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Balore: The Jewel of the Mountain

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BALORE: THE JEWEL OF THE MOUNTAIN

By

Jeffrey C. Evans

THESIS

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ABSTRACT

BALORE: THE JEWEL OF THE MOUNTAIN

By

Jeffrey C. Evans

These first four chapters of a novel begin the tale of two boys named Ozo and Sami. The book is a work of fantasy fiction. It begins in Chapter One with them being shipped to a large urban area and sold into slavery. It continues in Chapter Two through Chapter Four with both boys learning how to steal, maneuver the streets and come to terms with living in a harsh world where violence is always a threat and magic and the unknown forever lurk in the shadows.

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2010

This thesis is dedicated to my parents.

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This thesis uses the guidelines provided by the *MLA Style Manual* and the Department of English

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction.....	1
Body:	
Chapter One: Death and Slavers	11
Chapter Two: Bought and Sold	42
Chapter Three: The Hovel	65
Chapter Four: Training	88
Works Cited	111

Introduction

I met the boy who would become my best friend in autumn of 1978, when I was ten years old. The day we met I was sitting with an open notebook under a willow tree, the leaves above me turning yellow and just beginning to fall when he approached. He asked me why I was sitting there all by myself instead of out on the field playing flag football with everyone like our teacher wanted, and he asked if I was okay. I told him I didn't like the coach yelling at me when I did something wrong. I told him it wasn't as much fun as doing my art. He asked what art that was and said I showed him a drawing of my version of a more ferocious and frightening Godzilla. Lucky for me he thought I was cool that day, and he sat down next to me to draw pictures too. That was thirty-one years ago. He's a top-shelf family practice M.D. today, and I'm still drawing, but I don't sit under willow trees as much as I once did when I work.

I've always been a dreamer. My best friend was the practical one, and I was the one telling stories. He and I would get dropped off at the movie theatre on a Saturday afternoon to see a Disney film, something like *Swiss Family Robinson*, and by bedtime I had reworked the tale completely with the two of us as the heroes on the island, but with much cooler and more deadly weapons and traps to protect what was ours, like hidden pits filled with pacing black panthers or mounds of hissing cobras. I think in one version we even had jet fighters and tanks on the island. The tale always grew in the telling, until a parent told us to be quiet and go to sleep. My grade school teachers learned about my being a dreamer too, and during conferences with my mother they often told her how I would need to be moved away from windows in order to focus on tasks at hand.

In class and out, I read a lot as a child. I think that was what first introduced me to alternate worlds, to places stranger and better than where I lived, to places much farther off than merely what I could spy from a grade school window between lunch and afternoon recess. Fantasy fiction came first. When I was a very young child, my mother would read with me the Hardy Boys and Nancy Drew books, but I never much liked the tales. I did like reading with her over my shoulder, and maybe that was why I first fell in love with stories. One day I asked if I could pick out a book of my own, and she was more than pleased at the question. I picked out Robert E. Howard's *Conan the Barbarian*. The first scene in that story shows Conan alone in a jail cell. A guard comes in and throws down a ham bone with just some bits of gristle on the end. It was Conan's meal for the day. In one deadly move Conan grabs the ham bone, jumps up and caves in the jailer's head, and then calmly walks out, a free man, to continue the rest of his tale. For a boy age ten, that was like Halloween candy between book covers. Soon after discovering fantasy fiction I added comic books, science fiction and horror.

As well as a best friend I also had teenage brothers in the house when I was very little. I remember one brother would wake me up after he got in from working late to watch scary movies with him. I grew up thirty miles from the Detroit area in a city called Ypsilanti, and the local TV channels back then showed low-budget horror films that started at midnight. The TV shows had names like Creature Feature, Scream Theatre and one with an oddball announcer named The Ghoul. I forced myself to stay awake just so I could watch them with my big brother. Growing up I had two art forms guiding my imagination -- books and film.

A few years ago, I read the book *The Prince of Nothing* by R. Scott Bakker. He created a world unlike any I had encountered before. In many ways it reminded me of the Biblical era, with a messiah-like protagonist who leads a holy war. The setting of the trilogy is what grabbed me. I was tired of Medieval Europe as the setting for fantasy novels and knew I wanted to try something new. In one passage from the novel the messiah character, Kellhus, has arrived at the city of Sumna. Bakker writes:

In the distance, bathed in sunlight, the sloped walls of the Junriuma towered over the masses. Of the surrounding structures, it alone seemed immune to the multitudes. The other buildings, engineered in the later and more graceful days of the Ceneian Empire, were overwhelmed by squirming thickets of warriors, wives, slaves, and tradesmen. Hanging arms and indistinct faces congested the balconies and long colonnades of the administrative compounds. Scores of youths were perched like pigeons across the curved horns and haunches of the three Agoglian Bulls that ordinarily dominated the heart of the plaza (Bakker 94).

Later in the chapter, the protagonist of Bakker's world, a sorcerer named Achamian, walks the streets alone and contemplates the arrival of Kellhus. Bakker's subtle details influenced my own as I sat down to write. "If a city was old, really old, the gutters and pools would always glitter black, sodden by the detritus of ages. Sumna was ancient, her waters like pitch" (Bakker 118).

My story introduces two young protagonists, Ozo and Sami. Both are taken from a rural area and brought to a large urban center to be sold as slaves. There, in the city of Balore, they are bought by a man who works for a dark underground organization within the city and who trains children to be pickpockets and thieves. I hope to not only show the tragic and brutal side of youths struggling in a violent adult world but also reveal to my reader their budding friendship and how love can grow even in the midst of terror and tragedy.

The writer I owe the most to for inspiration with setting and character is George R. R. Martin. He still uses a medieval Europe as his setting, and the map of his fictional world even resembles Great Britain, but the adult themes he uses and the utter brutality that his characters live through made me realize I had the freedom to create a world unique to not only the genre but to me as a reader. A scene at the start of his first novel describes a patch of woods outside a castle called Winterfell:

The gods of Winterfell kept a different sort of wood. It was a dark, primal place, three acres of old forest untouched for ten thousand years as the gloomy castle rose around it. It smelled of moist earth and decay. No redwoods grew here. This was a wood of stubborn sentinel trees armored in grey-green needles, of mighty oaks, of ironwoods as old as the realm itself. Here thick black trunks crowded close together while twisted branches wove a dense canopy overhead and misshapen roots wrestled beneath the soil. This was a place of deep silence and brooding shadows, and the gods who lived here had no names (Martin 22).

If fantasy could produce writing that resonated with me like Martin's, then I wanted to try my hand at it, too.

But it is Martin's characters that influenced me most. In an earlier scene, the lord's second-youngest son, Bran, has just had the privilege to travel and see the lord's justice done, to see the beheading of a deserter. On the ride back Bran listens to his older brothers argue about how the prisoner handled his fear of the axe upon sentencing, how he faced his own death. Bran is quiet and contemplative and a bit confused as his brothers ride off and leave him to think about what he witnessed. Martin writes:

So deep in thought was he that he never heard the rest of the party until his father moved up to ride beside him.

“Are you well, Bran?” he asked, not unkindly.

“Yes father,” Bran told him. He looked up. Wrapped in his furs and leathers, mounted on his great warhorse, his lord father loomed over him like a giant. “Robb says the man died bravely, but Jon says he was afraid.”

“What do you think?” his father asked.

Bran thought about it. “Can a man still be brave if he's afraid?”

“That is the only time a man can be brave,” his father told him.

(Martin 16).

Even before I was accepted to Northern Michigan University graduate program, I was world-building. I had notebooks with sloppily rendered maps, lists of character names, ideas on religions and the names of gods, titles of towns and cities and small neighborhoods too. I created a set of rules for magic. But I did not have a solid idea where to start. I knew I wanted the freedom to control each character from the outside, yet I wanted my reader to get a feel for that character and spend time with him, to get to know him well before I shifted to another. I decided on a close third-person narrative perspective to free up the limiting aspects of a first-person narration. I also picked third person so I would have the ability to shift from one character to the other, aiding the plot and limiting what my reader would know and discover over time. I would need to hold back just enough to ramp up the suspense. I also wanted third-person for wiggle room. Quite often I will create a character on the fly, who sometimes takes over the scene in the chapter. These occurrences are never expected, but I do find them pleasurable. I chose my narrative perspective so I could adapt chapter to chapter and give a new character stage time if needed.

Next on my plate was deciding where to begin and how much time to give to each character. When I sat down and started writing, it soon became apparent that I wanted my reader to get to know my main characters and remain with them for quite a while as I both introduced the character and the world around him. It seemed best to break the book into three large parts. Part One would be from one boy's perspective. I could set up the tension of the situation, add in desires and fears, and bit by bit give the reader peeks at my fantasy world. I picked the more reserved and cautious boy of the two for the

introductory part of the novel, wanting gradually to build on events scene by scene and get my reader acquainted with my world just like the boy, Ozo.

Part Two would be the introduction of my other child character, throwing my child protagonist head-first into his new life. The boy in Part Two, Sami, is a more talkative and curious type, more apt to try and force himself to be included in fun and games and any adventures, as well as speak his mind without much thought toward the outcome. I felt that using him for Part Two of the book would pull my readers in as the tension and excitement in the story heats up. Having a more outward personality observing it all and describing it for us the reader would also increase reader interest. Sami can involve the reader in events because he can't stand to stand on the sidelines, whereas Ozo might hang back and simply watch events transpire.

By Part Three of the book the antagonists get much more attention. My main antagonist is Master Satesh. He is the man in charge of running the place called the Hovel, where Ozo and Sami find themselves living by chapter three. Peppered into various scenes will be the growing tension between Master Satesh and the children living at the Hovel over Master Satesh's unpredictable fits of violence. His rage, plus gradual loss of control, will increase as both the children he is in charge of watching rebel and pressures from his superiors push him over the edge. Master Satesh is a horror for Ozo and Sami, the biggest villain in my book. At first Master Satesh only threatens violence against Ozo and Sami, but as the boys learn and grow more comfortable in their new surroundings, they witness Master Satesh's sexual assaults on girls at the Hovel, and they realize the girls live with a different kind of horror. By the end of my novel Master Satesh attacks a girl named Rosha, one of the key players in my boy's tightly knit group of

friends. In revenge, Ozo kills Master Satish and everyone is forced to flee the Hovel. Afterward, Sami will burn down the Hovel, scattering the children throughout Balore. Ozo and Sami will reunite with the other child slaves and go their separate ways. Sami will leave with a traveling acrobat troop, and Ozo gets taken in by assassins at book's end. Future books will focus on their separate adventures.

A few more writers have had an influence on me. Robin Hobb's *The Farseer Trilogy*, beginning with the book *Assassin's Apprentice*, rang a chord with me. Her set of three consecutive trilogies follows a bastard growing up in the shadows of his royal family. There are other fringe characters within this family, and the one who takes the bastard main character under his wing both guards his full and legitimate siblings from the shadows and works as an assassin if need be. Hobb writes:

It's murder, more or less. Killing people. The fine art of diplomatic assassination. Or blinding, or deafening. Or weakening of the limbs, or paralysis or a debilitating cough or impotency. Or early senility, or insanity or . . . but it doesn't matter. It's all been my trade. And it will be yours... (Hobb 75).

Her take on espionage mixed with fantasy, with dragons and magic and the threat from the shadows mixed in, made for a great read. So she was high on my list of influences for this book. Another was Susan Cooper's *The Dark is Rising* series. From her books and mythos I took her grasp on how to describe the daily lives and communication between children. Susan Cooper also has a talent for mixing the amazing with the everyday. One minute there would be an argument at the dinner table during which the children are heatedly discussing the things only children worry about, and then the next ancient beings with god-like powers would pull the protagonist literally out of time. Glen Cook's *The Black Company*, about an organization of hired thugs, and an ancient and feared organization at that, lent itself well to what I wanted to do. I wanted multiple

underground organizations within my tale. I needed groups set outside normal society to reveal what average people never witness even in fantasy settings. There is also Fritz Leiber's classic *Fafhrd and the Grey Mouser* books. All these stories of thieves and con artists, of assassins and bastards, had bits and pieces that inspired Balore.

Many years have passed since I sat under that willow tree drawing pictures. My best friend now lives in Asia and has two beautiful daughters. One is old enough to ride a bike and loves to listen to stories. I watch her play and think about her father, my best friend, and how knowing him has changed me. He and I are in my book. We are Sami and Ozo, and so many parts of all the rest. My book is about terror and tragedy, magic and monsters, prophecy and fate, but it is also about friendship, and most importantly about love. Read closely and you can see us there.

Balore
The Jewel of the Mountain

Part One

Ozo

Chapter One

Death and Slavers

They stared at the dead boy. His eyes were open and he gazed out from a shadowy corner unblinking. His lips were dry and cracked and chalky white. The boy looked no older than ten, his black hair matted around a girlish face that still retained a slight plump of youth in the cheeks, roundness at the chin, and very long lashes. His head remained tilted up and back at an odd angle, like he had wanted to see the sky before he died.

Each boy was fastened to the bars of the cage by a collar and a length of chain. They sat in their own filth as the slavers' wagon rumbled over the uneven road. Occasionally a whip would crack against the outside of the bars to warn the children not to lean against the rusty metal, to keep their arms and reaching hands inside the cage. They had become used to lying on their sides to sleep when exhausted. They had become used to falling over when they needed to rest. Now one boy had fallen over and died.

Flies crawled over the dead boy's open-eyed, vacant gaze. The boy sitting next to Ozo pulled his own knees in and wrapped his arms tightly around his legs. He shuddered as if chilled, although sweat poured down his skin.

“You think it hurt?” the trembling boy asked everyone and no one.

Ozo stared at the flies crawling over the face of the dead boy, across his dry, cracked lips, into a nostril, into an ear canal and out, their little bodies collecting heavily around the mouth. “He never made a noise when he went, so I think it didn’t hurt.”

“Are we going to die like him?”

Ozo didn’t answer.

The sound of a whip snapped over their heads, and the boys jumped. An angry man with a greasy, braided black beard riding on a gray horse eased his mount up near the bars. He barked something in a language Ozo did not understand, cracked his whip again, and shook the handle at them. Ozo guessed the angry rant in his language meant to keep silent. The man was dressed in tattered leathers the color of mud and had a cudgel hanging from a hook on his hip, but it was the whip he best liked to use.

Ozo closed his eyes. The boy with many questions leaned against him under the hot sun. Ozo didn’t mind. They looked to be of the same age, ten harvest seasons and no more. The boy was frightened of death and being alone. Ozo was too. With the sun baking his dark skin hot, Ozo slept sitting upright with the other boy’s weight holding him in place and flies buzzing in his ear.

* * *

The sound of two boys fighting brought him awake. He opened his eyes and saw the two biting each other and pulling hair. One had a pheasant leg bone held out of reach, and the other boy clawed at him to get at it.

The men outside had gathered around to watch the boys wrestle. The slavers sometimes passed the time by throwing food through the bars, morsels and scraps, in order to cause them to fight. It made the slavers laugh. They gambled with fists full of

coins as they urged on one boy or the other. Once the fight ended, or the prize was given up or lost, the men would mumble and move off and the wagon would start moving again.

As his opponent bit down on a finger, the boy with the pheasant bone screamed. His scream grew in pitch, and suddenly the pheasant bone was free and fell to the floor of the wagon, splashing down in a puddle of piss. Another boy not in the battle snatched it up and rammed it in his mouth in one greedy, growling move. The boy with the torn finger lurched across at the new threat, only to have his metal collar bring him up short and snap his head back so abruptly that he hit his head on the bars behind him and was knocked unconscious. The men outside roared with laughter, exchanging bags of coin. One man patted the bars like the cage was a favorite pet that had done a new trick for his pleasure. He mumbled his approval at the unexpected winner of the pheasant bone and moved off out of sight, his boots crunching on gravel and kicking up dust.

“We shouldn’t fight each other.”

Ozo turned and looked at the boy next to him, the one who liked to talk and ask questions.

“All we have is each other now. My papa and brothers fought those men outside, and they died. We shouldn’t fight.”

Ozo didn’t say anything back to him, he just stared at the hills and the trees they traveled through. The land was growing hillier, and the sun was now on their left. It was getting hotter as well, and they had been on the move for days and days. Ozo inhaled the smell of humidity through the bars. He dragged it deep into his lungs and pictured himself running along in the shelter of trees outside the wagon, not chained to the inside

with the swelling dead boy. He pictured a whole pheasant, cooked and steaming. He pictured home.

* * *

It had been his job to take care of Coco and Tolo, to make sure they were treated as well as one of the children, and he didn't mind at all. The two dogs at times seemed to love him only. His eldest brother, Edeem, had long since married and moved from home, and his remaining two brothers, Olamesh and Elan, preferred to spend their time at the Three Branches on the shores of the Red River getting drunk when there wasn't work to be done. Since Ozo was the one left home the most, it was only natural that the dogs followed him. They loved his mama and papa too, but it was Ozo they ran the sheep for each day. His papa was both a shepherd and a woodsmith of late, and many of his works seemed to take more and more of his time away from the Barrows. Ozo didn't mind. He was happy to help his father. One day he'd be old enough to go to Three Branches himself, but until then he'd be content with watching Coco and Tolo run and bark and round up the bleating sheep. The two dogs made work look like play, one dog bumping against a stray sheep, edging it back into the herd, while the other dog barked orders. When the two dogs neared one another on the Barrows they would often nip at each other in their game and then hurry back to Ozo's side, tongues hanging out.

The day was nearing its end and the sun was sinking in the west when Ozo walked out to the dog pen, a low wide structure his brothers had built for the sheep dogs. If the weather grew too frightful, they would bring Coco and Tolo inside the house for

warmth, but most of the year the dogs called the squat gray structure home. Since Ozo was a small boy, he'd often nap within the pen's cool shadows next to his dogs, at least until his mama would come calling.

Ozo moved across the yard and gazed at the hilly Barrows. The green hills looked like beasts sleeping beneath the ground, great round backed things with tall witch grass growing on them as they slumbered. Sometimes he'd imagine some great giant waking and breaking free of the soil to stand and roar in the Barrows. He'd stand and fight it with a sword and an axe when it woke. He'd run and meet the monster head on, but then all around him earth would tremble. The Barrows would begin to crack and shift, soil slipping and falling, and giant after giant would stand and stretch and roar in rage down at Ozo. He'd fight them all!

