every one of his. When the giant finally stopped, he stared down at the two slaves for a quiet moment. "You've made quite the impression.... Master Sapper has requested you two personally."

Barloc's shoulders slumped, his face flushed, and he fought the urge to protest, to explain what had happened.

"Master Sapper's in front of the castle having the slaves break down and rebuild the stone piles. You'll find him there, waiting for you."

Barloc nodded.

Sir Vigor lifted a tree-trunk-sized hand, and a moment later, the portcullis clicked open.

Master Sapper paced back and forth on his horse, just beyond the drawbridge.

When Barloc started walking, Sir Vigor spoke, "Have you ever stepped on a hornet's nest?"

"No, sir."

"You have now." He nodded in the direction of Master Sapper. "And MJ-7, once you step on a nest, the damage is done. Try not to get stung too badly." He walked away.

The new footwear made a huge difference against the gravel, but walking toward Sapper dampened his spirits. No shoe in the world could protect him from that, and each step brought Master Sapper that much closer.

As they approached, Sapper began clapping. "Well done, Hero!"

Barloc's heart climbed up his throat at the sight of the other MJ slaves, though his attention rested on Sapper, where danger lurked in those brown, beady eyes.

"So good of ya to join us," Sapper said, crossing his arms. "Say, ladies, have ya seen the hero's new boots?"

Barloc scanned the slaves and found them all staring down at his new footwear, and he knew the hornets had started to swarm. Even one of the slaves from the previous day had returned with a scowl set into his face, and Barloc could only assume that it was because they hadn't eaten the night before.

Sapper laughed and clapped his hands. "I had them pointlessly moving these stones back and forth until ya arrived.... Now that yer here, we can march alllllll the way to the mine, load the carts and come alllllll the way back... Then we can do it again!" Sapper let his words wash over them. "Let's go!"

Barloc moved past the disgruntled slaves, avoiding eye contact.

MJ-8 stayed especially close by his side. Cuts lined his arms and legs, and when he walked he did so with a limp; the results from the stones collapsing on his feeble body.

Two more slaves stood by the wheelbarrows, both wearing long, filthy linens.

The first slave had the white hair of an old man with wrinkles deep around his blue eyes. His hands were covered with scars as though they'd been mauled by a dog, but even through all that, he gave off the presence of strength. He held his chest high and looked straight ahead,



past the slaves, toward the mine.

The other slave was completely unforgettable. His right eye had been replaced with a milky white orb, and a deep, craggy scar cut above and below the socket. His hands shook slightly, jingling the chains around his wrists.

Sapper rounded the slaves up and led the way to the mine. Four guards surrounded the group, riding a slight distance from the slaves, two on either side. Once at the mine, Sapper instructed the slaves to load the carts. He remained on his horse and paced back and forth. Barloc kept his eyes on him, and he couldn't help noticing that Sapper seemed uneasy. Every few seconds, he cast his attention toward the tree line.

Barloc worked without incident from the MJ slaves, though he feared that they would take advantage of Sapper's divided attention. Out of his peripheral, Barloc caught them lifting their heads, both toward him and the guards. He knew it would only be a matter of time before they made their move. *How will they do it, though? Will they take turns or strike me all at once?*

A wolf's howl ululated from the trees. The guards, Master Sapper, and all the slaves spun to the source. The howl came again, followed by five men stepping into the clearing. The moment Barloc laid eyes on them, he knew who they were: Howlers. The men carried long rifles strapped to their backs and wore a variety of filthy outfits. Armor hid among common clothes that were speckled by the silks of the wealthy, a clear sign that they geared themselves from their victims.

The lead man stepped forward, his outfit the only one out of the lot that held a consistent theme. He wore black leather, much like the guards at Drudgeburg, with blood-red lines cutting through in a design creating the illusion of burning coals.

Master Sapper moved closer to him. "Katiph!"

The man dipped his head, not taking his eyes from Sapper. "Running a bit heavy today, aren't you?" He straightened up and motioned to the slaves.

Katiph's voice came out in high, squeaky waves, reminding Barloc of a rat. His face pinched up, and his skin clung to his skull, a mask to the bones behind it. Thin facial hair dusted his cheeks, and hanging over one shoulder lay the long, braided strand of a rat tail.

