

Demi-Heroes

Text copyright © AndrewLynch™ 2017

The moral right of the author has been asserted. All rights reserved. This story is published subject to the condition that it shall not be reproduced or retransmitted in whole or in part, in any manner, without the written consent of the copyright holder, and any infringement of this is a violation of copyright law.

A single copy of the materials available in this story may be made, solely for personal, non commercial use. Individuals must preserve any copyright or other notices contained in or associated with them. Users may not distribute said copies to others, whether or not in electronic form or in hard copy, without prior written consent of the copyright holder of the materials. Contact information for requests for permission to reproduce or distribute materials available on this website are listed below:

lynchwriting@gmail.com

All rights reserved © AndrewLynch™

Chapter 1

Lucian suspected what the dead man had just said was important, but he hadn't really been paying attention.

He had been daydreaming. The dead man had been talking about a hidden... something, somewhere, someone... In Lucian's defence, the man had been coughing a lot and didn't seem to have a tongue. And it was probably all standard, boring stuff.

He shouldn't have been chatting with this - now dead - sentry anyway. Partly because he was getting his clothes covered in blood, and who knew what trouble that might cause - but mainly because the Company wouldn't like Lucian being seen somewhere their Hero had just left.

Lucian laid the man's head down on the ground, and put this all from his mind. If he pretended it never happened, and no one had seen it happen...

He had just arrived at the scene. Arriving so late in an assignment was peculiar, but it would be a good chance to meet everyone before their break.

He didn't know what had happened to his predecessor, and he had to admit he was curious. Who wouldn't be in this line of work? He hoped to find out without having any questions asked about his own previous group. He had only just stopped drinking himself to sleep. Apparently

that was just the right time to be sent back into the field - the Company certainly had an odd definition of psychologically sound.

It was for the best. Lucian hadn't much enjoyed drowning his sorrows - he really didn't like the taste - but any other options that allowed him to not dream of his mistakes were either far more expensive, or far more dangerous. Usually both.

The sentry had collapsed by the drawbridge on the far side of the moat which surrounded the necromancer's castle. A standard affair, skeletons hanging, heads on pikes, and spiky bits everywhere for good measure. Lucian had seen the architect's work before of course - all villains used the same company - classic stuff, and he could really appreciate the broad strokes of it.

There was a figure waiting at the entrance archway along with a supply wagon. As he closed in he could tell it was an Elf - male or female was always hard to distinguish - wearing a flowing red robe embroidered with silver threads, and holding a golden staff. Probably not real gold, of course, that would just be a terrible idea - however the Elves were nothing if not flamboyant, with a casual disregard for subtlety.

'Well met!' Lucian shouted with a big smile as soon as he was within shouting range. He'd been travelling on his own for the past two weeks, so any interaction was a welcome change.

He was met with silence, and an unchanged posture until he was within speaking distance. He wouldn't say the Elf had a rod shoved up somewhere, but it certainly seemed like it.

'I'm Lucian Huxley,' he tried again. 'Your new commander.'

'Hmm. And here I thought someone else had, on the spur of the moment, decided to journey to the middle of nowhere and approach an evil castle,' the Elf replied. Unnecessarily haughtily, he felt.

Lucian cleared his throat. 'Yes, well, you never know.' Perhaps their role in the group was to make people feel awkward. A rather specialist skill, admittedly. 'And you are?'

'Jezithel Tharadian. Magus.'

'Oh. Very nice.' Lucian was pleased he had a magus with him, their spells would prove invaluable. 'The Company didn't tell me who I would be commanding or their specialities. I'm sure it will be a pleasure to see you in action.'

Jezithel stared at him with narrowed eyes, perhaps considering if that was a double entendre that deserved retribution. She finally decided on, 'Let us find the others.'

They walked across the drawbridge, which had no doubt been lowered a few hours ago by the Hero. You could tell a lot about a villain by his choice of moat. Necromancers tended to prefer a

lake of tortured souls, but this one had gone with a bottomless chasm surrounding his entire castle. Unexpected, but it got the point across.