To the north was the line of trees where the Blackwood Forest began and the Barrows ended, where last harvest season he and his brothers had come across the carcass of a retaku dragon. Ozo had been fascinated by the sight, but Onall laughed and said the dragon was only a baby. Probably it had gotten lost in the forest. The retaku dragons were mostly found on the Sea of Red Grass, so how a baby got all the way through the woods almost to the Barrows was a mystery. Still Ozo was amazed at the wide head with its three rows of teeth. The biggest tooth was as long as an arrowhead. Flies crawled over dull green eyes, and its dry tongue hung gray out of its mouth. Ozo had felt sad for the baby dragon. It wasn't even as big as Tolo, and Tolo was heavier than Ozo.

To the east and out of sight was the Red River. Ozo inhaled deeply but could not catch its scent. Sometimes he could smell its waters on the breeze.

Now Coco and Tolo ran circles around him as he made his way to the dog house. They were as eager for him to crawl inside and nap as he was to do so. The sun cast long shadows along the ground as he made his way. The chickens clucked behind him under the house, and the sheep shuffled off beyond their fencing. Another day done with only an hour or two to wait until dinner. Ozo and the dogs put the sheep back in their place, emptied the slop for the hogs, fed the chickens and repaired the hinge on the gate to the hog's pen for a third time this month. Chores completed, he had enough time to catch a nap before dinner.

He got down on his knees and started to crawl in the dog pen when Coco bumped him and moved in first. Both dogs had a habit of bumping Ozo in the side like they did sheep in the field, trying to move him this way and that.

“Coco, stop herding me, I'm not a sheep.”

Tolo ran past into the pen and bumped Ozo on the other side, making his way over to lay claim to his favorite corner to sleep.

“What did I just tell your sister?”

Tolo turned around twice plopped down and lobbed his tongue out happily.

Ozo sighed, leaned his head against the inside of the kennel, and crossed his legs. He took out his pouch and examined the rocks he had found in the field. Any time he found an interesting rock along the ground he'd pick it up and put it in his pouch for later examination. He had good finds down in the leather bag this time. One stone sparkled with pink quartz in the dim light after he licked his fingers and rubbed the dirt away. Another rock had a shell design imbedded on one side. The shell was a spiral, and Ozo traced it with his finger. One ledge inside the pen by his shoulder was dedicated to his

geological discoveries. They were safe in the dog pen. His older brothers would take them for sling ammunition if Ozo kept the rocks inside the house, but they wouldn't crawl inside with the dogs anymore. Ozo placed his new finds next to the others on the ledge and admired them. Soon he settled back against the wooden wall and dozed off to sleep.

Shouts and strange voices woke him. Tolo's bass growl caused Ozo to sit upright, blinking. Something smashed. Tolo lunged out of the pen in a flash of brown fur. Coco was tensed and nervous but remained by his side, an upraised line of fur in a thin ridge between her shoulder blades. She growled at the arched opening and kept her body in front of Ozo, protecting him. Ozo crawled quickly to the opening of the dog pen and looked out at the chaos that had come over the Barrows while he slept with the dogs. Coco growled at him, trying to get him to stay inside with her.

“Stop that, Coco! Let me see, girl.”

Men dressed in tattered leathers and dirty homespun material moved through the field. Several stood back next to a long, barred wagon filled with chained boys and fired flaming arrows into his home. Sheep ran free in the gloom, bleating loudly on the nearby hills. Their fence had been knocked over, and the strangers were chasing sheep as fire engulfed his home. Ozo watched jet-black smoke roll out the doorway. Fire crawled up the walls.

Tolo had one of the strangers by the forearm, his jaws clamped down, and he jerked and twisted the stocky man along in the yard. The man wailed like a woman in pain. Another man walked up and pinned Tolo to the ground with a rusty rake. Tolo yelped and struggled, his scream sounding so shrill Ozo's eyes teared and his vision

blured. Tolo flopped on his side like a fish several times more trying to get free, his blood pooling around him and the rake, and then he grew still.

Ozo's two brothers were dead in the yard. Olamesh lay face down, three arrows in his back. Elan was missing an arm, an arrow protruding from his back. His blood had spilled out across the dry soil and looked black. Both had fallen as they ran toward home. Ozo's father was sitting upright against the side of the hog fence, his severed head in his own lap at a sideways angle. His father looked surprised and a little angry as he looked at his property. A man with a curved sword stooped down to use Papa's shirt to clean his blade of gore.

Ozo couldn't breathe. He backed to the back of the dog pen as men smashed things inside his home. They moved in and out of the black smoke pouring out the door, arms full of his family's belongings - silverware, copperware, his mother's trinkets and jewels. Inside his mother screamed and screamed and then suddenly ceased with a terrible gurgling finality.

Coco shifted next to him, her body rippling with nervous muscle, and she bared her teeth and ran outside to attack the men. Ozo began to shake when her growl ended in an abrupt shriek of pain. His air wheezed in and out of him.

Foreign voices were outside the dog house, tall legs moving, boots crunching on the dry ground. They said odd-sounding words to each other. Ozo looked down at the ground where they stepped and shifted and could see where the illumination from the fading sunlight ended and the safety of the darkness began. He tried to scoot deeper into the wall of the doghouse, away from the voices and the light. A clear line separated each. There was a border between dark and light. He blinked at it. Had it always been there?

Had it always been so distinguishable and easy to discern the border of extremes? And then hands reached into the shadows toward him.

* * *

Three days later another boy fell over and died.

He was chained up against the back of the driver's seat, under the over hanging rider's bench and out of the sunlight, but it didn't matter. It happened right in the middle of the day, not at night like it had with the first boy, so everyone heard him die. It sounded like it hurt. It sounded like it hurt very badly indeed. The boy had been hunched over for hours, but that was never much of an issue. Could be he was sleeping or almost sleeping, or just feeling his bad thoughts like Ozo did sometimes. But when he started making a gurgling, bubbly noise with his mouth, the boys nearest him tried to scoot away in fear, their expressions wary, like the gagging was a sickness that might spread. The gurgling noise grew louder, and his bony body started to rattle and bang against the back of the wagon, hitting the back wall behind the driver. The gurgling turned to a wet wheeze, and the boy clawed at the skin of his throat like he was choking. His face was so dark it looked like it was turning purple or black. His eyes bulged as spittle slithered out from between his dry lips, and he slammed hard once more against the back wall of the wagon, flopping over on his side with his huge unblinking black eyes looking at all of them.

A boy near the dead one started wailing. He looked like a shorter version of the boy who had fallen, less length in limb and less bulk in muscle mass, but he had the same

head of tight, black curly hair, the same squinting left eye, and his mouth and chin were slightly girlish. The sound seemed to build and erupt from a deep place down inside. Ozo wondered if they were family. The boy pulled at his own collar, banged against the bars and tried to reach the other boy who had died, but his chain would not extend that far. His wail turned to a scream, and he reached out as far as the chain would go, stretching his thin arms for the fallen brother.

Suddenly the cage stopped and all the boys slid forward. The back door of the cage banged open and a man with a braided brown beard thrust a hooked spear into the wagon in between them all. He poked both dead boys, then grunted something loudly in his language to the other slavers outside. He pointed and gestured, and then a smaller man with a belt fastened with numerous pouches jumped up inside among them. He moved imp-like down the line of boys, making eye contact with no one. He had a dull and tarnished set of keys on a ring. He unlocked the collars of the two dead boys and then jumped back out of the cage, but not before hissing something at a boy who grabbed at him as he crab-walked past. He slammed his fist into the boy's neck to get him to stay back. The boy gagged and clutched his throat and lowered his head in pain.

The fat man with the hooked spear jutted his weapon in among the boys again. He hooked the bloated dead boy, the one who had been in between them for three days. The hook of the spear punctured the extended swollen stomach of the corpse, letting the air escape. It made a wet, flatulent sound. The hook tore deep into the abdomen, and the man yanked the dead boy out and let him drop onto the rocky road behind the wagon. He pushed the boy's corpse out of the way with his foot, stepped up on the back of the cage and reached in, leaning over far with the spear to hook the newest deceased. He missed

the first time, swore, and then tried again. His second attempt was successful. The hook snagged the boy in the armpit, and the man started to drag him out. As the body went by, the other boy, the one who had been crying, reached out and grabbed at both corpse and spear. The man yelled a warning as the boy went into a frenzy. He pulled and pulled at the hooked spear, trying to free it from the fallen. He strained at his collar and growled and hissed like an animal. The hooked spear broke free of the dead boy's armpit, and the blade ricocheted up and sliced through the crazed boy's face from chin to eyebrow. He fell back and covered his face with dripping red hands. The man laughed. He reached in a final time, hooked the dead boy and pulled him out from their midst.

The last thing Ozo saw were two of the men from outside grabbing the legs and arms of each corpse and throwing the two dead boys over the hillside. The men talked happily to each other as they performed their duty. They seemed like friends. The weeds bobbed down and sprang back up as the dead boy rolled over the top of them and disappeared from sight down the hill. Ozo wondered if they all would die before they reached their destination.

* * *

"Look, mountains!" said the boy next to Ozo, the talkative one.

Ozo turned his head and saw mountains off in the distance as the road curved sharply to the right. They were various shades of purple and gray.

Ozo turned and looked from the mountains to the other boy. He had light brown skin, black hair. His cheek bones stood out on his thin face. He had big brown eyes that

were bloodshot, and there was a thin, bruised scab at the edge of his lip. Ozo blinked at him for a few seconds. The boy looked frightened and worn down, like he hadn't slept in days.

"I'm Ozo. What's your name?"

"Sami. Are you from Red Rivers?"

"No. I'm from Barrow Reach."

"Really? Isn't that a haunted place? My grandma always told us things eat children at Barrow Reach," Sami said.

Ozo thought about that for a minute. "There are no ghosts, if that's what she meant."

"Ghosts and wights and three-eyed witches. They all haunt Barrow Reach, according to my grandma." Sami scratched at his dirty hair.

Ozo laughed. For the first time in days, he laughed. "I've never seen anything like that."

Sami said, "Well, haunted or not, it's probably more interesting than where I'm from. I bet it is much better to grow up there than boring Red Rivers."

Ozo said, "We won't be growing up there. We won't be growing up at either of those places now."

Several of the other boys chained near them looked up at that. Everyone stared at Ozo as the wagon bumped and rattled along. Somewhere in the distance a hawk cried.

* * *

After the second boy died, the boys started calling each other by the names of their homes instead of their birth names. They were Maleon Down, and Big Pike and Little Pike, since they were brothers. There was another Red Rivers in the slavers' wagon with them. There was a Kulnoor, which was a small place that was the last the slavers had raided. There was a Hog Hill, and a Craggy Point, but everyone liked to just call him Crag. The two oldest boys were both from the main city of Kellington and were friends from home, but one lived by a place called Near Rock that was named for a great rock formation there. Near Rock jutted out of the Red River like a giant's thumb, so they decided to call him that instead. Only Sami and Ozo knew each other's real names. The other boys all called them Barrow Reach and Red Rivers after their home towns, too. There was a Pinestone, and the boy with the wounded face, the one who had gone wild (it was his brother who had died) was from Upper Blackwood where the ancient forest met the Sea of Red Grass. Blackwood's wound was oozing yellow pus, and he looked pale and sweaty. The cut ran from eyebrow to chin in a curving line. The skin around it turned purple and black with a little yellow discharge running from it. Ozo looked at him and then around at all the others. Counting himself there were thirteen inside the cage, thirteen boys chained by the neck to a rusty bar.

The slavers moved along outside all around them as they went on their way, some on horses, and others on foot. Ozo counted close to thirty men. The wagon was at the back of the train, so it was difficult to count exact numbers of the slavers outside.

The days edged on.

* * *

Two days later, two things happened simultaneously. Blackwood fell over and wouldn't respond to anyone who poked him, and the men driving the wagon started cheering.

Blackwood had been mumbling and jerking his head back and forth in feverish delirium, curled up on the bottom of the cage. Little Pike was doing his best to tend him and try and get him to wake up, to answer him when the men outside erupted in cheers and catcalls. The men outside, walking on foot or riding on horseback, looked ahead and began cheering and whistling at what they saw. Ozo and the other boys tried to peer around the high rock face that the wagon skirted, tried to see through their bars by mashing their faces up against the metal. Ozo jumped from the commotion. They all did. And then the wagon cleared the tall, looming rock face and came out on a road overlooking a wide plain.

The plain stretched on and on, ending in the dark wall of a jungle forest, but beyond the forest, perched up high and far away, was the biggest city Ozo had ever seen. Buildings crept all the way up the distant mountainside. The structures crunched in one atop the other in a chaotic jumble of rings on three squat mountains. Ozo could see dark lines in between buildings and wondered what they were. Might they be roads? He was not sure what they were, but they criss-crossed in between the buildings all the way up and down the mountains.

Was this their destination? Had they finally arrived?

All the boys were wide-eyed as they took in the sight of the great city in the distance. A brown fog hung over every structure save for the highest and largest at the top of the mountains, and behind those structures, imbedded in the very cliffs themselves,

Ozo spied towers. They loomed highest of all, even higher than the wide palace built on top of the entire sprawling chaos along the largest mountain's face. Pouring from the bottom center of the palace was a waterfall. It looked like a wide white line from their distance, cutting the entire upper city in two.

Sami voiced all their thoughts. "Is that where we're going?"

Ozo said, "Yes."

"They mean to sell us there, don't they?" asked Kellington.

Ozo didn't say anything to that. He looked quickly from Kellington and back to the city on the horizon. He had never seen anything like it. He didn't think anything so large and grand existed. Barrow Reach was a patchwork of farms, a small hold with a few trading shacks and shops at the edge of Red River. He had been to the town Red Rivers and Maleon Down, but even the tales of the nearby city of Kellington didn't sound as grand or as amazing as the city ahead.

The men were opening bottles outside the wagon and handing them around to one another, and they talked to each other with animated excitement while within the wagon Blackwood rocked his head back in forth and breathed in and out in painful shudders.

Little Pike said, "I think Blackwood is going to die."

Ozo looked at the boy in their midst. Blackwood's cut looked terrible. The wound had caked over in a black crust, and pus oozed down the side of his face as he mumbled in the grip of his fever. His black hair was wet from sweat, his face ashen.

"Maybe we should get their attention?"

“No!” said Maleon Down. He sat across from Blackwood, down the line of them all. “What if they just drag him out by that hook? What if they leave him to die or push him off into the weeds like his brother or that other one? Blackwood is my friend.”

“But if he is dying?” said Sami.

Ozo said, “They’re happy now. They seem excited about that city up ahead. I think we’re near the place they’re taking us, so maybe they’ll be nice this time?”

“They are never nice! Are you stupid?” said Near Rock. “We’re just like sheep in here. They just mean to sell us at that place up there. You know it’s true, Barrows Boy!”

Near Rock was older, and his harsh words made Ozo’s eyes water and his face feel hot in embarrassment.

“All the more reason to help Blackwood,” said Kellington.

Kellington was as old as Near Rock. His words took the anger out of the other boy, who acquiesced.

Sami was the one to take action. He banged on the bars beside Ozo’s head. “We need help. Blackwood is sick.”

The man who watched them the most, the one with greasy braids in his beard, urged his horse over and said something down to Sami. He had a bottle in his hand and he gestured with it as he spoke. Sami pointed up at Blackwood. He said, “He’s hurt.”

The man followed Sami’s pointing finger. His eyes widened and he yelled out a halt to the wagon driver.

The cage door opened, and then the same small man from before jumped in among them, his heavy pouch-laden belt jingling. He shuffled up to Blackwood in his imp-like way and moved Blackwood’s head back and forth, mumbling. He took out a

knife. Little Pike inhaled in surprise and grabbed at the small man. The small man yelled in his language, pulled his hand free, and then backhanded Little Pike across the face. Little Pike fell back and favored his bleeding cheek, and then Big Pike started to move, but the small man threatened him with the knife and blurted out something and pointed down at Blackwood.

“I think he only wants to help him,” said Kellington.

With knife in hand, the small man scraped at the surface of Blackwood’s wound. The crust that had formed broke free as the blade slid over it. He scraped several times. The wound shone red and then pink in the gloom within the slavers’ cage. After freeing the wound of the crust that had formed there, he took a rag and wiped at the pus, mumbling something in his own language. When blood ran clear from the wound, the man took out a jar from one of his many pouches and untied the top, removing the leather covering. Ozo saw a deep green blob of paste on his fingertips. The small man wiped Blackwood’s wound with it, and then spoke to the man outside. Water was handed up to him. He cradled Blackwood’s head and tried to get him to drink.

“He’s helping,” whispered Sami.

The small man jumped out. Looking up at the man with the braided beard, the small man spoke very quietly. Ozo could hear the threat in his voice as he spoke even if he did not know the tongue. He backhanded the other man. He went on gesturing at the darkness of their cage, whispering a threat, and then he walked away.

The man stared at the ground after the smaller man moved off, his dirty beard glistening in the sun. And then he looked up at all the boys watching him. The look of

hate on the man's face made Ozo wish they were already where they needed to go. It made him wish he hadn't been looking at all.

The man cracked his whip and hissed out a sentence, and the wagon lurched forward once again.

Blackwood slept.

He still looked sick, save for the green mush smeared on his face. Ozo hoped he would live. He hoped they all would live to see the city up ahead, the grand city on the mountainside.

* * *

The wagon rolled along another day and still they had not reached their destination. How big was the city if you could see it an entire day before you arrived there? It was hard for him to understand. Kellington and Near Rock tried to explain it to him. If something is really big and massive, it is even more so close to it. Being able to see the entire city in the mountains far away meant that it was even bigger once you made it there and went inside.

"I think we'll be there by tomorrow," Sami said.

"I think so too," said Big Pike. "See how wide the road is now?"

Ozo turned around. Big Pike was correct; the road had become wide enough for four wagons to ride side by side.