Sapper shook his head. "Don't worry yerself about what I'm doing. Let's just get this over with." He lifted a hand and snapped it back down.

Sapper's foot guards grabbed the two unique slaves and directed them toward Katiph.

"Two? I came all this way for two?" Katiph shook his head and waved his hands in front of him. "That's not going to work."

Sapper's chest expanded and his hand twitched toward his whip, resting on the handle. "Yer gonna get what I give ya, and yer gonna like it!"

Katiph laughed. "The days where you tell me how things are going to be are coming to an end. I've become a man you don't want to mess with, Sapper. I've enough dirt on you to bury you in your own grave."

Sapper moved closer to Katiph, uncoiled his whip, and launched it at the strap attaching Katiph's gun. After a loud snap, the rifle fell to the ground, and before it landed, he lofted the whip forward again, breaking another one of the other Howler's guns free.

"Keep yer childish threats with yer toys, Katiph!"

The other three men finally grasped their guns and lifted them at Sapper.

"Why do ya prefer those useless scraps of metal? They can't pierce plate, ya can hardly aim true, and half the time they kill the man holding it!"

Katiph retrieved his weapon.

Barloc knew guns were few and far, more common with outlaws and Howlers. Though,

Howlers *were* outlaws – King Sclavus’s outlaws.

“This may be true for the inexperienced.” Katiph smirked and pointed his rifle at the slaves. “Surely you can part with one more?”

“I had two prepared. What tale do I tell Lord Harbor when I return one short?”

Katiph shrugged and shook his head. “Tell him a slave ran away for all I care.”

“What kind of master would I be if I let my slaves run free?”

“And what kind of mercenary would I be if I returned from such a long journey with so few?”

“I don’t –” Sapper spoke, but Katiph cut him off with a wolf’s howl.

From the trees, five more men, already gripping guns or bows, joined them.

“As I said, things are going to change around here.” Katiph stepped through the slaves, observing each one. “Be lucky it’s only one, Sapper.”

Barloc’s heart raced as Katiph neared, and when he felt the Howler’s eyes dawdle on him, he coughed as hard as he could.

Katiph backed away. “You keeping the ill now?”

Barloc watched MJ-8, fearing he would copy his actions, but Katiph stopped in front of MJ-3.

“Tall... strong... looks healthy enough.” Katiph lingered in front of the slave before sauntering back to his men. “Yes, I’ll take these three.”

Sapper glanced between the slave and the line of men before him, his grip tightened on the whip’s handle, but after a moment, his fist relaxed. “How much?”

“Three gold coins.”

Sapper lowered his head and rubbed his fingers into his temples. “Fine, but let’s make this fast. I’ve other matters to tend to outside of ya, Katiph.”

Katiph smiled. “Round them up.”

Two Howlers grabbed the two prepared slaves while a third went for MJ-3.

MJ-3 shook the Howler off and broke into a run. His chains restricted how wide his stride would allow. “I won’t go back with no Howler!”

Sapper mumbled and plowed by on horseback. As he advanced on MJ-3, he withdrew his whip and snapped it forward, wrapping it around the slave’s leg. MJ-3 flopped down to the ground with a loud thump. Dirt floated up, and before it could settle, Sapper was dragging him behind his horse, the whip cutting lines into the slave’s leg.

Katiph clapped excitedly and produced three gold coins from a small sack, handing them to Sapper. After a long, exaggerated bow, the Howlers disappeared into the trees.

Sapper cantered past the slaves. “What are ya fleabags starin’ at? Get back to work!” He moved to the tree by the mine and dismounted, pushing his back against the rough bark. He rolled one of the three gold coins across his knuckles.

The MJ slaves worked fast and hard, ignoring Barloc and MJ-8. Like tugging the slaver’s palanquin across the kingdom, they moved as one unit. Seeing one of their own sold like fruit at a market altered the tension in the air, as if harder labor would exempt them from a future sale to the Howlers.

Questions assaulted Barloc. *Why would Sapper know a Howler so well? Does Lord Harbor know? Is he part of this?* The idea that Sapper had any part with the Howlers countered any progress he’d made in his mind about Lord Harbor and freedom. It now felt like a joke, like one misstep and he would be back in the Howlers’ hands.