They continued under the portcullis and through the winding corridors of the necromancer's castle. 'Who else have I got under my command?'

'You should see them for yourself. "Rabble" is how I would describe them.'

Lucian chuckled. 'And I suppose they sent you for your winning personality?'

'I was the only one that could remember the way.' She kept her eyes straight forward.

'This old place?' He was surprised the others didn't know the layout. It showed that they probably didn't study strategy and tactics quite like him. That was the difference between him and everyone else. He was there with a purpose - at least, a purpose other than getting paid. He knew, that with enough hard work, he could become the one that had followers cleaning up after *him*. He could be the Hero.

'It's just a standard pre-sum castle number six with a skeleton aesthetic.' As he said this he walked into a large cobweb and had a moment of extreme arm flailing to remove it. 'Maybe too heavy on the aesthetic.'

She seemed rather unimpressed by this, and continued to walk along the path he knew would take him to the throne room - or in the skeleton aesthetic, the bone room. Her robe was clean despite the dust hanging around the place and the weeks she would have spent travelling. She had the classic Elf look of long blonde hair, blue eyes, pale skin, and was thin as a waif. Not to mention she had about a foot on Lucian in height despite him being average.

No, not a foot, Lucian chided himself, thirty centimetres. The effects of the Imperial war were still slow in taking hold after Lord Metriouisc changed everything.

The castle had dark purple torches mounted along the walls, partly to illuminate the flagstone corridors, partly to let everyone know it was evil. Anyone that used magical fires clearly had more money and power than sense. Hence, evil.

His brain went into work mode, surveying the current state of the castle.

They'd leave all of these torches burning for as long as possible. They'd leave the cobwebs - those were an excellent touch. Some of the bone dust would have to be swept up, and any random bones from defeated skeletons would need to be stacked in a corner - he couldn't have a trip hazard lying around when the tours began.

He always liked the smell of bone dust. To some it was musty, cloying. To him it was the glorious smell of vanquished villains and heroism. He wished he could bottle the fragrance, and the effect. It might hurt his chances with the ladies, but it might also propel him to a heroic

stature. The sacrifices he had to make... Apart from that, this would be a pretty simple clean up. Much easier to deal with than a dragon's hoard or a volcano lair. And he could see most of it had already been done, presumably by his new team who had been hard at work.

They rounded the last corner, and the bone room was in front of them. The always peculiar feeling of magic emanated heavily from this room. The final fight had definitely occurred here recently. The room itself was filled with more of the flagstones from the corridors, large purple torches, and several pillars. Nothing out of the ordinary for this pre-summoned castle. Two men worked industriously, one stacking bones artistically around the sides of the room, and the other sweeping bone dust and chips into a pile. A third man helped with the sweeping.

Sorry, "helped" with the sweeping.

As this third man wasn't doing anything constructive, he was the one who saw the couple enter.

'Ahh, you found 'im?', he shouted, slightly louder than necessary.

'No. It is someone else that came to explore an evil castle,' Jezithel said.

'Bah, piss off, Elf.' He dropped his broom and walked up to Lucian.

Lucian stuck his hand out to greet the man, who ignored it and stopped walking only once all notion of personal space was gone. He wouldn't be surprised if the man's name was halitosis.

He stood and examined Lucian from several angles. 'You the new strat guy?'

'I prefer Commander, but Leader will do.'

'Yeah, yeah, sure. Why are you covered in blood?' He made a wet sniffing sound and wiped his nose on his sleeve.

'Oh, umm, there was a henchman still alive.' Lucian had put that so successfully out of his mind that he'd forgotten the man's blood was still all over him.

'That's fair. I'm Khleb, boss.'

'Hello, Khleb. Lucian Huxley, your new commander. What do you do around here?' he asked the man. In fact, Khleb reminded Lucian more of a Goblin than a man if you ignored his height. Pasty skin, nearly bald, and was probably nicknamed "The Crook" in school - not for his morals, but his nose. Still, looks could be deceiving.

'Little as possible, boss.' Khleb finally took a step back and Lucian could start breathing again. Khleb also stopped staring suspiciously at Lucian and slapped him on the back.