They had moved through half a dozen villages since the incident with Blackwood and his fever, and it seemed the closer they rode toward the city in the mountains, the

more people they passed. There were also stone buildings with many soldiers within them along the side of the road. The structures were round towers placed on each side of the wide road they traveled, and they had grown in frequency as the wagon passed. The uniform worn by the soldiers who manned the squat towers were blue and gray, with a cloud insignia on the left breast. The soldiers watched warily as everyone moved by on the road. Ozo spied men with bows on their backs and others clutching long spears. They were grouped in sets of four, two of each type, looking out over the tops of the squat towers. When Ozo and the others passed between a third set of squat towers inside half a day, Ozo saw men looking out from open doors at the base. These men wore swords, and they kept a hand resting on the hilt, looking at everyone moving on the road.

“What do you think they’re looking for?” asked Sami.

No one answered. All the boys were taking in the view from in between the bars of their cage.

Ozo smelled the city.

It suddenly blotted out the dusty smell of the road, the verdant scent of jungle forest and trees, the biting awfulness within the wagon. It was the smell of a thousand cooking fires. It was the smell of oil lamps and coal, and mixed in with it the aroma of meat roasting, fish frying, the pungent scent of a dozen types of spices. It was the odor of teeming human life. They were very near the city.

“Someone is cooking lamb,” said Big Pike.

It was true. The roasting lamb meat on the wind made his stomach growl. He put his face in between the bars of the cage, closed his eyes and inhaled deeply.

Ozo tried to spy out where they were, but everything was blocked by vine-choked trees on his side of the wagon. All he could see was the trampled ground they rode on.

“Can anyone see the city from that side?” he asked.

Kellington and Little Pike leaned against the bars and peered through, but the line of trees was even closer on their side of the cage.

“Just trees,” said Little Pike.

“I think the trees end up ahead,” said Kellington. He leaned back and twisted his head to try and get a better view. “It looks like the edge of a field, maybe a prairie.”

Ozo turned away from them and put his face up to the bars on his side of the cage once again. He closed his eyes and let the smells in. He was so hungry! And then he could hear the city.

Voices.

Voices like the roar of wind or the hum of far-off rain. Music filtered in too. The sea of voices peeled back, and he could hear the chime of bells, the ringing out of horns and string instruments. He could hear laughter. Finally he had a clear view of the city from his side of the wagon as they moved out from the copse of trees.

The city had spilled out of its walls.

A land-locked ocean of tents and caravan wagons sprawled off into the distance, reaching the very walls of the city itself. There were people walking and moving about everywhere, more than Ozo thought existed on earth. The tents ranged in size and design. Some were taller than the highest temple he had ever been in; others were just big enough for one man to use for sleeping. The smaller tents looked like little dots. Some of the tents were square like a building made of cloth, while others had outrageous peaks and

curves. Some of the tents were done in one bright color of red or blue, pale emerald or yellow. Others were created to depict scenes from what might be far-off homes. He saw mountain ranges sewn onto the canvas of one large, looming tent near the edge of the caravan city. He saw another that had its side decorated with beads, streamers, and kites. They flapped in the humid wind with promises of wonders inside the tent's shadowy interior.

“That one is looking right at us!” declared Maleon Down.

One domed tent had two red and watching eyes sewn into its cloth. As the wagon moved along the road, it did seem to watch them.

Far off to the east of the city was a brown river that disappeared beneath the stone walls of the city.

Ozo could not see the city in its entirety now that they were so near. The walls surrounding it were of a rust-red stone, and each stone looked bigger than the caged wagon the boys rode in. Up and above the walls the buildings were built one atop the other. Many of the nearest and lowest had black shadowy windows hung with laundry flapping in the wind. The lower buildings looked battered and old, but the higher up the mountain, the more amazing and beautiful the buildings were in size and architecture. He saw buildings with onion domes on top that shone silver and gold. He could see buildings made entirely of green or blue stone, others with connecting bridges in a complex lattice work that shone ivory, onyx, crimson, jade, and gold. He could see the edge of what looked like another tall protective wall higher up. It looked like it was made of the same rust-red stone as the wall across the plain, but it had more tall buildings, towers, and

battlements placed intermittently up and down its expanse, more spiked watch towers that looked like bloody fangs pointing toward the sun.

The wagon slowed. Ozo sat up and grabbed at the bars. He saw the slavers in their train as they made a wide and lazy turn toward the tents, men both walking and on horses moved ahead of them. He counted thirty in all. The horse of every riding man was loaded down, and the men walking looked tired.

People moved up and down the trampled earthen paths in the thousands. Merchants hawked their wares and yelled out in a dozen languages at anyone who slowed, pointing at their own merchandise. Each table had a worker who would come around and try to grab at passersby to get them to stop and see what was on display. Some stopped with interest, while others waved away the pestering salesmen. The people passing by occasionally would peek in at the boys as their wagon crept through the teeming mass. Most would avert their eyes as if ashamed once they realized what they saw within.

As they rode toward the heart of the tents, he saw all types of people. The majority had the same brown skin and black hair as Ozo and the others in the cage, the same as that of the slavers too, but many other kinds of people moved in the crowd, fair-skinned people with golden hair and blue eyes; a group of men so dark they looked like they were made of night. The colors of their clothes were vibrant, and they looked very rich; every finger was adorned with more than one precious ring. There were people with hair the color of fire, and others who had long tresses that shone silver and violet. Their faces were long and solemn, their legs and arms lithe. Ozo saw a woman who had pictures tattooed all over her body, even on her face. She regarded them and then held up

her hands palms out. She was painted there, too; one palm showed the yellow sun and the other a black and white moon, and when she blinked, her eyelids were inked in another set of eyes. All the boys were paralyzed with fascination and curiosity.

The wagon curved out away from the smaller tents into a central area of larger tents. In the middle of these sat a central courtyard. In the midst of the largest tents were dozens of caged animals. There were giant striped cats with front upper fangs as long as Ozo's arm. There were horses and zebras. There was a hairy elephant with tusks as long as a boat. There were big black cats and a giant brown bear wearing a spiked collar. Ozo absentmindedly thumbed his own collar as he watched the bear pacing back and forth. Then there was an animal whose neck was as tall as a tree. It was jet black, and atop its head, way up high, were two spiral horns. On each horn was hung a bell, which chimed and rang as the creature gently stepped by the boys inside the slavers' wagon. Ozo and the others let out excited gasps as the tall creature dipped its head low and sniffed down at them, its huge brown eyes seeking them out in their chained and filthy darkness. A man with a long braided stalk of grass gently tapped the beast on the backside. The tall creature snorted and raised its head and lifted skyward its great neck, and he and his keeper moved on their way.

Ozo jumped as one of the giant cats let out a ground-rumbling roar. He looked over and saw a man teasing it with a bloody carcass on a long spear. The giant cat, hair as golden in color as wheat, swiped the meat off the spear to cheers from the onlookers. The man teasing the animal turned and bowed like he was the one they found amazing.

The wagon turned and made its way down a new dirt path. Cooking fires were all around. Large fire pits held entire lamb carcasses roasting on spits. Another pit had four

pigs twisting on one long spit. Another had what looked like dog roasting. Vegetables stewed in giant vats, perfuming the air with spices. Wooden racks with hanging roasted fowl, others with red and spicy-smelling giant grasshoppers impaled on dripping red skewers. Another had turtles wiggling on sticks. Placed in front of the struggling turtles was a big round pot of boiling water. It smelled of basil, rosemary, and garlic. They passed eleven different fruit stands and just as many selling vegetables, the produce shining in the sunlight, and only a few feet from the bars of Ozo's prison. Another long table had several dozen types of fish resting in salt, the crystals of the salt and scales of the fish both reflecting sunlight.

A half-chewed mango suddenly splashed down in between the boys. It had landed in their excrement, and no one made a move to grab it. Several boys outside the wagon and running alongside it said something in a strange tongue, banged against the outside of the bars, and then one of the free boys threw in another mango, this one whole and untouched. All the boys inside the slavers wagon looked up at each other. And then a loaf of bread landed inside the wagon from the other side.

Sami whispered, "Look at that."

Voices outside started chanting something over and over, something that sounded like a song. Suddenly food of all sorts started landing in the cage. Pieces of half-eaten fowl, chunks of venison and pig, apples, pears, and all types of fish were being thrown by the people chanting outside. The expressions on the peoples' faces seemed to show that what they were doing was part pity and part game. They had smiles on their faces as they threw all sorts of things to eat, and their gestures urged the boys on, wanting them to partake in the gifts.

The boys inside the cage came alive.

Ozo bit into first an apple and then a piece of roast lamb. Kellington had bread in one hand and a dripping chicken carcass in the other. When the people outside saw them eating, they began to cheer and dance. The slavers driving the wagon laughed, joined in, and sang the same chant along with the caravan folk as they tried to keep moving their human merchandise through the dense crowd.

“Maybe we got here during a festival?” said Maleon Down. He had chunks of roast pork in each hand.

Ozo nodded his head and continued to eat.

Soon the commotion ended. The boys had enough food among them to feast on, and they hardly noticed or looked outside as they ate. They had enough to share and trade. Sami handed Ozo half a pomegranate. He took it and then put a whole loaf of bread in Sami’s lap. Sami laughed.

“I have never tasted food this good,” said Sami.

The boys continued to devour their odd offerings. It crossed Ozo’s mind that they had grabbed food off the dirty floor of the wagon much as the giant golden-colored cat had off the spear. The people had cheered then, too.

Sami grabbed Ozo by the arm hard enough to cause him to wince.

“Look! Look!”

Over in another wide open patch of ground people were sitting on the earth in a wide circle. At the center of the onlookers men and women were running and leaping over one another. As each would leap, they would twist -- one, two, and three times in the air in somersaults and land on their feet. They made a great show of it.

They ran and formed a line. After each acrobat took his turn leaping the person before them in line, they would stop quickly and crouch down next to the last one to make a jump. By doing so they created a longer and longer line of bodies for the next person in line to leap.

A small man with a shaved and shining head ran up next. He had eleven people to leap. He stumbled to an exaggerated halt directly before the last man to crouch down, receiving guffaws from the sitting circle of onlookers. The man ran backwards in a clumsy fashion that got more laughter, and then turned at the last minute and ran once again toward the waiting eleven. Along the way he flipped forward three times, and then when it looked like he was going to do a fourth flip, he used his forward momentum to launch off the back of the first crouched man and vault high into the air. The audience clapped and whistled as the little man sprang twenty and then thirty and then forty feet up and away. It seemed he could fly, it seemed like magic, and Ozo blinked rapidly at the sight. And then the man landed, knees bent to take the impact, and he flung his arms wide in triumph. The crowd stood and cheered.

“I want to learn how to do that,” Sami said. He had his head pressed so hard against the bars of the cage that he had red lines on his face when he leaned back. “I want to jump and fly like that.”

Wherever they were being taken, it probably wouldn't be anywhere to learn something as amazing as what Sami watched through the bars of the cage.

Ozo said, “It probably takes a long time to learn how to do that.”

“I don't care how long it takes. I want to be out there with them.”

They did look grand. Each acrobat had on matching clothes of red and silver. The men had on tall black boots, and the women wore a version of the same, but only up above the ankle and very delicate. The women also were adorned in short silver capes that flipped in the hot wind as they stood and took a bow.

The wagon cut rightward, and the acrobat show vanished from sight. The long edge of the rust-red walls of the great city stretched out to left and right and curved out of sight. They were nearing the gate and leaving all the wonders within the tents and wagons behind them. Ozo swallowed saliva, inhaled a breath and gripped the cold metal of the bars in his sweaty young hands.

* * *

It took a long time to get inside the city. Each wagon was being inspected, and the slavers had to wait their turn in the queue. The sun was beginning to sink in the west before the wagon slid under the great gate and in between three adjacent walls, one built close to the next. When the wagon ducked underneath the first of three looming gates, Ozo saw that in between each wall was a void as wide as a roadway. Soldiers walked to and fro within the empty spaces in groups of six. The men each carried cudgels on their belts and swords at their hips. Just like the soldiers he had seen previously, these wore the same uniform of blue and gray.

The second void, the one in between the second and third protective wall, was paved with worn stones. Also visible were the front facades of barracks and the entryways to two watch towers. Horses and carriages and siege engines of war were

arrayed up and down the second inner void, and many soldiers went about their business as the boys waited to be let into the great city.

Finally the wagon moved. With barricades placed on both sides of the final gate, the space to enter and exit the city narrowed. He wondered how it would look without the barricade, without all the soldiers nervously moving about. He wondered why the barricade was there at all.

Soldiers looked over the slavers in their group and then inspected all their crates and anything on their horses. They moved to the back of the train and peered inside the bars at Ozo and the boys. It was a rushed affair, the soldiers barely giving more than a cursory glance at each boy, and soon they jerked forward and moved into the city.

The slavers led the wagon east, the sun sinking behind them. The road was wide enough in between the shabby buildings on the left and the river on the right for six or seven wagons placed side by side. They passed low, crumbling tenement buildings and dark taverns. They moved by a low building with many women standing around out front. Ozo was fascinated with the clothes the women wore. They had on bright colors of reds, pinks, blues, and pale greens. The setting sun made the women glow. They waved and blew kisses. Ozo waved back, his hand barely moving up and down. He felt foolish when he realized it was really the slavers the women greeted in passing, although a few laughed when they saw the slave boys waving too. One woman crouched down at their level from her stoop and waved into the passing cage. Another bared her breasts for them. All the women along the porch laughed.

They continued on, the road curving and following the edge of the waterfront. Sailors loaded and unloaded docked ships, their backs glistening with sweat as they

heaved crates and barrels and handed off massive burlap sacks in a line to pile on waiting flatbed carriages, their horses and mules snorting in the setting sun. To the left they passed crumbling temples, facades weather worn, walls covered in prancing gods and goddesses in embarrassing poses. Ozo realized that whatever part of the city they were now entering wasn't a good part. Suddenly the buildings and the people all looked hard and angry. The clothes on the men and women were thrown-together rags, pieces of leather, thin and billowing tan shirts, cheap sandals. The buildings were worse. They looked ancient and half in ruin. People sat in widows and stared out over the river doing nothing. Others sat whispering with neighbors in the façade next to them in their angry rushed language. And everywhere soldiers walked in groups of four.

The people glared at the soldiers' backs after they passed by. There were also a group of men who were not soldiers moving together down the avenue. They wore robes orange in color, and their heads were tattooed with symbols that Ozo didn't recognize. The pedestrians gave the robed men a wide berth, and so did the soldiers. He saw a woman make some kind of hand sign and toss down something and step on it after the robed men went past her. She made another hand sign toward the sky and vanished from her doorway. The robed men continued down the avenue, oblivious to the reaction of the crowd they parted as they walked. People would avert their eyes quickly, duck their heads and even move to the opposite side of the street in order to avoid the figures. Ozo wondered who they were to instill such fear.

The road curved left, the protective wall ended, and the river opened up before him. At its edge was a dock stretching off in the distance, and ships of a dozen types, all shapes and sizes were docked. He saw rowing barges with two dozen oars fastened up

next to the ribs of the boats like drawn-in centipede legs. He saw wide pleasure barges with lamps and bells rocking in the breeze.

Ozo looked out the bars on the other side of the cage and saw dead men hanging from wooden crosses and ropes. The other boys in the cage noticed too. Little Pike and Maleon Down screamed. Some were dead with their eyeless heads facing up at the sky. Others were upside down, their hair hanging like filthy mops. Gulls and crows flapped lazily around them. Ozo watched a crow land on the bare and bloody foot of one upside-down man. The bird pulled at the corpse's small toe, trying to rip free the treat.

The wagon bumped along and the sounds of a man screaming on the platform made Ozo inhale in terror. He watched a man being tied to one of the crosses on the long platform. The man screamed and jabbered as the men first tied his hands around the wrists to the cross beam, and then hammered spikes through both his knees and into the top of each foot. His cross was a wide X-shape, and after he was nailed to it spread eagle, four men walked it upright on the high platform, giving the doomed man a view of the docked ships and wide flowing river.

Next to the crucified man a brick building the color of dried blood sat in the setting crimson sun, its shadow like a long spike reaching toward the river. There were a series of wooden pens and a tall platform attached on the side nearest the hanged men. One man was being dragged out of the farthest pen. He was held by two men in threadbare red and gray uniforms, and he pulled and jabbered in his language as the men yanked him toward the crosses. One side of the prisoner's face was wet with blood, and his left ankle was broken. As the men dragged him along the useless foot bounced and

scraped over the stones with the toes pointing back the wrong way. The man began to scream, and Ozo looked away.

Men waited outside the red building, milling about. They looked up and saw the slavers moving toward them, waved a happy greeting and came forward to meet them. One man held a severed head by its bloody brown hair. He danced it in the setting sun as he came near, making a funny sound like he was talking for it, like it was his puppet, and the slavers laughed. The other men looked into the cage, eager and excited, and one man rubbed his hands back and forth in anticipation. Were they being led to the crosses? Would they break the boys' ankles too? One man suddenly pushed his face up against the bars of their cage and made kissing noises. He was missing all of his teeth and his left eye was gone, the gaping socket black. The scar around the missing eye looked like it had been raked by half a dozen tiny blades, the puffy lines running diagonal across his cheek and nose. He laughed and reached in and pulled on Little Pike's hair, and the boy screamed. The sound of the hinge on their cage door echoed Little Pike's wail as it opened. The boys had reached their destination.

Chapter Two

Bought and Sold

The wagon stopped. The slavers who had traveled with them, who had taken them from their homes, yanked open the back of the cage and began lifting each boy out. The same small man who had tended Blackwood's wounded face jumped in and quickly began unlocking collars, moving down the line hunched over like an imp. He started at the back by the cage door and worked his way in. A collar clicked open and dropped free. They took Little Pike toward the red brick structure at the river's edge. Ozo was next. The slavers unlocked his collar and pulled it apart, and he felt air on the skin of his throat for the first time in weeks. The breeze made his open sores sting, made the sensitive raw flesh burn. With the heavy metal collar gone, things felt light and wonderful. He focused on the man carrying him.

The man had skin the color of night, but unlike the dark men Ozo had seen back among the carnival tents, the man carrying him wore no jewels and was not dressed for wealth. He was strong, though, and Ozo felt like a baby in his arms, being carried off into a shadowy hallway beneath the roof of the red building. The man had a scar that went

around his entire neck, the flesh pale and puffy, like his head had been reattached to his body.