The castle had lost some of its previous nightly enchantment. It appeared rough, like a castle should, with long cracks cutting through the foundation like veins. Stone crumbled away

at certain points, and the wood that lined the windows was old, as if washed ashore from the sea. He'd always known castles to be the strongholds of the kingdom, forts that stood up against battles and protected the people within.

Drudgeburg was built in a unique location, wedged in a valley between two tall mountains. A creek ran along the base of the left side, snaking in and out of the hardwoods until it disappeared behind the castle. Large trees lined the castle walls down both sides, also vanishing from view.

One road exited the castle and climbed up a hill, past the oak tree where they'd eaten the day before. Overgrown fields stretched both sides of the road to the forest line.

After the slaves finished unloading the stones, the same set of women returned holding a replica meal of hot rice and vegetables. With their bellies full, the slaves soon returned to the mine and loaded the carts a second time. Once again, their progress slowed as the day descended toward night.

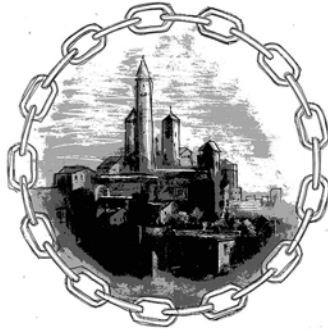
On the return journey, Barloc focused on the woodlands lining the fields on both sides of the rutted road. Off in the distance, deer disappeared into the thick trees, and he remembered how the Howlers materialized out of nowhere. He felt like anyone could be watching them.

As they unloaded the stones, Barloc contemplated the four huge stacks. He wondered why they needed so many, but the way things were shaping up around Drudgeburg, it wouldn't surprise him if Sapper made them return each rock back to the mine, piece by piece.

Once done, Sapper led them into the courtyard and left them with a group of guards at the stables. Although Barloc's muscles twitched from exhaustion, he instantly felt relief with Sapper's departure.

A line of slaves stood before Barloc, and four at a time they stepped forward, where guards dipped brushes into buckets and scrubbed them from head to toe.

By Barloc's turn, the water swirled thick with dirt, and each swipe with the rough brush scratched his skin. After the last man, the horn called the slaves back to their bunkhouses, where the guards locked them in without a meal for the second night in a row.



## Chapter 5 - The Funeral

The nightmare replayed, but this time, Katiph's wolfish howl crashed through the air while Barloc ran from Master Sapper. The slaves sold to the Howlers joined the army of zombies chasing him. He still lost his blade, climbed up the pile of bodies, and attempted to jump to the ledge, but the moment he tried, the faceless figure hurled him backward. Barloc's eyes flipped open before the deafening bellow erupted from Sapper's gaping mouth.

He wiped sweat from his lip and listened to his heartbeat pulse through his ears like a drum. The slave horn hadn't permeated the quiet, but outside padded footfalls moved around the yard.

The process repeated itself from the previous mornings: the horn blew, the guards and slaves lined up, Sir Vigor and Madam Constance assigned their quests, and they stood at their designated markers.

Madam Constance instructed Barloc to return to Master Sapper, but he would receive gloves first. As he waited at the red flag once more, he noticed that all the MJ slaves stood with him, except MJ-2, who now stood at the green marker, awaiting his day in the battle square, and MJ-3, who had been sold to the Howlers.

The lines depleted, and the slaves dispersed. The red group approached a tent where Barloc received used, brown leather gloves with patched fingers and dried blood across the palms.

Once the last slave collected his gear, a guard led them back to the red marker where Master Sapper waited with a parchment in his fist. As soon as the slaves were in earshot, he called out different names: "JF-3, JF-8, OM-11, DS-3, F-9, and JD-1, follow the guards. Yer gonna be dealin' with crops." He pointed at two guards standing to his left. "MJ-1, 4, 5, 6, 7, and 8, yer with me. Let's go!"

Sapper walked straight to the exit where he mounted his steed and waited for the gate to lift.

As the group of slaves moved toward the mine, Master Sapper called Barloc off to the side. "Yer one smug slave, MJ-7. Ya come in here and do what ya please... like yer more than just a thrall. I bet ya think yer so clever for coughing like that in front of Katiph. In hindsight, I should've offered ya from the start."