'You'll do!' He laughed and went back to almost sweeping.

'He is our thief, Khleb,' said Jezithel. 'I am sure he has a second name, but I do not care what it is.'

'I prefer, "rogue",' Khleb said, as he spat on the floor. 'Entices the ladies more.'

Lucian didn't exactly have high hopes for the rogue of the group, but maybe this Khleb had more to him than met the eye. Maybe he had hidden depths.

'Oh, and if you ever need a little something, just let me know.' Khleb pulled back his Company issued cloak to reveal several pouches of what were definitely illegal substances.

Nope. No hidden depths.

'Jess, how about an introduction for the group's leading man?' the one who had been stacking bones said.

Jess sighed, presumably hoping that this human desire to shorten her name wouldn't spread. Too late. Lucian had already mentally changed her name. 'This is Darrius.'

Darrius waited a beat before miming she should continue. 'Darrius Anderson. Incubus,' she said, clearly hating that she had somehow become the official introducer.

Darrius chuckled. 'Not a literal Incubus, of course, sir. That's just Jess here feigning disinterest. She's resisted my charms for a while, but I can tell she's softening.' As he said this he magicked a rose from some hidden pocket and offered it to her.

She slapped it out of his hand and went to stand in a corner.

'Or not. Hard to tell with Elves. Anyway, I'm the man to go to when you can't fight or steal your way out of a sticky situation. I'm a professional seducer. A ladies man, if you will. Maybe, even, a bard.' At this he gave a small bow, and would have tipped his cap had he been crude enough to wear one indoors. He was half a head taller than Lucian, well tanned, and clearly he kept himself in shape. His brown hair was typical for someone raised in the Empire's capital, and Lucian had to admit that the way it dangled artfully in front of his face was rather striking - impractical for action as it would require constant brushing to one side, but striking.

'A pleasure to meet you.' Lucian said, and shook hands with Darrius. They both smiled at the chance of new, polite, social interaction.

'I confess, I've never worked with a bard before. Have you seen any notable actions?'

'Oh yes, of course, sir! Why, just on this assignment, we found ourselves needing to relocate a particularly surly farmer's daughter who just wouldn't leave the cows unattended.'

'I could have tended to her needs, if you know what I mean.' Khleb winked.

Jess threw one of the many bones at him and said, 'No one would touch you with a barge pole. Go back to being bone idle.'

'That a pun? Lowest form of wit, you know, Elf.' Khleb said with venom.

'That is sarcasm, idiot,' Jess said.

'No, I was being serious.'

Lucian and Darrius ignored their little spat. 'Needless to say, I relocated her allowing the rest of the group to do their work. Quick, and no one harmed, sir.'

'As I recall, *you* were harmed,' Jess said, clearly determined to make sure nothing but the truth came out.

'A bit more skilled with a rolling pin than expected, sir,' Darrius said defensively.

Lucian was slightly taken aback. 'You needed a rolling pin to... relocate her?'

'He was chased out of the farmer's kitchen,' Jess said, 'and she caught him outside. She gave him a stern talking to and a few whacks.'

'Yes, well... these things are really a numbers game. You can't expect every woman to fall for you. I have a very admirable record of fifty / fifty with the ladies, thank you, Jess.'

'Quantity, not quality. That's what I say too.' Khleb felt he was aiding Darrius' argument.

'Not quite sure why, but I do often find myself tangled up with barmaids, farm daughters, and rolling pins.' For a second Darrius seemed in deep contemplation over this, but that quickly vanished. 'Life of a bard, I suppose!'

With a roll of her eyes, Jess pushed on, eager to be able to go back to looking imperious while doing no work. 'Finally, we have Garadan Thalkom Thalmek, the brute.'

The last man stopped sweeping, and Lucian had a chance to examine the mountain of a man. Large and well muscled, with skin the colour of obsidian. Lucian wasn't sure why he had taken such an interest in geology at school - its only practical purpose was identifying cave walls and making great similes. Garadan was swathed in a large fur coat that looked too warm. Leather straps and metal plates in the style of a gladiator covered his right side, and a small buckler was slung on his back along with a gigantic, battered sword.