The hallway they entered was long and curved, paved with dark gray stone, cooler out of the heat. Ozo winced when the man carrying him ducked beneath a low threshold and dumped him down onto a wet stone floor. The man rose, turned, and walked away without even a cursory glance at Ozo and the other boys sitting on the wet floor of the wide square room.

One by one, a slaver entered and dumped off a boy. Ozo counted as their number grew to thirteen, thirteen shivering and frightened boys with sores on their legs and buttocks and raw spots on their throats from the collars they had worn. Some boys leaned against the wall as their legs started to come back to life, others stood in place as if paralyzed and unsure what to do. Still others cried and whimpered on the floor, gazing at their new surroundings. Ozo wiped at his own face. He refused to cry.

Over by the far wall Sami stared down at his own feet, dirty black hair hanging over his eyes. Ozo walked over to him on wobbly legs. The boy had been next to him for so long, it felt strange and scary to be away from him in the big room. Ozo wiped his own face dry and tapped Sami on the shoulder.

“What is this place?” Sami said.

“I don’t know,” Ozo answered. “At least there are no collars.”

Sami blinked in the dim light. He stared down at the floor.

“Let’s stay together,” said Ozo. “If we stay together, we’ll be safe.”

“I like that,” said Sami, looking up at Ozo. “I will. We will.”

“Promise?”

“Promise.”

Ozo was about to say more, but the sound of men’s voices approaching hushed him. Four men were entering the square room. They held long poles with brushes attached to the ends and carried big buckets of water. The men began ushering boys near grates set in the floor and then started stripping off the rags the boys wore. Two men splashed them with water from the buckets while the other two got to work scrubbing each boy with the brushes. White foamy soap began to collect at the grate in the floor beneath a naked and frightened Kellington as the men scrubbed and brushed him, his body jerked around by the movements.

Soon more men arrived with more buckets and brushes. Ozo realized it was his turn to get cleaned, and he felt like his dogs Coco and Tolo as his body was pushed this way and that, the brushes scraping over skin. It felt like ten thousand needles. He groaned and stumbled as one man turned him around and splashed smelly water over his head. Whatever was in the water was the cause of the odor, which rolled down Ozo’s head and face and over his scrawny naked chest as the slavers bathed him.

Splashed once more, Ozo was free. The men moved off and left him standing in the middle of the room dripping and covering his nakedness. They gathered up their buckets and brushes and began exiting the room.

Loud laughter and catcalls from the slavers caused Ozo to turn around. Several of the men had gathered around Maleon and were trying to get the boy to remove his hands and uncover himself, to show them his naked lower parts. Maleon was shaking his head no, but the men pushed and pulled at his arms. Finally two men grabbed him, each taking hold of one arm. Maleon’s privates flopped into sight. His genitals hung down halfway to

his kneecap. The men roared with laughter, pointed and whistled. Maleon endured their catcalls with a lowered head, arms held out by a man on each side of him. One man walked up and flicked Maleon's privates with his finger. Maleon squeaked in fear and twitched in pain, and the men laughed and laughed. Finally the two holding him let go, and Maleon clumsily covered himself up again. It took both his palms to do so. The men moving out of the room clapped Maleon on the back, pinched his face, and tousled his wet black hair.

Ozo and the boys weren't alone long enough to dry when more men entered holding buckets of water and razor blades. They brought in tables and chairs. The same tall dark man who had carried Ozo inside began pushing the boys into a line along the back wall. Shears and a razor blade rested on the surface of each table, and Ozo watched as the men first cut the hair off of Big Pike and then shaved down to the scalp with the razor. After Big Pike was bald, the men lathered up his skin and searched for lice both on his scalp and down in the fluffy pile of black hair around the table and surrounding stone floor. Water splashed over the boy's head, and the barber slapped the skin of Big Pike's scalp and mumbled in his own tongue for him to get up.

Two by two the rest were shorn of their dirty, matted hair. By the third set of two, Ozo saw what they searched for after each cutting. One barber lifted up a small wiggling white worm and showed it to the tall black man standing near. The black man grunted something and the barber laughed. And then it was Ozo's turn in the chair.

Tap, tap, tap went the big black man's hand against Ozo's back as he urged him toward the chair. Ozo stumbled forward and sat down on the wet chair, which felt cold on his naked bottom. Ozo kept his privates covered with his hands as the barber tilted his

head this way and that, gripping his chin. He winced when he heard the hiss of the shears cutting off his hair. It fell in ropes to stick to his shivering thighs as the barber did his work. Ozo looked but did not see any bugs in the black hair that fell from the top of his own head.

To his left Sami also faced his turn in the other chair. The boy was hunched and bent over in a stubborn ball as the barber tried to get him groomed.

“It’s not so bad,” he said over to Sami. “I think the air feels good in here with less hair.”

“I hate it,” was all Sami replied. He did not look up.

The barber cutting Sami’s hair tapped him on the head with the scissors, and Sami jumped.

“We’re almost done,” said Ozo.

Metal thumped down on Ozo’s head, and he jumped too. Then lather was running down his face, and he could feel the cold tug of a blade dragging across his scalp. The barber had a cloth on which he wiped the foam after each pass of his razor. Ozo looked at the rag for bugs but did not see any, and then a big splash of water cascaded over his head. He shivered. The water was very cold. The air on his bare skin felt raw and vulnerable. The barber pushed at Ozo’s back for him to stand up and make way for the last set of boys to go.

Ozo hurried forward, his hands still covering his nakedness, and moved up to see if Sami was all right. Ozo’s feet made wet splat sounds over the stone floor.

Sami looked up as Ozo approached. His wide round eyes matched his pale bare head.

“How are you?” asked Ozo.

“I feel like a lamb after cutting season,” he said. And then he smiled and looked down, ran his hand over his shorn scalp.

Ozo said, “You look like one too.”

Sami punched him and laughed. “You look like an egg with eyes.”

Ozo laughed.

Other boys walked up to them. The barbers were taking up their buckets and razors, leaving the room. The boys soon found themselves alone in the room, alone and naked, void of hair, but clean. For the first time in weeks, they were clean.

“Did you see that man’s neck?” asked Little Pike. “You know, the big dark man. His scar goes all the way around.”

“I wonder what it’s from?” asked Sami.

“He is the one who carried me in,” said Ozo.

“You are all so stupid,” said Kellington. “Can’t you tell he was hanged?”

All the boys broke out in excited whispers.

“But how is he still alive?”

“What happened?”

“Who did it?”

The questions went all around the tight crowd of boys as they huddled close together and tried to make out their new surroundings. Before they came up with an answer to the dark man’s scarred throat, he entered again and pointed back the way he had come, directing them all to follow.

They moved along a stone hallway, their bare feet tapping over the floor. The big man led them down a flight of stone steps worn down at the center by use and time. The boys entered a long narrow corridor made entirely of stone and rounded above their heads. A cave. Torches burned at intermittent places along the wall, and the dark skinned man and thirteen boys came round a corner and stopped at the intersection of a hallway. A hunched old man missing all but four teeth and smelling of urine stood at the spot beneath a burning torch. He had a burlap sack full of what looked like smaller burlap sacks. The man stopped and juted his chin at the man with the bag, directing the boys to go up to him. As each boy cautiously moved up to the man with the cloth sack, the man lifted out a long shirt of thin homespun material and handed one to each. He showed the first boy, the scar-faced Blackwood what to do, grabbing him and ramming the shirt over his head. The shirt fell to the boy's legs at knee height. Then the old man shoved Blackwood out of the way and handed the next boy a shirt, and then the next and the next.

Ozo took his own shirt and stepped back quickly to drag it over his head himself. He had been touched enough for one day. The material was surprisingly soft and smooth on his bare skin, the material falling to his knobby knees. Ozo felt better dressed. Having clothes on made him feel less like the lambs that Sami had mentioned, less like a thing and more like a real boy.

Now the black man led them down the right-hand corridor. The stone walls of the hallway glowed from the burning torches in their sconces, flecks of quartz speckling in the pocked yellow stone.

They made two more turns in the corridor, a left and another left, and then Ozo saw bars placed over alcoves along the cavern walls. People of all types and ages huddled on the other side of bars. They stared out at the passing boys like opossums, raccoons, and night foxes. Ozo saw that the women had bald heads too, and the other slaves watched as the boys were led away.

Ozo's heart sank when he saw a man standing by an open cage door up on the left. The boys moved into their new prison one by one, and the cage door banged shut behind them.

Straw was scattered about on the cold rock floor like one would scatter for horses in a barn. At the back wall of the deep alcove were tied bales of straw.

“Are those our beds?” asked Blackwood. He scratched at the long curving wound on his face. In the flickering shadows from the torches out in the hallway, the scab looked black.

“There are fifteen bales. They must have put the others here for the two who died,” said Sami.

Every boy stood and stared at the bales along the wall for a long time. No one moved. Ozo wondered if there would be more than two spare beds before things ended, more unused bales of dry itchy straw to go to waste because someone else would die.

The older boys moved first. Near Rock and Kellington led the way, each sitting down on a bale, looking around, trying to act brave. Sami was next, and he did a thing that surprised Ozo. He ran and leaped up on his bale of straw and turned around to face the others. “I claim this one as mine! No one else may touch it. Because I am king of the

mules.” And then he brayed loudly. The noise he made sounded exactly like the mule that Ozo and his papa had used back home.

Ozo laughed first and Little Pike joined in. Soon all the boys were running and claiming a bale for themselves. They laughed and made animal noises and tried to push each other off their straw beds. They leaped from bale to bale playing tag, feeling the freedom of youth. They pushed the bales together and made forts. They made a game of leaping as many bales pushed together as they could, with Sami doing his best to immitate the acrobats he had seen beyond the city walls. Kellington and Near Rock won every time since they were older and their legs were long. The boys played for the first time since they had been taken from their homes.

* * *

Ozo enjoyed the morning meal best.

They were fed three times a day now, and each meal was both better fare and in larger amounts than anything they had received on the road in the back of the slavers’ wagon. The first meal, Ozo’s favorite, was a yellow porridge. At first he didn’t know what the sweet spices were until the Pike brothers complained it had too much cardamom. If that was the spice Ozo tasted, then he loved cardamom. The Pikes were from a family of cooks and bakers, so they knew all about spices and things like that. They told Ozo that the breakfast meal also had cloves and cinnamon in it, but some days it seemed to have one flavor and the next morning another. Ozo didn’t care. He just knew he could live on the delicious porridge for every meal if they gave him a choice in the

matter. The second meal of the day was usually a stringy vegetable stew. It was always too spicy, and Ozo drank lots of water, but it didn't help; his tongue still hurt. Some days they had fruit for the second meal. Ozo liked those days best. The last meal of the day was always the same, lentils and rice. Ozo hated it. The flavor was fine; it tasted good, and was spiced with cumin and coriander, so the Pike brothers claimed. It was just that it was always the same meal every day. Ozo wished for some fresh meat to eat. He dreamed of roasted lamb, of grabbing up a chicken, twisting its neck and cooking it with feathers still on. He put down his lentils and rice with a frown.

He looked at the boys all around him. Some sat on the straw covered rock floor, while others occupied their hay bale beds. Someone was scraping stone against stone to Ozo's left.

Kellington dragged another scratch into the rock wall. He used a chunk of stone that had broken free and fallen to the floor. Some of the boys used these shards to draw pictures of their homes, but Kellington counted days. He and his friend Near Rock said they had been gone from their own home, taken and on the move for almost three entire moon cycles. That was five weeks longer than Ozo. They added days by making scratches down the wall. Ozo counted eleven new scratches. Eleven days down in the caverns.

"They're fattening us up like festival pigs," said Near Rock. He sat off in the far corner on his bale of straw, his legs propped up, his arms behind his head as he watched Kellington drag the new scratch into the wall's face.

"Of course they are," said Kellington. "What else would it be?"

"Fattening us up for what?" asked Blackwood.

“We’re just boys. If they want to sell us, we have to look fatter and not so skinny and sick,” answered Near Rock.

“I don’t look skinny and sick,” said Kully. He was just seven harvest seasons old, younger than even Ozo and Sami’s nine, a nervous and energetic boy who always had to be moving and twisting his leg or tapping on another boy or just dancing in place like he was doing at the moment. Kully didn’t look skinny or sick, but he did look like a girl. Before Kully’s head had been shaved, his jet-black hair had fallen to his shoulders in thick ringlets and the boy looked too delicate and soft to be a boy.

“No, not you. You never stay still long enough to let the sickness spirits grab you,” said Near Rock. He rubbed the younger boy’s bristled head of short, stubby brown hair. Kully giggled and pushed Near Rock’s hand away.

“If they sell us will we all go to the same person?” asked Kully.

The boys all looked around at each other showing their nervousness at the thought.

“I doubt it,” said Kellington.

“Maybe we’re prisoners and not slaves,” said Crag as he walked up and sat down cross-legged on the stone floor between Hog and Pinestone. Ozo was just getting to know the three of them, and Crag, short for Craggy Point, was the friendliest. He was a chubby boy, prone to big smiles and uncontrollable giggling. His hair was a dark bristly brush of stubble like all the others, and shadows from the torches burning out in the corridor coated half his face in darkness.

“Prisoners are only enemy soldiers or people with gold like kings and queens. You see any rich people in here?” snapped Near Rock.

“I was just saying,” said Crag.

“I don’t want to be a slave,” said Pinestone.

“What if they beat us?” asked Red Rivers from the back. He moved forward out of the shadows. Ozo thought he had been napping, but he rose up on his bed and walked up to sit in the wide loose circle with the rest of them. He had a funny hurried gate to his walk, like he walked everywhere on his toes. It made it look like his head got to his destination before the rest of his body. He was a very tall boy, almost as tall as their jailer who walked the corridors, so Ozo thought maybe that was why he walked hunched over all the time. He had small, narrow eyes that looked jet black in the gloom.

“We should talk about something else,” blurted out Sami.

Back in the slavers’ wagon Sami had latched onto Ozo, or maybe Ozo had latched onto Sami. There was really no way around it since they were chained next to each other, but Ozo felt like things were better when Sami was around.

Ozo changed the subject. “I used to have two shepherd dogs. Did anyone else have dogs back home?”

All the boys tried to talk at once. Some had dogs and some had mules. The Pike brothers had the rare gift once of getting to ride horses. It was a reward for making such a delicious cake for the wedding of the magistrate’s daughter. The magister allowed the boys ride his horses for a day. One boy talked of his livestock, another boy a falconer out with his father on a trading trip to Kellington. As the stories moved among them all, Sami looked over at Ozo and smiled.

He leaned over to Ozo and said quietly so the others couldn’t hear, “I like talking about home in happy ways.”

Ozo did, too. Home was a happy place. He remembered being out with his dogs Coco and Tolo as they herded sheep. He remembered the sunrise over Barrow Reach, how it shone over the humped hills and cast the tall grasses in gold. His dogs would charge out ahead of him and vanish over the hills in their work, rounding up the bleating sheep. It looked more like a game for them than work. On occasion one of them would startle a hare, and if Ozo was quick enough with his sling, he'd proudly get to bring home the prize for his mother to add to the pot for the evening meal.

The boys continued trading stories until they started falling asleep. It was hard to tell time down in the caverns, so a few hours after every meal the boys napped. What did it matter when they lived in darkness?

Ozo listened to the soft snores of the others around him. He heard the occasional cry of anguish in the darkness, sometimes a scream from a nightmare, others calling a name. Many nights echoing throughout the black caverns was the sound of sobbing.

He lay on his side and watched the shadow play from a torch over the wall opposite their cell door. The torch was around a corner out of sight, but its light reached them. He could see shapes in the darkness, dancing bears and leaping cats made entirely of night. He thought again of the festival and the carnival tents set up outside the city walls. It had been such an exciting way to arrive at the city, but now after days of waiting, he wanted something to happen. He wanted to be free of his cage, out running between those tents and seeing the remarkable people. He'd visit the animal arena first and eat from every food stall. He'd sneak in and see the shows from places he'd only heard about in tales back in Barrow Reach.

“Ozo, who do you think will buy us?” asked Sami.

Ozo was surprised Sami was still awake, even more surprised that Sami knew that he was still awake as well. “Buy us? You mean if we get sold as slaves?”

“Well, we will, won’t we? I mean, that is why we’re locked in a cage.”

“I guess. It just sounds scary to say it,” Ozo said.

“I know what you mean.”

“That’s good. No need to be like a frightened girl.”

“Right!” said Sami

After a few silent seconds Ozo said, “I really don’t know who will buy us.”

Sami was quiet for a very long time. Ozo exhaled a deep breath after a while and readied himself for sleep. He figured his friend had already beaten him to it when Sami whispered in the darkness behind him, “If they are cruel to us, we could always run away.”

Ozo said, “It doesn’t matter where we go or who buys us, if they’re cruel let’s run away anyhow.”

“Deal,” said Sami.

Soon Sami’s breathing changed and Ozo knew he had beaten him down to slumber after all. Ozo continued to watch the shadows crawl across the cavern walls outside their cage. He wondered what it would be like to be a slave. Would he have a bed? Would he be beaten and whipped? What would they eat? Would there be others? Where would he go if he ran away? With a dozen questions bouncing around inside his mind, Ozo finally fell to sleep.

* * *

It all happened very fast. Their jailer, the tall black man, along with five other slavers banged open the door abruptly to pass out breakfast the next morning, and the mood was different. Not only did their regular jailer bring others with him, but the others were taking away the straw beds. As each boy finished his morning porridge, he was yanked out and ushered into the dark corridor and down around the corner, out of sight. When Ozo realized what was transpiring, he made sure to time his eating to match Sami's. If they were being led away or moved, he wanted them to go together. He had made a promise to remain by Sami's side, and Ozo meant to keep it. His heart was beating very fast.

“Hey!” Sami declared. They yanked the bowl out of his hand before he finished eating. A man with slimy brown hair and a thin beard with a bell tied in the whiskers did it, and he mumbled something and pushed Sami hard toward the open cage door. Sami stumbled but did not fall. Ozo handed his own bowl off and hurried to catch up to Sami.

The two of them moved down the hallway following two men and three boys. Steps were visible in the darkness, and Ozo and Sami began to climb the same pathway they had used to enter the prison two weeks before. Ozo remembered the room where he and the others had been bathed and shaved. The stone floor was still wet as Ozo and the rest rushed by, but now it was empty of people, empty of slaves.