Barloc remained silent.

"I bet ya think I can't break ya. Well, I can, and I will. If for no other reason, I'll do it simply to prove it." Sapper spurred his horse and rode to the front of the line, leaving Barloc to merge back with the group.

Barloc and MJ-8 worked as steadily as they could, side by side, and by the time everyone loaded their carts, gaps began showing in the collapsed entrance.

Much like the previous two days, they trekked back to the castle, ate, and revisited the mine for a second load.

On the return trip, Sapper pulled MJ-1 off to the side, out of earshot from the group.

When they arrived at the mine, the guards joined Sapper under the tree, leaving the slaves to their work.

Halfway through the load, a sharp pain stung the back of Barloc's head. A small rock bounced along the ground by his feet, and when he lifted his hand to his head, he pulled his fingers away wet with blood.

MJ-1 stood with his fists balled, glowering at Barloc.

Warmth flooded his cheeks as rage crashed through his body. Blood dripped down his bare back, and after a moment of uninterrupted staring, he turned to his wheelbarrow. When he bent down for his next piece of stone, another small rock buzzed past his cheek. Barloc spun around to confront MJ-1, instead meeting all four MJ slaves. He found the guards and Sapper staring at them with their arms across their chests.

MJ-8, who had been on Barloc's heels the entire time, now stood by the cave's entrance.

"You think you're better than us, Hero?" MJ-1 growled, and there it was: Sapper's words right out of the slave's mouth.

"We don't need to do this, Archer," Barloc said, remembering his name from the first day. Confusion glimmered across Archer's face at hearing his name, but Barloc pressed on. "Let's get back to work. Thirty days. We need to stick together."

Archer punched the air and breathed heavier, the muscles in his chest tightening then relaxing with each exhale. "Don't call me that, Hero. You don't know what you're talking about."

Barloc backed away one step only for the MJ slaves to take two forward. He pivoted to run, but the four men jumped on his back, smashing his face against the hard ground. Blood filled his mouth, and he curled up while they swarmed like hornets, jabbing their stingers into his sides, back, and legs.

His body shook from each hit. The onslaught hurt tremendously at first, but he quickly became numb. Barloc locked his arms in front of his face and waited for the slaves to tire or for the guards to intervene. He cried out for help between each strike against him, but he knew that no one would intervene. As a last effort, he called for MJ-8. A moment later, someone screamed and a deep thud echoed in the air. The kicking and punching tapered and then stopped completely.

The slaves backed away, and MJ-8 stood over Archer, holding a huge stone with a swatch of blood smeared across it.

Barloc's vision spun; he closed his eyes and rested his head. A bell rang faintly, like wind chimes in a morning breeze. The soothing sound calmed him, each bell ringing alongside his heartbeat.

A growl disrupted the oncoming tranquility. The ground shook around him, and the growl shifted into a bark. Faster, the bells and the bark alternated, the ground rumbled again, and something smacked his cheek. Weightlessness tricked him into feeling like he floated until a hard pressure nearly stole his breath, and finally, he opened his eyes.

"Grab MJ-1 and follow. Leave the carts and march back!" Sapper's voice rumbled louder than ever. "The bell means trouble; get back to the castle as fast as ya can. If I have any missing slaves, I'll make it my life's mission to personally kill each of ya. Understood?"

Barloc was flung over Sapper's horse like a sack of flour. He bobbed up and down as he stared at the filthy road. Each gyration sent a shockwave of agony through his chest. He tried to sit up until he felt himself slide and gripped onto the saddle. They rode hard, but before he knew it, they crossed Drudgeburg's drawbridge and stopped in the courtyard.

Sapper shoved Barloc off the horse.

Pain exploded across his entire body on impact. Using the horse for balance, Barloc managed to pull himself up to his feet. Once up, he leaned against the mount for support. The spectacle before him acted as a distraction from his own pain.

Lord Harbor ran across the bailey toward Sir Vigor, Madam Constance, and three other Green Cloaks. They circled around another man lying on the ground, covered in blood. Lord Harbor dropped to his knees beside him. "What happened?"

Sapper dismounted and joined the group.

One of the Green Cloaks greeted Sapper with a nod and spat out a small piece of grass.