Sunlight blinded Ozo as he stepped into the open air and he shielded his eyes from the glare. He cried out as someone slapped him hard across the back of his head, and he stumbled forward and fell, his face hitting gravel and dirt. Sami was at his side lifting him, wiping dirt and blood off his lip. A man rushed toward them as they tried to

recover and stand. He jerked each boy by the arm and scooted them forward on dancing feet as they tried to keep up with his fast adult pace.

They moved into a holding area. On each side were tall wooden fences that kept anyone from running. Ozo could see men walking back and forth atop a platform carrying cudgels. One had a crossbow slung over a shoulder. He peered down at Ozo below.

Sand covered the ground inside the holding pen, and it was so hot it burned the bottoms of Ozo's bare feet. The walls were made of flat wooden planks nailed tightly together. He flexed his toes and lifted each foot, and then finally found a shaded spot up against the back wall to stand beneath. Sami moved up next to him to get out of the way of the rest of their band of boys entering the cell. Ozo couldn't see in between the slats of wood at all. He could only see out the way they had entered and hear the voices of many people from the other side of the wall. It sounded as crowded as the festival had been. He swallowed.

After the last boy walked into the cage, the barred door was shut. A man wearing a shirt of red and dirty gray open at the collar and flapping in the hot wind looked in at them. All the slavers wore the same colors as they went about the business filling the other pens.

Slaves moved by, their eyes squinting and their ribs showing beneath the skin. The men looked scared. Many of them had cuts and wounds all over their bodies. One was missing a hand, and the stump at his wrist looked like the flesh had been cooked, the wound burned over. Another man limped terribly, and when he stumbled, the same black jailer picked the fallen man up by the neck and shoved him into the pen with the others.

The adult women were next. They looked worse than the men. But it wasn't bruises and wounds that made them that way. It was the looks on their faces. Haunted eyes and timid movements. Each woman seemed to tiptoe, locked inside a world of terror. A few of the women tried to move up to the boys' cage, calling out names, reaching for the bars like they knew someone within, but the slavers pulled them away and gave them a shove to get them moving.

And then it was done.

One of the cages had been opened, and something was happening. Dozens of footfalls stomped over the wooden platform, and people called out things in their strange language. Another much louder voice egged the crowd on. The owner of the voice moved back and forth, back and forth, his boots thumping heavily over the platform.

"I'm scared," said Sami.

His friend's eyes were very wide and round, more so than usual, and his face was wet with sweat and Ozo reached and squeezed Sami's trembling hand as the crowd beyond the wall behind them yelled out louder and louder in answer to the pacing man's calls.

The wall behind moved, revealing a hidden door and steps leading upwards to a tall platform. Sami squeezed his hand hard.

"*Geen dalah! Geen dalah!*" a man yelled out behind them. Ozo knew from the squat man's gesturing that it meant to climb the steps and hurry. He and the other twelve boys ascended the splintery steps.

They grabbed Ozo by the neck, shoved him in line, and stripped him naked along with the other boys. Hundreds of voices out of sight called out taunts and jeers. The sun

was hot, the humid wind strong, and the wood beneath his bare feet hurt as he and the others covered their privates and waited for their turn on the platform.

Another slaver yelled a command, and Ozo stepped out onto the narrow platform, built eight feet up from the ground. The people gathered were a sea of heads and shifting bodies stretching far up the sloped street, which curved between buildings and ended at a towering red stone wall. It was the second inner wall he had noticed from outside the city upon their arrival. All the buildings beyond the wall looked far more grand in architecture, as if it separated rich from poor. Above everything rose the mountain. The city was massive, a giant hive of red, yellow and white stone structures as far as he could see. The people below him were yelling and holding up small bags of coin to a short, fat man moving back and forth in front of the boys. For a man so round and small, Ozo was surprised he could move so nimbly, like the acrobats outside the city walls. And each person in the crowd seemed very intent on getting his attention and handing him his coin.

Four boys in their band of thirteen were bought at once. A group of soldiers stood near the edge of the platform. The soldiers studied the boys and one leaned in and whispered to the leader. All wore the same blue and gray uniform, and all had matching cloud insignia on the left breast, but the leader wore a lightning bolt across his cloud insignia and had stripes of white on his sleeves. He had close-set brown eyes and hair shaved almost to the scalp. He nodded at his subordinate's comment. The soldiers maintained a composure that the people in the crowd did not. They didn't act crazed and wave bags of coin around, but when they held up their hand to get the fat man's attention, he ran over to them, crouched down and ignored all others trying to push into his sights. The soldiers pointed in among the boys arrayed atop the platform. They picked out

Kellington and Near Rock. Near Rock shook his head and tried to move away from the slavers. Gone was Near Rock's usual anger and rage, replaced by fear and shock. His face was a pinched rictus of emotion. The slavers yanked him toward the steps that led out to the waiting crowd. Kellington was next, and the boy went willingly. He looked about like he did not know where he was or what was happening. Ozo's stomach lurched when they moved down steps off the side of the platform, their shaved and bristly heads of hair vanishing in the crowd. They were the elders in the group. What would the rest do without them? He didn't have much time to ponder the thought when Hog and Crag were purchased and led away. The soldiers hooked collars around the four boys' necks and vanished in the crowd with their merchandise. Things were happening very fast.

Pinestone and Red Rivers were bought next. A giant of a man out in the crowd with an even larger woman hanging on his arm waved the slave trader over. They talked directly into his ear, handing off three bags of coin. People in the crowd behind them booed and hissed as the two boys were led away.

The auctioneer dragged Maleon forward. He grabbed Maleon under the armpits and lifted the boy up for the crowd to see. Maleon had been covering his nakedness with his hands like the rest of the boys, but as he was lifted quickly over the slaver's head, his hands came free. His abnormally long privates flopped into view. The crowd went wild. People whistled and called. Laughter rang out across the heads of the onlookers in a wave of noise. Maleon tried to hide his shame and twist his head to look away from the crowd. He had a grimace on his face like he was in physical pain. A bag of coin landed at the auctioneer's feet, striking his legs. It burst open and its contents went rolling across the platform and out into the crowd. Men and women lunged at the platform in a growling

chaos of reaching arms and desperate faces. The slaver cried out and dropped Maleon. People in the crowd began to climb up toward the scattering coins and knocked the slave trader to the floor of the platform in their greed. Suddenly men were at the slaver's side, including the man with the scar on his neck. One slaver swung his cudgel, and blood splattered Ozo's feet as the slaver tossed the man off the platform into the crowd. Two more people rushed the platform. The black jailer hit the first one in the face. Two teeth snapped loose and soared away, and then he grabbed the second man by the hair, turned in place and flung him back out into the sea of people.

The crowd was calm again. A man with four women clinging to him pushed his way forward. He handed a very heavy bag of coin to one of his women to pass up to the slave trader. They were painted and dressed in pale silks the color violet, pink, emerald and sapphire. The man himself was small, wearing a ring on every finger and chains of gold and silver around his neck. He was painted in a similar way to the women, his eyes shadowed in shades of blue and lined in black, his cheeks rouged. A cruel humor lived inside the man's thin smile and hard, dull eyes. Maleon was handed over. The women began running their fingers over Maleon's shorn hair, squeezing his shoulders, petting his hand. They were turning away when one of the women pouted and whispered something in the little man's ear. The five of them, six counting their new slave, turned all at once in a wide circle amidst the crowd like a slow-turning weather vane, and the crowd made way for them. The short man pointed at Kully. They bought him, too. He looked braver than them all, his head tilted back and his chin up. He walked off the platform alone, taking small, dainty steps along the edge, walking like a girl. He looked small as he gazed up at his new masters, joining the whores and their pimp alongside Maleon Down.

The Pike brothers were next. A man with a long braid trailing down his back purchased both brothers. The man had a shaved head, all except for a long glistening braid of hair dyed white and black, and tattoos on each arm. He gestured, wanting each brother brought forward for his inspection. He grabbed Big Pike by the face, turning his head left and right, and then he repeated the process with the younger brother, checking teeth, pinching ears, and looking into eyes. Then he paid and took the brothers away.

That left Blackwood, Sami, and Ozo. Ozo looked out across the heads of the onlookers and felt very small, like a tiny ant looking up a hill. He closed his eyes and prayed that he and Sami would go to the same master.

Three men gestured for Blackwood to be brought forward. One of the men examined Blackwood in the same manner that the Pike brothers had been inspected, checking teeth, examining muscle tone, and looking in ears and eyes, while the other two haggled with the slaver. The three men had black-stained arms, stains that ended mid-bicep. Ozo wondered what caused it. Their hands and wrists and forearms all the way up to their clipped shirt sleeves were black as ink. Blackwood cast one last frightened look back at Ozo and Sami, was handed off to the black-armed men, and then vanished into the wall of bodies.

A man and four tall boys pushed their way up to the edge of the platform. The boys stood next to a man with a pock-marked face and little close-set black eyes to each side of a wide and flattened nose. His teeth were stained a dull bluish-green, and a green liquid coated the edge of his wide fish lips. The ugly man's body was round and built like a barrel. He didn't look fat, but he didn't look strong or lean either. He did look mean,

and his eyes never left Ozo. He turned his head and spit green spit onto the ground as he haggled with the slave trader.

They dragged Sami to the edge of the platform for inspection, and Ozo was suddenly alone. He could feel his heart pounding out a rhythm behind his chest, blood pumping quickly behind his eyes. What would happen now? Would anyone buy him, or would he be killed if no one wanted him? Were slaves rejected? What happened to them if they were? Should he run? Ozo's mind flittered like a moth in jar.

Sami walked off the platform. One of the taller boys checked his head for lice. Two of the other boys talked heatedly with the man with the stained teeth, and they repeatedly glanced up at Ozo. *Please, please!* Ozo repeated in his mind. *Take me, too.* The crowd was booing and hissing. A patch of people up the hill in the crowd erupted in swinging fists and curses. Their angry voices echoed off the facades of buildings along the avenue. The noise added to Ozo's discomfort and heated his fear, and he wanted so much to go home. The sun was near its zenith, and sweat rolled down his neck. He swallowed saliva. He bit his lip and fought back tears. The wood beneath him was hot and his feet throbbed. The barrel-shaped man blurted out something loud, and the slaver took Ozo by the upper arm and danced him over to the group. Ozo felt like one of his family's sheep as he was poked and pulled at by the man. Green juice had spilled down the man's chin so often that it had dried in crooked lines. His breath smelled like anise and rotten fish. Then it was over. The crowd let out boos as Ozo was pushed and hurried down the steps leading from the platform.

Naked, Ozo was handed off to his new master waiting at the edge of the platform. The city loomed up ahead like a living thing, its towers and buttresses, its palaces and manors, its secrets and shadowed corners, all waiting for Ozo to find.

Chapter Three

The Hovel

The five strangers led them away from the din of people huddled around the slave market, pulling blankets from knapsacks and draping them over the boys. The ugly man said something to one of the tall boys with him, who turned and babbled something at the new slaves. Ozo blinked at him. The boy turned back to the ugly man and said something else Ozo didn't understand. The ugly man let out a big sigh of exasperation, nodded, and then moved up the street and away, while the boy urged the new slaves to follow. Ozo fell in step with the others, the stone street hurting the soles of his bare feet.

The noise of the slavers' market fell away, replaced by the hum of the crowded streets. The ugly man kept a fast pace. Most buildings, although varying in height and size, were all one large piece, carved out of the mountain itself, tall and close together. A few structures at the center of the wider roads, like shops or wooden shacks where shopkeepers hawked wares, were made of materials like wood as well as quarried stone. It gave Ozo a closed-in feeling moving through the narrow streets.

A sound of laundry being beaten on the rooftops above turned his head. *Whump-whump* went the sound of the long wooden sticks. Many women were up above working on the roofs of the buildings around them, busy cleaning clothes, tending small gardens. Steam rose lazily into the sky as three girls cooked. It was like there were two worlds the boys rushed through, the crowded streets where people tried to navigate elbow to elbow, and the world of women up above, cooking and cleaning and free from the chaos below.

Some people in the crowd were scary, glaring at either the tall boys or the ugly man who led the way. One man with a missing eye and a gaping, scarred socket trailed them for several blocks, then spat. Farther on, two men outside of a shop stood to each side of an arched doorway and looked over everyone moving past. Dried herbs hung beyond the open doorway between them. The two men each had two swords slung over their backs in an X shape, and another smaller curved blade at their hip. They were big men who never seemed to blink.

Up ahead in front of a building painted pink, where multi-colored silk scarves flapped in the breeze, several women leaned against the wall laughing and clinging to thin wooden support beams beneath a slatted awning. Men had gathered all around, and the women and men whispered and kissed and pawed at one another. One of the women called out to the ugly man who led Ozo's group. "*Apunatet la nee chan, Satesh,*" she said, but he ignored her and hurried on.

The ugly man took a side street left and then another one to the right. He was full of energy and stronger than his round body led one to believe. Ozo was tired, sore, and frightened. He wanted to see where they were going. He wanted to look at all the people.

The ugly man slowed only once to pull off a finger-long pinch of a green leaf from a pouch within his shirt. He mashed the entire leaf into his mouth, creating great globs of bright greenish-blue spit as he half-ran, half-walked.

The streets were becoming very narrow, the buildings at each side built close to each other, and there were fewer people to wade through. The smell of spices and baking bread came from the windows, making Ozo's stomach growl. The ugly man led them past a candy shop where an old man missing most of his front teeth sat rocking in a chair and smoking a long pipe. He smiled at Ozo, the first real smile he'd seen in a long time. Ozo smiled back, running to catch up to the others.

The ugly man turned another corner toward a building where children of all ages sat around in front of a long two-story stone structure the color of wet ash. The stones were worn, the facade around each widow crumbling, Children perched up in the windows to watch them approach and sat on the street outside the arched threshold entrance. They leaned against the cracked front wall and sat on the lower window ledges at street level. They walked the rooftop above.

“How many children are in there?” Sami asked Ozo.

Three of the waiting children, two boys and a girl, got up from their resting place against the wall and rushed up to greet the newcomers. They made whistling noises and tugged at Ozo's blanket, the only material covering his nakedness. They pinched his ear. A girl flicked his nose with her finger, and Ozo blurted out, “Stop that!”

The ugly man hissed a warning, and she and the other children backed away.

Ozo followed Sami up onto the long porch that fronted the building. A boy squatting on the right hand window ledge glared and curled his lip like he wanted to

fight. The boy was short and stocky, his hair a light fuzzy brown, his hazel eyes slightly bloodshot. Ozo looked away. The children up and down the porch laughed. One of the older boys, one of the four walking with the ugly man, rushed up and slapped the hazel-eyed boy across the face. The boy took the slap and turned away while the older boy whispered something. The smaller boy made some odd hand sign with his fingers, and then bowed his head. The older boy seemed satisfied. Then he turned around and shoved Ozo inside the building, where he tripped and stumbled against Sami's back.

The ugly man waited inside with his arms crossed. The room was a palatial space, both upper and lower floors open to reveal a tall ceiling high above. Two curving stairs led up left and right. A railing in a horseshoe shape circled the second level. Hallways branched off in six directions from each side of the upper and lower levels. The paint on the walls was chipped and peeling, all done in dull orange and faded yellow. On the back wall hung a tapestry of a female deity done in blacks, with pale white pupilless eyes. She had a knife in one hand and a flower in the other. The goddess didn't look like someone Ozo would pray to. Below it were unlit candles and an empty offering bowl.

The ugly man began yelling. He yelled, "TANVI, TANVI."

A girl appeared at the railing above. She said something to the ugly man, bowed quickly, and then scampered down the steps and up to the group. The ugly man said a few sentences to her, and she bowed again. She was a pretty girl. Her hair was as oily black. It spilled over her shoulders and shone in the sunlight coming in from behind the boys. She looked several harvest seasons older than Ozo, and was a head taller. She looked the same age as the four tall boys who had accompanied the ugly man to the slave

market. Her eyes were nervous, dancing over each newcomer and that of her master as she assessed her situation.

“You are from the Movane country? You are Movani farm boys, yes?” the girl asked.

Sami answered. “You know how to talk?”

The girl looked confused. “Yes,” she said, although it sounded more like a question when she said it.

“I mean you know our language,” said Sami. “No one knows our language. We only know how to talk to each other.” Sami pointed at Ozo.

The ugly man said a barrage of angry sounding words. When he interrupted Sami, the girl jumped.

She turned back to face Ozo and his friends and began to talk again. “My master says I am to be one of your low masters.” She stopped, bit her lip in thought, nodded her head, and continued. “I will be your...teacher. You will have several here at the Hovel.”

“The Hovel?” asked Sami.

The girl held out her arms, “This is the Hovel. It is your home now, along with the rest of us here.”

The ugly man said more words to her. He spit a glob of bright green mucus on the stone floor and nodded his head like he understood what was being said. Ozo didn't think he did.

“This is your master now.” She gestured toward the ugly man.

The ugly man grinned at them, his stained green teeth glowing in the dappled sunlight coming from behind Ozo's back. The room lit up in strips of sun and shadow. The ugly man thumped his own chest and declared, "Satesh."

"This is Master Satesh," said the girl. "You are to know his name."

Their new master thumped his chest again. "Satesh," he said slowly. "Sa-tesh," As if the boys were deaf and not merely ignorant of the man's tongue.

Sami bowed low at the waist like the girl had done. Ozo followed suit. Satesh laughed and patted the top of Ozo's head. With that, master Satesh seemed satisfied and calm. He spoke more phrases to the girl.

"I will be your teacher," the girl said. "There will be several here who will teach you so you learn everything that is our ways. Master Satesh wants you to know he is a good master. His only rules are to make him money, to bring him riches. If you are caught, he does not know you. If you return missing a hand, Master Satesh does not know you and will not let you enter the Hovel again. If you are caught and it is the Skyguard who captures you, do not speak of the Hovel. If you speak of the Hovel or anything related to the Mulcari or the Korlani neighborhood, gods help you, because the Skyguard cannot even protect you from the wrath of the wronged Mulcari." The girl stopped as Satesh dictated more instructions for her to translate. She nodded her head at him and continued. "If you cannot make Master Satesh money, he has no use for you. If you aren't a good liberator, you can remain a beggar. If you cannot beg, you will be cast out. His most important rule is to make money and for you to always bring things back to the Hovel. If you make him a rich man, then you can attain your freedom by becoming a

guild member of the Mulcari. A guild member is never a slave. A guild member makes his own way. A guild member is free.”

Satesh said something else.

The girl translated: “Do you understand?”

Ozo and Sami nodded. Ozo wasn’t exactly sure what he was agreeing to, but it seemed like the safe thing to do. He was discovering that Master Satesh smelled very bad, an old sour smell like he rarely bathed, and when he did it was rotten fish he used for soap.

Satesh clapped his hands together, happy at their agreement. He said more for translating:

“I am not the same as other masters. I saved you. I do not make you bring me meals or paint my toes. I do not have you waving a feather fan over me like a fat hog up in the Manor District or the Hill of the Gods. Your days are not a living hell like a dye slave or miner. You make me wealthy, you stay safe and have a home,” said the girl.

“And I will prepare you for the guild.”

When she paused after Satesh’s last words, he smiled his terrible green grin once more. Then he said one more thing: “And the most important rule: if you try and take Master Satesh’s riches, you will be found floating in the shit and piss in Lower Balore.”

Their new master seemed satisfied with the girl’s translation, and he yelled out a few names. The same four boys who had escorted him to the slave market appeared and then followed Satesh through a set of double doors at the back of the main hall. From outside the Hovel didn’t look as big as it did inside. The hallway snaked off down into darkness.

Once Satesh and the other boys were gone, Sami asked the girl, “What is Lower Balore?”

The girl nodded her head and took a breath, seeming to search for the right words, “It is the city beneath the city.”

Sami blinked and waited. They all did.

The girl said, “This is Balore.” She motioned all around her. “This is the city you are now in. Did you not know?”

Ozo and Sami shook their heads no.

The girl laughed. “Oh, my farm boys, you are so far from home. We are in the country of Kushalan. This place is the capital city. It is called Balore, The Jewel of the Mountain. You didn’t even know where you were made slaves? Poor boys.”

“How do we make the green-toothed man money?” asked Ozo.

The girl laughed. It made Ozo feel good to hear her laugh. It was also nice to see her relaxed and not as nervous as she had been around Satesh. She moved her hands a lot when she talked and seemed excited to be talking with them. “So many questions at once. Let me be your low master, your teacher, as I am told to do, and that way you will learn all I know,” she said.

The boys waited for her to continue.

“My name is Tanvi. What are your names?” she looked at Ozo first. “How about you, quiet one? Are you the mouse boy, or can you speak?”

Ozo said, “I’m Ozo. I’m not a mouse boy! My name is Ozo.”

“A strong-sounding name, this Ozo,” she said. She turned to Sami. “You next.”

“I’m Sami,” said Sami.

Tanvi nodded her head and seemed satisfied. “Ozo and Sami: our new farm boys. We have much to learn to you.”

“Learn to us?” said Sami. “Don’t you mean much to teach us?”

Tanvi blinked and then nodded her head up and down rapidly. “Oh yes, that is right. I know your Movane words mostly, but sometimes I forget or don’t know.”

Ozo smiled. He said, “We can teach you, too. We can also be your teacher if you want.”

Tanvi smiled. She said, “Tanvi would like that.”

Sami said, “No, no. Lesson number one is stop talking about yourself like that! It sounds stupid. Say, ‘I would like that’ not ‘Tanvi would like that.’ We are the ones who say your name, not you.”

Tanvi nodded and said. “It will work both ways, because I am to teach you the tongue of Balore.”

“Really?” said Sami.

“Yes,” said Tanvi. “It is my orders to teach you many things. You must learn Balorian, you must learn the streets and neighborhoods of the city, you must learn of the societies. Tanvi – I will teach you the people from other places who wander its streets, and where they go. There will be many, many things for the farm boys to learn at the Hovel. But first we will get you some clothing and you can pick out your beds.”

Ozo had been so overwhelmed with his new surroundings that he had forgotten that he only wore a blanket draped over his shoulders. Clothes would be nice.

Tanvi said, “Follow me.”

She led them past seven doors down the long hall, opened the eighth and walked inside. The three boys followed her. The room was filled with clothes piled on tables and the floor. Over in the corner was a pile of shoes.

“You find your fit. This is the boys’ clothes room. Stay out of the girls’ clothes room. I will come back and get you.” Then Tanvi walked out into the hallway and pulled the door closed.

Left all alone in the room filled with clothes, Ozo walked over and lifted up a pair of thin, worn pants the color of sand. He held them up. They were too big and came up to his armpits. The cuffs dropped to the floor with a swish.

Sami laughed behind him. “Wear those! Wear those!” he said and then jumped face first onto the pile of clothes on the floor next. He stood up slowly on top of the entire mound with his blanket pulled over his head like a ghost. “I am from Barrow Reach. I have come to take Ozo away. Oooooaahhh,” he teased.

With the blanket pulled up over his head, Sami had uncovered his bare butt for all to see.

“You’re a funny ghost with your butt sticking out like a moon,” said Ozo.

Sami started laughing and fell over on the clothes mound. The two of them laughed and tossed clothes in the air.

* * *

A short time later the door opened and Tanvi ducked her head inside.

“Are you ready? Did you find things to wear that fit?”

“We did,” said Sami.

Ozo was happy with his finds. He had picked out a worn tan-colored shirt that fit loosely and opened at the neck. He found some pants as well, dark brown in color. He had trouble finding a short enough strip of rope to tie them, but finally he did. Finding shoes was the hardest part. There were many single shoes without mates. Ozo had to dig to the bottom to find matching pairs. The ones he finally picked out were a little too big, a pair of dark leather sandals the color of old tree bark, but they fit up over the tops of his feet as well as around the heel, so they didn't fall off when he walked. Before they were ready to go, Tanvi made Sami find a pair of shoes that matched. For some reason she was not happy with his choice of a different shoe on each foot.

Finally Tanvi said, “Follow me to the sleeping room. You will need to find a bed place that is not taken. Please do not fight with your new brothers.”

The two boys fell in line behind her, moving up the steps to the main terrace and cutting around the horseshoe-shaped upper level. Ozo was surprised to see several boys sitting by the railing, their legs dangling in between the bars. Several of the boys turned their heads and watched Ozo and his friends walk by. There was also a group of girls who had gathered at the opposite side of the room who giggled and whispered to each other when they saw the new boys. It seemed Ozo and his friends were becoming the center of attention.

“Follow, please, farm boy Ozo.”

Ozo turned and then hurried to catch up with Tanvi. He heard girls giggling across the hallway behind him as he ran to catch up.

“He's not a farm boy, he's a shepherd boy,” said Sami.

Tanvi didn't answer. She led them to the very end of the hall lined with doors. Ozo wondered what was behind each one. At the end of the hallway a short stairway led downward. She descended. The boys followed.

They ended in a long room of stone. There were no windows, but three open cave mouths led off from the big room in three directions. Flickering torchlight came from the depths of the cave mouth. Wooden pallets made into beds were placed within carved-out alcoves along the stone walls. Each little cubbyhole had padding and blankets. They looked like shelves, but in this case a boy's bed was on the shelf. The alcoves were set three high, one above the other. Many were decorated with the types of treasures valuable to boys of varying ages. Only two boys were inside the room watching them. They halted their conversation and looked up as Tanvi and her retinue walked in.

"Let us try to find you two beds together. Would the farm boys like to sleep near to one another?" Tanvi asked. "It would be good to have a friend from home. Tanvi knows this."

She moved out into the big room.

Sami said, "Say, 'you know this' not '*Tanvi* knows this.' You're doing it again."

Tanvi smiled at Sami. "Apologies, low master. I will try harder."

Sami's smile broadened. "You can just call me Sami. You don't need to call me that other thing."

Ozo stumbled, looking down to see what had tripped him. The stone floor was covered in layers of scattered rugs. There were so many that humps poked up here and there along the floor. To walk over it was a bouncy affair. It felt good beneath Ozo's new-found sandals. The ceiling was black and soot-stained from the burning torches set

every three alcoves. Ozo counted thirty pallets set back in the walls, fifteen to a side.

Tanvi was moving up to a group of empty spaces. Two were set side by side at floor level and another above.

Tanvi stopped just before the three openings and said, “These are open, one and two.”

“Where do we get blankets and things for sleeping?” asked Ozo.

“Ah,” said Tanvi. She pointed down the cave opening on the left. “You can find bedding down that way. After you have made your beds it will be almost dinner bell. Just follow the way everyone is moving when you hear it.”

“Will everybody be there at dinner?” asked Sami.

“No. Many are out in the city on their liberation assignments, but many are here as well. You will see. People are always coming and going at the Hovel. ”

“Liberation assignment. What does that mean?” asked Ozo.

Tanvi turned. Her eyes danced over Ozo’s face. Finally she said, “Stealing. It is what you will be learning here. It is what Master Satesh commands.”

“Oh,” said Ozo.

“Tomorrow we begin your training.” She turned to go.

Both boys fell quiet and watched her walk away up the age-worn stone steps, her long black hair swaying across her shoulders.

Ozo let her words sink in. The others were out on *liberation assignments*, which meant stealing, and that was what they would be learning here. What kind of place had they come to?

Sami walked over to the empty alcoves and climbed up on the middle shelf. Ozo took the bottom. The wood of the pallet was splintery and dry, nailed together in a hash-marked cross-sectioned pattern. The alcove dipped back into the rock face like a cave in a cave. Ozo wondered if there was a way he could cover his space to hide completely. Maybe Sami would let him hang a blanket from his shelf, and that way Ozo would really have a cave to sleep in.

The two boys down the way from them sat silently watching the two new arrivals examine their new home. Ozo heard them say something to each other, but when he turned, thinking they were meant for him, the two stood up and moved up the steps out of the room.

“They don’t seem to like us,” said Sami.

“We won’t be able to understand what they say anyway,” said Ozo.

“If Tanvi knows our language, maybe everyone does,” offered Sami, always the optimist.

“Why would they if even green-toothed Satesh doesn’t?” said Ozo.

“I was just saying,” said Sami.

Ozo stood up and headed for the cave on the left. “Come on. Blankets are this way.”

“Let’s find out,” said Sami.

They barely finished making their sleeping areas and settling in when a group at the top of the stairs yelled down incomprehensible words at them. A bell in the distance seemed to be above Ozo’s head, the sound soft. The group on the steps said their garbled words again, this time louder, and then left Ozo and the others alone.

“I guess it is time to eat,” said Sami.

“I hope so,” said Ozo. “My stomach hurts.”

“Let’s go see, then,” said Sami. “Let’s go make some friends.”

Ozo smiled at Sami’s back as they moved up the steps and down the hallway following the sound of the ringing bell.

* * *

Ozo and his two friends followed everyone else down. Boys and girls were coming in from outside, but some girls were coming down the steps from the opposite hallway. There must be a girl’s side and a boy’s side to the Hovel. There was so much he wanted to know, so much he wanted to ask.

The hallway was tiled in a chipped mosaic depicting scenes of horses, camels, and a long-nosed dog chasing after a skinny, spotted cat. It seemed to be showing some form of hunt. He wondered what the Hovel might have been before it housed so many children running about from hallway to hallway, room to room.

They followed the others to an open archway that revealed a wide room lined with rows of tables pushed together. At the side of the room three older women and a group of girls stood behind more tables and portioned out food from great pots. A line formed, and as each child received his bowl plus a large chunk of bread, he would wander off and find a place to sit and eat. Ozo scanned the room and the line of children waiting on their dinner. So far he counted twenty-three children in the room, not counting himself and Sami. They got in line.

The women were fast, handing each bowl out as soon as a child stepped forward. When it was his turn, he took the bowl offered him and scooted down the line. The women looked tired and angry. They occasionally mumbled something as they went about their work, but other than the infrequent snide-sounding phrase, they didn't do much talking. The girls working with them were mostly fetching things like bowls or the buckets full of what Ozo found out was a lukewarm tea. It tasted of cardamom and goat's milk. He took his bowl of food, only lentils and rice. He made a face, grabbed some bread from the table along with his tea, and moved off, trailing Sami to a table by the far wall.

"This place -- what is it called? Balore? Is all they ever eat lentils and rice?" Ozo complained as he sat down and stared into his clay bowl.

Sami went at his food greedily. With his mouth full of bread and the rice and lentils mix he said, "This has meat in it. Lamb, I think."

Ozo's eyebrows arched. He looked down at his meal, scooted his wooden spoon around in the concoction and saw dark brown chunks of meat. He took a bite. The spices that hit his tongue were delicious. He wished the Pike brothers were around to ask what was in the dish, because with the flavors and the meat mixed in, it was wonderful. He took a bite of the bread and found it to be a fluffy light grain of some sort. Together with the sweet tea, the meal was the best Ozo had eaten since the day of his arrival in the city, the day all the festival goers had tossed in different kinds of food at the slave boys.

"This is really good," said Ozo.

Sami nodded his head as he devoured his own portion.

“I want more,” said Sami and stood up and took his empty bowl with him back to the line.

Ozo wondered if that was against the rules, if they were allowed to ask for more. His own bowl was empty, and when he saw a group of girls going up for more, he followed them to the back of the line.

Three helpings later, Ozo wiped his mouth and sat back, sipping his tea. The room was very active. Where someone sat had a lot to do with age. The older children, like the tall boys who followed Satesh about, stayed together, as did the younger children. Many eyes stared at him as he looked around. And then Tanvi stepped into his line of sight.

“Why are you two sitting alone? It is hard to make friends at first, Tanvi knows.” She pushed out her bottom lip in a pout. She had an empty bowl in her hand with her tea cup down inside it. “You can go out to the front after you finish eating to play and meet others before sleep time. That is allowed here. Master Satesh knows boys must play. Tomorrow is the first day of learning, my farm boys, so play while you can.” She walked off with her long black hair flapping behind her.

Bellies full, the boys made their way to the front entrance. Ozo felt as Sami felt: he wanted to make friends, he just didn’t know how. How do you make friends when you can’t understand each other?

They stepped outside onto the long wooden porch, which creaked and groaned as they walked. Ozo could smell the river on the late afternoon breeze and the sun was high in the sky and caused him to squint. Instantly a group of five boys confronted them. The hazel-eyed boy took the lead and moved to the center, his four companions standing to each side of him. He had his fuzzy hair, the color of pale tea, pulled back in a frizzled

ponytail. His skin was darker but not as dark as the jailor's had been. The boy looked of mixed parentage. He was shorter than Ozo, and stocky, with jerky, energetic movements. Ozo couldn't tell if he and the newcomers were being friendly or not.

“*Oh, Ahh...houtii, houtii, houtii naa,*” the leader exclaimed, sizing up Ozo and his friends. “*Teh lah nee.*”

“Watch it, Ozo! He has a knife,” Sami hissed. He grabbed Ozo by the arm to pull him back.

The leader tried to defuse the tension, holding up the small knife like he was giving it as a gift to Ozo, holding out his other hand palm up out to show he meant no harm. Another boy pointed back the way they had just come, back to where they had been playing in the road. Four crates piled up one atop the other sat in the road, and four heavy bags of dirt sat on top of them. Sand poured out from a few cuts in the fabric of the bags. The lead boy mimed tossing the knife at the bags and smiled.

Ozo nodded and smiled in return. The boy declared, “*Pow hootal,*” and led Ozo out to the road. Sami trailed behind.

Out in the road the boy held the knife up for all to see. He flipped it up in the air, caught it, and then rolled the knife back and forth over his own knuckles. “*Otalal, otalal,*” he said as he danced the blade over his knuckles. It sounded like he was asking a question. Ozo nodded dumbly.

The boy suddenly caught the knife, flipped it over and tossed it at the bags of sand. The blade struck with a faint thud. A few whistles and catcalls, along with plenty of words Ozo did not understand, erupted from the porch behind him. He was surprised to

see children sitting on the porch watching. Others sat in the window ledges, and still others down at the bottom steps by the street. They had an audience.

One of the show-off companions retrieved the knife, bringing it back to the leader, who took it from him and handed it to Ozo. He nodded at the bags of sand out in the hot sun thirty feet away and stepped back. Ozo looked at the knife. It was double-bladed, the edge sharp on both sides of the metal, a small dagger really. He tested its weight and found that the metal end was heavier. He was better with a stone and sling for hunting rabbits, since his father had rarely let him play with sharp things like knives. That was of course before his father was killed by the slavers. He blinked rapidly and took a deep breath. All the children on the porch had fallen quiet. Ozo swallowed and tried to ignore them, studying the bag of dirt. A target marked each bag, sloppily done in three black charcoal rings, one inside the next. Ozo picked the center bag. He inhaled through his nose and pictured a rabbit eating grass and unmoving atop the crate.

Ozo threw the knife.

The knife spun end over end and sank deep into the bag just to the right of the target.

People clapped and whistled. The hazel-eyed boy held his arms up in the air and declared, "*Jeela!*"

Ozo could feel his smile widen as the boy and his four companions thumped him on the back and yammered at him in their unknown tongue. Sami moved up next and took the offered knife for his turn. Other kids started moving up to them from the porch to play as well. Ozo and his two friends couldn't understand anyone around them, but they understood how to play.

In the middle of the fun, the original boy pointed at Ozo and said a mouthful of words. When Ozo only blinked at him in reply, the boy thumped his own chest and said, “*Panak, Panak.*”

Ozo said, “Oh, your name is Panak. I see. My name is Ozo,” he thumped his own chest. “Ozo, Ozo.”

The boy repeated it and nodded and grinned. Ozo introduced Sami. Panak introduced his four friends, and once he finished introducing them, he started to point at everyone outside playing and watching the knife throwing game. Ozo was so overwhelmed he just nodded his head politely after each name. So many names!

The game of throwing the knife went on for two more hours. As the sun dipped over the edge of the curving stone road, Panak and the other boys fell quiet.

Two girls appeared at the crest of the hill and walked up the steep road toward the Hovel. Ozo stopped and stared too once he realized the girls looked exactly alike. They were older than Ozo and very pretty. They had long straight black hair similar to Tanvi’s, but even longer. They were walking right at the boys playing the knife-throwing game. Ozo didn’t understand what was going on. As the twins came near, Ozo noticed Panak and his pals stepping away from them. Ozo didn’t move. It was his turn to throw the knife and he was ready and eager to do so, so he looked away from the new arrivals to concentrate and threw the little dagger into the bag of sand. It went in with a thud and was followed by dead silence on the street; no one cheered or whistled or anything. And then the twin girls were standing right beside him.