Lord Harbor turned the dying man's face toward him. "Atticus, what happened?"

"M-m-my lord." The man's voice quivered and wheezed. "Scouts... by Buzzard's Rock." The man spat out a mouthful of blood.

Lord Harbor called back to Madam Constance, "Get the Healers. Now!"

She ran fast across the yard, her cloak billowing behind her like a cape.

Atticus coughed into his fist. "I was ranging along the mire... I found tracks. I figured it was just Katiph's men, but I followed them to make sure... all the way up to Buzzard's Rock where I found a camp."

"You're sure they were scouting us?"

"What else would they be scouting?" He spat again.

Lord Harbor gently wiped specks of blood from Atticus's face. "What happened to you?"

"I attempted a closer look, to see what their camp was about. How many there were and if they were a threat, but they discovered me." He fell into a fit of violent coughing. "One of them shot an arrow blindly into the woods and the bastard struck my shoulder."

Lord Harbor remained silent, kneeling by Atticus.

"I screamed when it hit me." He laughed a wet laugh that shifted into a fit of coughing. "Who the hell blindly shoots an arrow?"

"Scared men," Lord Harbor answered and added, "Fearful men."

"They came fast, but I hid behind a tree, broke the arrow and used it as a weapon to gouge the first face I saw." Atticus attempted to sit up but failed, landing hard on his back. "My left arm was no good, but I was still able to get my blade free." He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "I didn't want to, my lord, but I did what I had to... Not before I was smashed in the chest by a hammer, but I did what I had to do." His words trailed off as if he drifted into a memory. "Though, one got away. I couldn't catch him on foot. There was no way, so I had to backtrack to my horse, and by then he would have been long gone or hidden, so I returned to report."

Lord Harbor shifted on his knees and shook his head. "You did good. You're a brave man."

"T-t-thank you, my lord." Atticus rested his head on the hard ground, and that was when Barloc saw a pool of blood soaking into the dirt around him.

Madam Constance returned with two women wearing white dresses and long necklaces covered in vials. One older and one much younger.

"How confident are you in their numbers? Do you think there are more?"

The man spoke without opening his eyes. His words left his mouth lazily. "I can... guarantee... that there are." He coughed and tried to spit, but this time, it caught in his beard.

"I'm sorry I failed."

The Healers lowered to Atticus's side.

Lord Harbor cleared away, giving the Healers room. "You keep that quiet, Atticus."

The Healers worked quickly and with few words. They cut and tore and untied as fast as their hands would allow, and by the time they removed Atticus's tunic, blood covered their long, white dresses. In the end, they stood and lowered their heads, crossing their blood-soaked hands in front of them.

Lord Harbor stared down at the lost man and shook his head.

Sun glared off the wetness on Madam Constance's cheeks, and seeing her crying surprised Barloc. She carried herself to be a callous woman, but to see her so vulnerable in front of so many people changed something in the way he viewed her. Every one of the Green Cloaks seemed deeply bothered, but not so much as she.

Lord Harbor pointed at two of the three masters but spoke to Madam Constance. "Take the body to the Vicar Farlen and tell him that we'll send Atticus off this evening."

Madam Constance nodded and wiped her eyes. Two of the Green Cloaks grabbed either side of Atticus and followed Madam Constance through the inner portcullis.

Lord Harbor addressed the Healers: "Thank you, ladies. You may return." He faced the remaining men. "I'll need council. Everyone meet in the castle. That includes you, Sapper." Lord Harbor bowed slightly and turned for the keep.

The scene captivated Barloc so much that he'd forgotten about the beating. He swayed, still bleeding from various wounds. Pains danced across his body, and he suddenly wondered how he stood at all.

Sapper barked orders at the surrounding guards, who ran for the stables.

Barloc pulled his hand away from the horse and stepped toward Sir Vigor. He dropped hard to his knees and attempted to stand again, this time falling face first into the dirt.

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Glass tinkled followed by a woman's soft voice. "Hand me the hartshorn." After a small pop, a strong odor climbed into Barloc's nose. His throat tightened as if someone choked him, and all at once, his ears tingled, his nose burned, and tears forced their way out.