This close Ozo saw they were definitely older. They had little nubs of budding breasts and seemed to be all legs and long arms. Their hair reflected the setting sun and

caught the rays in deep ambers amidst the strands of black. They moved up and studied the newcomers. They looked over Sami first. The twin on the right took her finger and reached up to Sami's face, trailing it down his cheek. She did not smile as she did so, and neither did her sister. The girl was gentle about it, her finger barely grazing skin. Sami's brightness, his outward and shining expectant look seemed to bother both sisters. They seemed suddenly annoyed by him and ceased attention, quick and dismissive. Ozo was next. With both girls looking him in the face and standing so close, he wondered if what bothered Panak and the others were the sisters' weird eyes. The twins did not smile, and Ozo could see nothing in their eyes. Ozo didn't know the word to use, but the two sisters regarded him with a dull and vacant stare. It didn't bother Ozo much, it merely looked odd and made him feel slightly nervous. Before he could think too much about it, the sister on the right smiled at him. The smile was worse than the deadpan stare. Her eyes didn't match her mouth. Where the smile looked bright and friendly with lots of pretty teeth, the eyes remained dark and dull, like a void. She turned and quietly said something to her twin. The twin nodded her head slowly, never taking her eyes off Ozo, never blinking, and then they both glided past. They moved through the other boys and walked into the Hovel, all the other children silent around them on the street.

After they were inside and out of sight, it was like a blanket had been lifted off the crowd of children playing. Panak and his friends came alive. As the game commenced again and everyone got back into the pattern of play, Panak looked back over his shoulder at the Hovel. He came up to Ozo and spoke quietly, never taking his eyes off the front doors of the building. He said, "Millah, Tillah, *tiet tiet, tiet tiet,*" and he shook his head. He looked gravely at Ozo.

Ozo didn't know what *tiet* meant, but it seemed to be a bad thing.

Ozo asked, "Millah, Tillah?"

Panak pointed at the Hovel. He mimed long hair and frowning faces. He did it twice in a row and added the word Millah to the first mimed action, took a quick step to the left, and said Tillah for the next.

Ozo pointed at Sami and ran a hand down his own face and asked, "Millah and Tillah are the twins?"

Panak nodded vigorously. "*Tiet, tiet,*" he said.

"I don't know what that means, but I'll take your word for it. *Tiet, tiet.*"

Panak looked solemn and gripped Ozo's arm. He seemed nervous but satisfied at their exchange.

Ozo wished he knew how to speak Panak's language. It would make things so much easier. Maybe he could teach him a bit of it later on.

* * *

They continued their game until they ran out of sunlight to see. Ozo and Sami happily followed the others inside and made their way over to their sleeping area.

Inside they saw even more children both younger and older to play with. Some had odd-shaped dice and played a game on the floor. Ozo watched closely as they tossed the dice, bouncing them across the pile of rugs. They yelled out to each other in encouragement, but it was no use, the rules of the dice game just wouldn't come to Ozo. Soon enough he and Sami crawled back in their alcoves to sleep.

Ozo reached up toward the rough pock-marked stone over his head, but he couldn't touch it without sitting up. The bed pad was the softest thing he had slept on since he had been taken from his home. It smelled of mold and felt a little damp, but the softness was heavenly under him. He pulled the blanket up to his chin and listened to the soft sounds in the room: The whispers of other boys, a few snores, and a sound of someone scraping against stone.

"Do you like it here?" Sami's voice asked from the alcove above him.

Ozo thought about the question and said, "Today was a good day. It started off scary and ended good."

"I guess we're still slaves, though," said Sami. And he added, "I don't feel like a slave."

Ozo thought about that last sentence a while. How did a slave feel? How were the Pike brothers doing in their new home with their new master? What about Near Rock and Kellington and the soldiers who had taken them away? How were they doing right at that moment? What about Maleon and tiny Kully being bought by the painted women and the little man with the hard eyes? Would he ever see any of the others again? So many thoughts from just one simple question. Then Ozo fell asleep.

Chapter Four

Training

At the end of the day, Master Satesh always came down to watch the Game of Bells. He always took time to do so if he was at the Hovel. He would stand at the front of the room with his hairy arms crossed over his filthy tunic, resting them on his pot belly, watching everyone take their turn at the three dummy marks. Ozo was next in line. He was fair at the test, but not amazing. Panak was amazing. Tanvi was amazing. Even Sami was good at it, but it was a talent Ozo had no choice but to master.

The Game of Bells consisted of a set of wooden dummies placed at the center of the room. They were as tall as a grown man, and their cross-shaped bodies were layered in multiple shirts and coats. Inside each dummy were hidden coin pouches in pockets and a small valuable like a ring or necklace. The task was to move up to each, find the treasure hidden within, and take it. Easy enough to do in and of itself, but the test part of the challenge were the small bells fastened to each dummy. Some bells were sewn on in plain view; others were hidden down among the folds of the coats and shirts. If you managed to steal the pouch or item of jewelry without a bell sounding, you passed. If a bell chimed, you failed. The test was made harder by the fact that the dummies were built

in such a way that they would spin on central wooden posts, the arms waving around in a circle. The idea was to make it more life like, more like a real person you were trying to pickpocket. Ozo thought it just made things harder. If the dummy didn't spin and wobble around when you hit it, maybe the dumb bells wouldn't ever jingle. Thinking about it made Ozo's palms sweat as he waited his turn.

Sami was standing on the other side of the room nodding his head at Ozo for encouragement. It had been more than four months since the day Sami and Ozo had been bought and dragged to the Hovel, four months of learning and practicing what it meant to be a thief on the streets of Balore. Sami's black hair had grown out long and wavy since they had arrived at the Hovel. Panak said Sami had girl's hair, but Ozo noticed plenty of girls staring at Sami as he walked by, so that was probably not a bad thing. Sami had already made friends with almost everyone at the Hovel. He stood over on the other side of the room and had a little following standing near him, both those that were friends and others who had taken their turn at the Game of Bells. Ozo was happy to claim Sami as his friend.

“Ozo!”

Ozo looked for the voice and saw that Master Satesh had been the one calling him to attention.

The room quieted. Ozo circled the wooden cross with the clothes wrapped all over it. If this were real life, the thief would need to size up his mark. Ozo counted three shirts and three coats overlapping one another. The left-hand outer pocket bulged on the outside layer of coat, as well as another bulge in a shirt pocket somewhere deep within. Ozo had

the option to stop at one find or drag it out and search for more items per dummy. He knew the outer bulge was an easy mark.

He stopped on his fourth pass and slipped his hand into the pocket of the outer coat. A bulging bag of coins grazed his fingertips. He slowly felt around it all the way to the underside of the rounded leather bag, feeling for metal bells. His fingers found nothing, and he very slowly eased the pouch out. He exhaled in relief as the leather slid free of the pocket. He held the bag above his head in triumph.

His friends in the room clapped their hands.

The senior thief, the boy named Kalidas, asked a question in Balorian, “Again, or next challenge?”

He meant try to dig deeper on dummy number one or move on to number two. Ozo knew that whatever item was left on the first dummy was buried deep. He knew something was either on the first or second layer of shirt, but which one, and how many little bells guarded it? “Next challenge,” Ozo answered in choppy Balorian.

Kalidas gestured toward dummy number two. Satash spat a green-blue glob on the floor, harrumphed.

Ozo took a breath and stepped forward.

The second dummy was outfitted with fewer layers of clothes, but they fit snugly to its frame. Ozo bit his lip and began moving in circles around it. The coat was a forest green, and in the dim light it was hard to discern the shapes of hidden pouches. He made five complete circles until both Satash and one of the senior boys next to him let out a windy sigh. Ozo moved up to the dummy.

It looked like there was a pouch hidden in a pocket that he could not see down on the inner side of the green coat. He slid his hand below the material and felt the lip of an inner pocket. Very gradually he moved his hand inside the pocket, and sure enough touched a leather sack in its depths. Ozo moved his fingers down and around the bottom of the pouch to see if he felt a bell, and then caught his breath as metal grazed his pinky finger. He stopped. Very slowly he tested the metal with the tip of his finger, searching for the dangling metal striker to the bell. If he could push it up against the inner side of the bell, he might still be able to pull out his hand without the little piece hitting the sides of the bell itself and ringing out. As he tested the surface of the metal, it felt very strange, and not at all like a bell as he at first believed. His pinky finger traced the outline of a circular opening and nothing more. Ozo inhaled a breath and held it. He let his finger slide into the opening and on through to its full length into the hole. Then he gently pulled his hand back out and blinked in surprise. He stared down at a copper ring.

“He found the ring!” a boy exclaimed.

Ozo let out his held breath and stepped back. His heart was beating so fast and strong he could feel his blood pumping in his ears.

Kalidas asked, “Again, or next challenge?”

Ozo didn't care what Master Satesh wanted. The fat bastard could spit and glare all he liked, Ozo just wanted to be done and standing over by his friends. “Next challenge,” he said.

The third and last dummy wore a cloak. Ozo blinked in disbelief at the difficulty that one garment posed in regard to picking pockets. The material hung loose, dangling

low toward the floor. The sheer number of bells that could be hidden on the inside of the cloak made it the worst challenge of the lot. He began his circles.

There was no use. After circling the dummy three times one way and then back, Ozo stepped in and simply began to feel and search for a pocket. Ozo's fingertips slid down and underneath the cloak, searching for a fold of cloth, an open slit or the flap of a pocket. He bit his lip, and then the soft tinkling sound of a bell rang out in the room.

Ozo sighed and stepped back. He looked up at Master Satesh and the other seniors thieves arrayed along the wall. No one said a word. Ozo walked over to the other youngsters and took his place beside them.

Panak whispered, "Everyone rings a bell on the cloaked dummy. Don't worry about it."

"Sami didn't," said Tanvi.

It was true. Sami was a good pickpocket. He was quick and nimble, made it look easy, and he loved to do it, too. Sami would make a good thief, maybe the best of them.

What Ozo really wanted to do was practice out on the streets with real people. There were no silly bells on a real person -- it was just luck, timing and talent. Ozo seemed to have enough of all three. No bell ever chimed when he cut the strings on a coin purse down at the docks or out by the caravans and tents. And people didn't wear six layers of clothes, either.

But there was something even better than picking pockets. He dreamed of getting his first assignment to loot a home. Picking pockets was fun and thrilling, but he fantasized about what it would be like to go in a window and bring back riches to show off to his friends. Panak told stories of heists that garnered gold coins in the dozens and

jewel-encrusted daggers that glowed in the light, he talked of big jobs that could get a boy promoted to full guild member in one night if the thief was lucky enough, if Satesh was impressed enough with the loot. That was what Ozo wanted to do, earn a name for himself in the Mulcari, not spin a stupid wooden dummy tied with sissy bells round and round all day long.

The next boy was up to take his turn. Ozo felt a sense of dread mixed with sorrow, but also resentment. It was the boy's fault they were all inside. It was his fault that Satesh demanded they practice at the Game of Bells and not get to run the streets like real thieves. Bhimm was a terrible thief. It was true, they were all thieves in training at the Hovel, but Bhimm just couldn't seem to master the art. He was a gangly boy with a head of curly brown hair that half-hid his frightened eyes as he meekly stepped up to the first dummy, panting. Poor Bhimm. It wasn't simply that he was bad at everything, it was that Master Satesh hated him because of it. Bhimm's awkwardness and difficulty in learning the ways of thievery broke every rule Satesh wanted followed at the Hovel. Bhimm was only a few steps away from being punished or damned to remain a beggar boy for life if he couldn't shine at something, and the worst part was, Bhimm wasn't even good at begging. He approached people, his tall and gangly body looming over most adults he met on the streets, his long, slender hands out as he shuffled too quickly toward them, too abrupt with his requests for aid, and it triggered something defensive, and they would bat him away, shunning other children begging alongside him. Each encounter ended badly – no offered coin, no sympathetic faces, everyone around them trying to flee. Bhimm was bad at everything: picking pockets, mastering weapons, memorizing any sort of task. He couldn't learn the city districts and neighborhoods, the languages, the hand

signs they used with one another as budding guild thieves. He couldn't even write his own name. Once, during a particularly trying time out by the ships arriving along the Shardhar River, Bhimm had tried to pick a pocket as Sami and a group of others rushed up and surrounded a half dozen well-dressed people stepping from one of the ships. They felt Bhimm's clumsy hands fingering around in their pockets and yelled out in alarm. Sami said the Skyguard came running. The only thing the boys could think to do was shove the people off the docks into the river as a distraction and flee. It was one way to distract the person whose pocket was picked from giving the city watch reason to come after them, although run after them they did. Luckily Bhimm's long legs were good for that – running -- and he got away.

Now Bhimm was moving in and reaching within the folds of the first dummy. The sound of three bells rang out. He jumped, and the entire dummy rang with the tinkling of bells. It was so loud it sounded like a peddler's cart announcing wares to sell. The onlookers laughed.

Master Satesh did not.

He let out a muffled growl and took hold of Bhimm by his head of curly hair, pulling the boy's head back so far and so violently that Ozo thought Bhimm's neck might snap. Master Satesh screamed down into the terrified upturned face. "You are worthless! Why did I pay money for you? You can do nothing! Nothing!" Master Satesh punched Bhimm in the stomach. The boy doubled over and hit the floor, the palms of his hands slapping down on the tiles. Satesh kicked Bhimm in the ribs. The boy let out a shriek. "One more chance, useless boy, one more! And then you beg forever! No guild will ever take a fool like you. You will be a man without hands before you reach manhood." Satesh

kicked Bhimm again. “Out of my sight!” He looked up at Ozo and the other children arrayed along the wall opposite him and yelled, “GET HIM OUT OF MY SIGHT!”

Tanvi and a group of girls were at Bhimm’s side first, carrying him out. As Tanvi moved near Master Satesh with one of Bhimm’s long and gangly legs in her hands, their master grabbed a fistful of her hair and hissed something into her face. When he released her, he gave her a rough shove that sent a sobbing Bhimm and startled Tanvi crashing to the stone floor.

The most senior of them, the boy Kalidas, suddenly clapped his hands together, and he and the other senior thieves ushered everyone out of the room. They stood in a crooked protective line between Satesh and everyone else. It looked like the Game of Bells was over for the day.

* * *

It had been two weeks, two weeks in which Bhimm had to suffer with bruised ribs as he lumbered along trying to keep up, they were looking for marks and scanning the crowd. They called it liberation assignments or rangings, and Ozo loved it. He loved moving freely throughout the manic city streets of Balore. Each neighborhood had a different personality, and he liked them all. But his favorite was his own neighborhood, the streets of the Korlani Ward.

Tanvi said, long ago, Balore was a gathering of many separate kinds of people, and all from within the country of Kushalan, where Balore was now the capital. Ages back, these various clans and families ages back had settled outside the walls of the

Balorian castle, the Palace of the Moon. They settled outside the innermost protective wall, the one called the Circle of Iron, and they never left. The Hovel was located near the heart of the Korlani streets because the Korlani Clan had settled there long ago.

The Korlani neighborhood was gradually becoming, for Ozo, a place for shelter and safety. It was where he went to hide and play and eat from his favorite shops. It was where people like Manohar and Jadis let him palm fruit for free right off their carts. It was where he could leap from rooftop to rooftop, and none of the women outside doing wash or cooking did more than say a few playful curses at him in passing. It was where he was getting to know every face in every doorway. They were poor, the Korlani, but they stuck together and helped each other. Many times Ozo had found some small thing that he didn't need out on his rangings, and he'd give it as a gift to someone in need. Like a toy for a small child with none, or maybe a handful of coppers for Old Blind Adeena. She could always pick him out by smell. It made Ozo laugh. She called him "shadow boy" for some reason. "I smell you there, shadow boy. You slipping me some coppers again?" Ozo would stand still for a few seconds wondering how she knew every time, testing her, and finally he'd say, "You know I did," and then run off.

The Korlani neighborhood was bordered on the south by the Docks and on the west by the Illimar Ward with its decaying tenements. The Illimar was even poorer than the Korlani. The most dangerous warehouses and taverns were found down in Illimar. It was said if a dead body was found on the streets in the morning, he belonged to the rats and crows by night. Even the dreaded and fearsome Skyguard with their blue and gray cloaks wouldn't walk the streets of the Illimar by night. Some whispered that many of the whores were witches and nighthags with powers summoned from the hells, but Ozo

thought that was just a lie to keep people away. Most of the whores he had seen didn't even have all their teeth, and they smelled bad, too.

To the north of Illimar was the collection of dead end streets known as the Crag. Most common Balorians didn't know it, but hidden within the dark alleyways of the Crag were the headquarters of the thieves' guild. It was the goal of all the boys and girls at the Hovel to be accepted into the guild and move to the Crag some day. To become a guild thief meant freedom from slavery. Boys near the age of Kalidas and the seniors were already doing runs for the guild. It was said if you shone in Satesh's eyes, you'd be a guild member soon after. The thing was no one ever seemed to shine in fat, stinking Satesh's eyes. Satesh was the one to always remind them about being freed if they became guild members. He said it over and over like a chant.

West of the Crag and the Illimar was the Low Bazaar. The Low Bazaar was a chaotic jumble of buildings that housed many of the Caravan folk who kept their tents and rolling wagons outside the city walls. Tanvi said many of them stayed all year long. They traveled all that way and never left. They would simply take down their tents, hitch up their wagons, and move into homes inside the Low Bazaar during rainy season. Ozo hadn't been in Balore long enough to see a rainy season yet, but supposedly the caravans outside the city walls vanished once the rains set in. When the boys had arrived at the city, back when they were sold at the slave auction, Ozo had thought it was a time of festival. It turned out the tents and wagons never left – except when it rained.

Other neighborhoods Ozo hadn't seen yet, because a young child thief was easily spotted wandering their streets. The High Bazaar, the Manor District, the Garden of the Moon, and Smalltown east of the Korlani Ward were off-limits. Smalltown housed the

Skyguard, and soldiers of any sort often called Smalltown home. On the Hill of the Gods, the area around the great golden dome high up and east of the Balorian palace, perched the dome called the Golden Seat. Ozo hadn't seen it either. It was said that the Balorian royal family were decreed by the gods to rule as demi-gods on earth. They ruled all the land of Kushalan, but it was whoever sat the Golden Seat that really ruled the kingdom, for he controlled the strings of the coin pouch. Ozo didn't really understand, but the building was beautiful. Some day he'd figure out a way to get past the inner wall, the Circle of Iron, and wander the streets of the rich. He'd sneak in the bedroom windows and exit out with all their gold and jewels. He'd be a king among thieves.

Now Ozo climbed atop a broken stone column and stared up the long steep thoroughfare at what he could see of Upper Balore, the part of the city with all the wealth and power. The building called the Golden Seat reflected the sunlight like it was a drop of the very sun itself. Its walls were gold and gilded silver set with enormous blocks that threw off a dozen colors. They looked like great slabs of mother-of-pearl, each stone taller than four elephants, one on top of the other. The dome that capped the building was pointed on top like a great onion. To the west, on the highest hill, was the Palace of the Moon, and so vast it looked like a city itself. It was made of white and black marble with matching snow white and ebony latticework bridges spanning its many buildings, and below it, spilling out in a giant spiral of emerald green and flowering trees, sat the Garden of Heaven. From where Ozo stood it looked like a little hidden forest dropped down on the side of the mountain. It was said that to sneak into the Garden of Heaven was death. It was only for the god-born Balorians and their honored guests. It was another place Ozo

dreamed of seeing in Balore as he stood atop the broken pillar with his hand shielding his eyes.

Even higher up and farther away in the distance, built out of the very rock of the cliffs and tucked among cluttered, crooked trees, stood four white towers. That was where the Dhavashar Mountains really began, at those cliffs. Even higher than the Palace of the Moon, far above the Golden Seat, and looming over the entirety of what was known as Balore, the Jewel of the Mountain was the towers that belonged to the cliff mages of Bhairah-Set. They looked small so far off and high up near clouds. People lowered their voices when they spoke of them, and sometimes the old women on the rooftops in the Korlani would stomp a chili pepper underfoot and say a quick prayer when anyone uttered the name Bhairah-Set. Once Ozo had seen the red-robed mages out walking through Low Bazaar, their facial tattoos done in blacks and reds like demon faces overlaying their real ones. They were mysterious and frightening, and everyone gave them right of way on the street.

“What do you think?” asked Panak.

Ozo looked down from atop the broken pillar he stood on, startled from his daydreams of spying out the rich heights of the city. “What?” he asked. “I was looking at the cliffs.”

Panak looked in the direction Ozo had been staring. He said, “Best not to do that. They may be looking back.” He meant the mages, of course.

“Maybe they’ll do their magic on me and bring me a bag of gold so I can get in the Mulcari guild at the Crag,” said Ozo. He slid down off the rounded side of the toppled column and plopped down on the dusty road beside Panak and the others.

“Might as well pray to demons for gold,” said Bhimm. “The wizards stay away from the likes of us. They only have eyes for the stars, and if you deal with them, it is always on their terms.”

“You have both been into Satesh’s kiju leaves again,” said Ozo. “You are supposed to chew the leaves, not make it into tea, remember?”

The entire group of children laughed.

Ozo had learned much in his months at the Hovel. The tongue of the Balorians had come more and more easily to him, though there were still plenty of words and phrases that instigated giggles and blank stares from many of the people he spoke to. All in all, he improved week by week. He also learned that many of the others did actually know some of his native tongue of Movane. The Balorians were a very proud people, Ozo was discovering, and they assumed the outsider would speak in the tongue of the place in which he found himself. They would rather let a stranger suffer and struggle than to demean themselves by speaking a foreigner’s language. It was frustrating, but as Ozo made friends and gathered trust, it seemed more and more they knew how to speak with him in some form or other after all.

“Nerevar says to leave Bhimm to his own. He thinks each of us should go ranging for marks separately, but Rosha and Cessair say to keep begging,” Panak was saying. “I had the idea to beg using the Devilfish Method. That way Bhimm could share our loot and not get in trouble. What do you think, Ozo?”

The Devilfish Method worked better with many children instead of merely a few. Children would crowd tightly around a wealthy-looking mark and box the person in with their bodies, all begging and pleading at once so the mark couldn’t navigate or move in

the crowd. Usually anyone trapped by the Devilfish Method would give up coins to the poor begging children and quickly. But while the person was bombarded with begging hands and pleading faces, the children surrounding him were also finding every pocket and cutting every purse string on his body. With so many children to deal with all once, the person could never pick out which one picked his pocket, and where they went. By the time the victim realized what was happening, the group of child thieves broke apart like a school of fish and vanished into the crowd in a dozen different directions. The Devilfish was the name of a fish that supposedly could devour a man whole if he fell into its waters. A school of Devilfish, it was said, could eat a horse in minutes if there were enough of them to do so. The idea was for the young thieves to empty their victim's pockets in less time than that. But to try it with only four thieves, Ozo didn't think so.

Rosha added, "And Nerevar doesn't want to share loot."

"Why should I?" blurted out Nerevar. "I'm a good thief. He's the one who's pathetic." Nerevar stood with his fists bunched at his sides, ready to fight as always. Nerevar had sharp features. His nose was pointy. His cheekbones were sharp edged, as was his narrow chin. His lips never seemed to have any color in them, like he was constantly grinding his teeth when he talked.

Bhimm looked down at his own feet.

Ozo agreed with Panak and Nerevar equally. He bit his lip trying to decide what would be the best idea. The boy wasn't much of a thief, but he sure had most of the females at the Hovel protecting and watching out for him for some reason.

Rosha moved up close to Ozo, her brown almond-shaped eyes expectant and impatient. She had her hair cut short like a boy. "What do you think, new boy? Should I

decide for you?” said Rosha. “I can, you know. The day is wasting and so is our liberation time out here while you stare up the mountain.”

Sami liked Rosha well enough, but Ozo thought she was annoying, always trying to do things better and faster than any boy she met. And many of those things she was better at. That was fine. It was just that Rosha always had to remind you when she was better at things. She stood face to face at equal height to Ozo, waiting for him to side with her.

“Well?” asked Rosha.

Standing behind her and glaring angrily was Nerevar. He was one of the few Sami and Ozo didn't like. Nerevar always had to be the leader, and if he wasn't he'd make things so difficult for the one who was that everyone left him alone to lead anyway. Ozo really couldn't care less who led -- he never got to anyway -- but Nerevar took risks and often went off on his own. That was fine to a point. Ozo knew you had to make a name for yourself, but Nerevar was a hot head. Once Nerevar got caught trying to pick a sailor's pocket, trying to get at what he swore was a bracelet he saw the sailor buy out in the caravans on the plain. The sailor felt Nerevar's hand, and when he grabbed the boy, Nerevar had gouged out the sailor's eye with his thumb.

“You can do what you want, Nerevar. No one will make you beg if you don't want to, but what will Bhimm do if he goes back empty-handed?” asked Ozo.

“Not my problem,” snapped Nerevar. “He can go back without hands for all I care. I'm out to get rich, and I won't get rich begging like an Illimar bastard!”

Cessair laughed. He said, “You would call the kettle black?”

Nerevar spun around to face Cessair. “Say it again, piss hair!”

Cessair had been taken from the far-off country of Dellene -- a land of fair-skinned and pale-haired folk. The boy spoke Movani with a funny accent, like he had a mouthful of hot potatoes when he talked. Ozo liked him enough -- it was so much easier to talk in his home tongue to another -- but Cessair had a bad habit of finding other's touchy spots and picking at them like a fresh scab. He liked to argue. The rumor was Nerevar had been sold to Satesh by a whore to pay off a debt, a whore from the Illimar Ward, and that was what Cessair brought up.

"I only speak the truth, whoreson."

"I'll kill you!" Nerevar lunged at Cessair.

"Stop it! Now!" Rosha said, grabbing Nerevar round the neck and yanking him back. Nerevar tried to reach behind and grab the girl, but she turned on her heel and sent the boy flipping over her leg to fall in the dirty street. "He is your brother! Stop it now, both of you! You go and do what you want. Go on, Nerevar. Go calm down and find your wealthy mark. And you," Rosha turned and looked at Cessair, "stop picking fights. You know not to say that to Nerevar. He is your brother."

Nerevar got up from the ground and made like he was going to strike Rosha. The girl stared him down, waited. Finally he huffed and moved off and vanished in the crowd of passersby.

"Kalidas says Nerevar's temper will get him killed," said Cessair.

"So calling him names makes it better?" Rosha snapped.

"I'd rather run with the slow learner than the fool. Bhimm needs our help and teaching, but Nerevar needs a beating."

Rosha turned her anger and her body to face Cessair. She glared at him.

Cessair made a face and then looked away.

Bhimm said, "If I'm such a problem, I can go back to the Hovel."

"We really don't have enough for the Devilfish Method now anyway," said Panak.

"We will be fine. You stay with us, Bhimm. We will find you some loot to stick in Satesh's ugly face," said Rosha.

"I don't know," said Ozo. "With only four of us..."

"I've done it with less," said Rosha. "We just need to find a really crowded area."

"That's right!" said Panak. "I remember low master Jarmo saying to use strangers in your ruse or something like that."

"Exactly!" said Rosha. "You'll see, Ozo. Follow me and learn."

Ozo rolled his eyes behind Rosha's back and followed along. The four young thieves moved out among the crowd.

Ozo was new to the ways of theivery, but he had discovered that he enjoyed the rush that would course through him during the act. It all felt like a game, a dangerous game.

Rosha led them out to the docks and far along the river westward toward the Low Bazaar with its masses of foreigners moving in and out of Balore. The Low Bazaar was the most densely populated place within the city, so it was the best place to vanish if things turned ugly. It was also teeming with wealthy landowners out buying things from far-away lands, and merchants new to the city looking to sell their wares to the highest bidder. Merchants liked to flaunt their wealth to other merchants, Ozo had been told. They had a vicious rivalry among them and always wanted to appear comfortable in their

livelihood and of high standing in the community, so they were often careless with what they carried on their person as they moved about the city. Ozo hoped to find such a merchant.

The river led them along the row of brothels and taverns that sailors frequented upon arrival from places unknown. The street was named the Avenue of Sighs because so many places of ill repute called it home. To Ozo it seemed more like the Avenue of Stench because of the smell of both the river that ran parallel to it and the sour urine coming from many of the buildings. Four dirty children ran in and out through pockets of crowds moving to and fro along the Shardhar River on the Avenue of Sighs. Rosha wiggled a leather pouch as their group moved out of one mass of sailors and into another. Ozo bit his lip. He was impressed. He was annoyed.

Panak ran out ahead of Rosha, slapping her playfully in the back of the head, turning their destination into a racing game. He was a fast boy, his stocky body moving much more quickly than even Bhimm's long legs could manage. Ozo pushed himself hard, determined to win the race to the Low Bazaar, and especially to beat big-mouthed Rosha. The Avenue of Sighs vanished behind them, and the shattered edge of the tenement buildings to the Illimar Ward replaced it. The buildings were cracked and crumbling structures of rust-red or sand-colored brick. Laundry flapped from every window. Many children ran about in-between piles of garbage and open pools of human waste. On the river's edge below the Illimar was the hill where the Skyguard nailed criminals to crosses for public display. Ozo spied the row of the dying perched up high for the pleasure of the crying gulls and greasy black crows. One body was a burned mass

attached to its crossbeam, the wood and body blackened all the way up to the top of the cross. He looked away and concentrated on running.

The Low Bazaar came into sight. Ozo ran harder. Panak was three strides ahead of him, but Rosha and Bhimm were both panting in his ear from behind. Ozo could feel his legs burning, his side trying to pinch. He ignored the pain and kept running. Then Panak was holding up his arms in triumph and slowing to a stumbling stop at the edge of a sea of adult bodies, people moving like a living wall. Ozo let himself fall against Panak. Rosha and Bhimm thumped into his back as well, and he and his new friends were like four laughing dominoes. They all caught their breath, and then Rosha nodded for them to begin scanning for marks. They wedged their way into the mass of bodies.

With so many tall adults bumping into Ozo, with so many bodies hovering above and around him, he had the urge to try out a one-on-one theft himself. If Rosha could do it, he could. Besides, they were moving in and out of several large groups of people, and she had yet to give the signal for any mark. What was the girl waiting for? Ozo spied a bag of coins dangling from a hip up on his right. The man walking was waving his hands and talking very animatedly to two men to each side. All Ozo would need to do is not be seen by the mark's companions.

Ozo took out his nicking knife, or his *tir* in the Balorian tongue. Nicking knives were tiny blades, dull on one side but extremely sharp on the other. They were never longer than the width of the owner's hand. You placed the dull side of the blade against the skin of your wrist with the point aimed upwards toward your own elbow and the sharp edge outward protecting your arm. The idea was to quickly rake through leather ties and bindings, letting the weight of the coin-laden pouch drop into your hand on the

way past. You needed something abrupt and jarring to hit the mark, so as to distract them from feeling the weight change against their body once the bag was cut free and fell.

Ozo rushed forward and bashed into the mark. The man let out a whoosh of surprised air from the blow against his kidneys, and at the exact moment of the man's surprise, Ozo's nicking knife cut through the leather strings of his bag of coin like warm butter. The pouch was safely under Ozo's shirt as he ducked and hit two more strangers in the crowd up ahead of the mark. The two new people he bumped into turned around in anger, and the two groups of adults bunched together with curses and exclamations as Ozo ran under arms, between legs, and caught back up to his friends.

He nodded at Rosha and lifted up his shirt to show her the edge and outline of his new bags of treasure hidden underneath. Rosha smiled.

"Good job, new boy, but can you get three?" said Rosha and pressed her own shirt tightly around her waist. Ozo could see an odd bulge to her belly, a bulge in three jagged sections. He smiled back.

Ozo was about to reply to Rosha when Panak said, "He's perfect."

Ozo looked up and saw the mark Panak meant. The man was tall and fat. He moved slowly through the crowd, arms filled with long bolts of cloth. His clothes were loose and billowy, made of silk in three overlapping shades of yellow. He wore an enormously wide violet sash round his great girth to fasten the layers in place. The man also had several pouches attached to the sash, and they dangled invitingly in the bright sun as Ozo and his fellow child thieves watched him waddle along the cobble street like a giant exotic bird.

Rosha nodded her head at the crowd a little ways ahead of the big man. The teeming crowd had bottle-necked near the cross section to the main road of Mirra's Way and the narrower street named simply Ring Street. Mirra's Way was the road that led all the way up to the Palace of the Moon. Mirra was the name of an ancient Balorian princess from before the Age of Ruin, or so Ozo had been taught. Princess Mirra had lost her lover in an ancient war. Often she would escape the palace in her grief and walk the city streets disguised sometimes as a washer woman, and others as a cart vendor. One day she was finally caught by her brothers and dragged back to the palace and locked away in a tower by her father, God-King Mallik. After the story got out about her wanderings, the common people started calling the wide road Mirra's Way, and the name remained.

It was a massively wide road, its cobblestone surface made of a dark gray rock, worn smooth and slick by time and use. At each side of the street were wide, dipping troughs. A gutter at the center of the road was covered over by a wrought-iron grating to protect pedestrians from falling in. The protective covering snaked all the way up the mountain, splitting the flow of traffic in two. The grating was flaked with rust, peaked in the center and five feet high. It looked like a long rack used for resting weapons in a smithy, but two miles long, working its way all the way up the main road. The two troughs at each side of Mirra's Way were open, uncovered. They dipped down only a few feet. They were so wide across a person could step off into one and merely stumble. In each trough hinged gratings opened, revealing shadowy depths below. They led down, down, down into blackness. Tanvi said Mirra's Way, as well as many other streets up the mountain, had been designed in such a way to keep the streets from flooding during rainy season. The runoff would spill down the streets like rivers at those times, Tanvi said, and

the gutters and troughs kept rain from flooding the city. All the rain had to go somewhere.

Ozo and his friends stepped down into the side trough, crossed its dusty surface and stepped into the main thoroughfare leading up the mountain. The big merchant was trying to maneuver his way past the central gutter's tall metal grating and not get mashed against the iron cross-spokes that covered it. Rosha nodded her head, giving directions to Ozo and the other two boys to attempt to do just that, to force their mark into a wedge against the grate.

The crowd had come to a stop along the thoroughfare as dozens of pedestrians rushed in trying to move in both directions from Ring Street and enter the traffic going up or down the mountain. The crowd had bottle-necked. Panak was the first to confront the fat merchant.

"Rich man, rich man, help me, please," said Panak, his dirty palms out before him, his face pulled down in a sad mask with his eyes opened wide. "I'm so hungry." Panak pushed against him.

The normal reaction from an accosted person occurred as usual. The man shook his head no and his body reacted by instinctively hunching over and drawing back and away, clutching his bolts of fine cloth closer to his person. As he did so, Rosha moved behind him and brought him to a halt with her body. She said, "Rich man, rich man, my little brother is so hungry. You have so much, while we have nothing. Help us. Please, help us."

"Get away from me. I have nothing for you! Go back to Illimar or wherever you came from, you filthy little--"

Ozo bumped the man hard and kept pushing until the man's full weight rubbed against the edge of the peaked iron grating over the central gutter. The man let out a surprised whoosh of air, and then they all bunched against the back of the dense bottle-necked crowd at the cross section to the perpendicular streets. The man had nowhere to go.

Ozo said, "Rich man, rich man, I am so far from home. Can you help me buy some bread? I don't know any place to go, and I miss my home. I'm so hungry, rich man."

Bhimm moved up last. Ozo was impressed with the boy for once. Bhimm closed the box around the merchant and pawed down the man's exquisite silks, adding his voice to the others. It became a chant as they herded the big merchant deeper into the mass of people: "Rich man, rich man, rich man." The four child thieves pawed and pushed, pleaded and begged, and simultaneously cut free first one pouch from his wide purple sash, and then another and another. The man spun in place, calling Ozo and his friends bastards and gutter rats and whorespawn. He cursed and tried to dodge each child as he moved in a circle trapped in between them, and when he finally realized what Ozo and the others were about, he dropped his bolts of expensive cloth on the road and tried to grab at Bhimm and then at Rosha. When he yelled out for aid, Ozo and the others scattered and ran in four directions, vanishing into the sea of bodies clogging Mirra's Way.

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