He gasped for breath and tried to sit up but couldn't move. Soft rope bound his arms to the sides of the cot. Barloc blinked until his vision cleared. To his right sat a young Healer, wearing a lacey, white dress that covered her body. Her sharp clavicles helped frame her shoulders, and her hair had been cut short. A necklace of tiny glass vials rested softly against her chest.

On his other side, a much older Healer hovered over him, holding an open vial in her hand. She passed it to the younger girl. When she spoke, she forced her words out as if she were new to the language, enunciating each syllable. "That should do it."

The younger Healer popped the vial back onto her necklace.

The older woman released the holds on his arms. "Can you stand, child? Only for a moment."

Barloc rubbed his wrists and stretched out his arms.

"You have to move. Everyone is required to bear witness at Drudgeburg." Both women pulled him up, and before long, he stood, his legs wavering. His fetters hung with an unreal weight, and his feet dragged along the ground, making it almost impossible to move.

"You need to follow, child."

Outside, every slave – more than he'd seen during the morning sorting – filled the outer bailey. He stood in front of a building just past the stables, tucked away in the corner. The position offered a view of the entire place without having to turn his head.

Lord Harbor paced up and down the path, just before a tall wooden funeral pyre where Atticus, the man who had died, lay atop. Ten Green Cloaks stood alongside five Healers. A young man in bright red robes stood in front of them all, his jet-black hair pulled back into a tight ponytail. A tribal tattoo climbed up his neck, stopping at his chin. In front of him, guards mixed in with the sea of slaves, standing so close their shoulders touched.

Lord Harbor stopped pacing and faced the mass of people. "As the sun sets on Drudgeburg, the sun sets on Master Atticus. I don't expect many of you to feel sorrow. Most of you haven't even met this man, and where a blind arrow has struck one of the many eyes of Drudgeburg, know that it made all the other eyes aware. Master Atticus... you will be hard to replace... Vicar Farlen, if you please." Lord Harbor knelt at the base of the wooden structure and lowered his head.

The man in red stepped forward and placed a hand on Lord Harbor's shoulder. Vicar Farlen turned back to the crowd. Even though wispy and cotton soft, his voice carried over the silent yard. "Death is serious. We live in a world under King Sclavus, a man who doesn't understand this. Death shouldn't be so quick. Too many of you have seen more than is suited for any one person. It's not fair, but it's the way of our world.

"A man's death has the weight of his life... Master Atticus lived a heavy life of sacrifice and hard work. When he placed someone before him, it wasn't as a shield, but to help that person forward, ahead of himself." Farlen faced the pyre. "Master Atticus, I hope your many sacrifices serve as payment from this life into the next. A moment of silence."

The vicar lowered his head, and when he lifted it back up, he said, "The fire will burn ten days in honor of Master Atticus. On the tenth, the ashes will be collected and mended back into the earth. Keep the fire burning!"

All of the vanguard, the Healers, Lord Harbor, and even some of the guards yelled back: "Keep the fire bright!"

Two guards handed Vicar Farlen and Lord Harbor lit torches, and together they approached the kindling below Master Atticus. At once it went up in flames. In only a few seconds, the popping and heavy breath of the fire overtook the awkward silence in the air.

"Come, child," the Healer said. "You need rest."

Barloc allowed her to guide him back the cot, and as he settled in, a thought dawned on him. "My lady."

The older of the two Healers stopped and spoke to him. "You may address me as Healer Haylan. This is Healer Altha."

"Healer Haylan, please don't keep me in here. I don't want to start back at day one."

Haylan considered him for a moment, searching his face. "I will be attending to you personally. You will remain here until I see it fit. Valerian." Haylan grabbed a vial from the younger Healer and leaned closer to Barloc. "This will help you sleep."

Haylan withdrew a dropper and dipped it into the vial. Once satisfied, she held it over his mouth. Two drops fell onto his tongue, and instantly the taste of sour cheese overtook his senses. He fought the urge to gag, and after multiple swallows, the taste finally faded.

"You need rest. Do not worry about day one or your other troubles. Worry about getting better so you can get through your time here. I will be back later." The Healers left the room, closing the door behind them.

Barloc's eyes felt heavy, and his mouth wouldn't stop salivating. Once again, Sapper's words managed to find a home in his head: *I can make it to where ya never progress at Drudgeburg.*

---END OF SNEAK PREVIEW---