'I don't think calling him a brute is quite fair,' Lucian said.

'She right,' Garadan said.

'Oh. Okay then. I take it you are the noble fighter of the group?'

'Not noble.' He had trouble getting his accent around the word noble. 'So, brute.'

'Well, a good thing you're on our side!' Lucian said awkwardly, unable to read the man. 'What do you prefer to be called? I don't know if I can say Garadan Thalk...'

Garadan drew his sword and held it by his side. A gnarled old thing that looked like it had doubled as a club more than once, and could be used one-handed only because of the man's strength.

'In Karakgar, say name wrong? Insult.' Once happy that Lucian would be quiet and wasn't going to insult his honour, the brute sheathed his sword. 'Gar. Fine.'

Lucian had never encountered one of the men from Karakgar before. Known for their hardiness and strength, they were highly sought after as warriors in the Empire. They were also known for their complete inability to master the Empire's language.

'Well, Gar. I'm glad to have you by my side, and you don't seem at all like a brute.' Lucian tried his hardest to say this while not staring at the sword.

Gar grunted and then went back to sweeping.

'All right. Well, now that I've met the whole team, let's finish the cleanup and get out of here.' Lucian clapped his hands and then realised there was no broom to join in the sweeping. He glanced quickly around, not wanting to seem indecisive, then saw the necromancer's throne standing proud at the end of the room, and started towards it to arrange the scene.

'I should let you all know that I'm a master tactician. Very little gets past me, so don't worry, you're in good hands. I won't let you down.' Lucian moved with purpose as he tried not to let his uncertainty show.

Half way across the room he spotted a corpse, robed in black and purple with an elaborate skeleton helmet, pinned to the wall by a black, iron-shod staff through its heart. 'I assume this is it?'

Khleb stopped doing nothing to answer. 'Yup. The necromancer.'

'Nice position. Really tells a tale. The Company will like this.'

'Not as good as Moxar's last quest, of course,' Khleb said.

'Oh? I've been... holed up, and hadn't heard,' Lucian said. 'Did he do a *really* good job on the Banished Baron, then?'

'It was rather impressive, indeed,' Jess joined in. 'The Baron was beheaded on his own throne. Moxar managed to make the head fly up onto the chandelier. Very elegant.'

'Keeping everything else intact.' Darrius said. 'A real craftsman.'

'He know his work,' Gar agreed.

Lucian knew that admiring their Hero could pull a team together. He'd heard of Moxar Lightshield before of course, he was one of The Trio. The most popular Heroes the Company

followed. Until now, Lucian had only been following middle tier Heroes, so such a big jump to a Trio member like Moxar had come as a pleasant surprise. Finally his work was getting noticed.

‘Until this idiot tried to clean the scene,’ Jess said.

‘Oi.’ Khleb shrunk at the accusation, knowing it was his fault, but also not being able to resist arguing with Jess. ‘I weren’t trying to clean nothing. He had a very shiny ring and clearly wasn’t using it anymore.’

‘Nothing good if mess with scene,’ Gar agreed.

‘Pfft, don’t join in with the Elf.’

‘Well, what happened?’ Lucian asked, curious to find how the previous commander fell. Something he hoped he could avoid with his superior skills. Well, maybe he’d need to keep training. He wasn’t sure how to specifically train to “not die”.

‘I had already sensed the power coming from the Baron’s corpse, but did not feel the need to mention it,’ Jess said, angry not just at Khleb, but at herself. ‘What idiot disturbs the final scene?’

Lucian glanced at the Necromancer’s corpse hoping something similar wouldn’t happen today.

‘I have impulse issues...’ Khleb said, knowing he’d done wrong. Disturbing a final scene was a sackable offence.

‘Impulse issues that got our commander killed, I’m afraid,’ Darrius said without his previous smile. ‘Third one in as many journeys.’

‘Let’s work.’ Gar said.

After some awkward silence and everyone shuffling back to their tasks, Lucian, putting out of his mind the fact that this group had gone through three commanders in as many assignments, went back to talking shop. ‘So, we’ll get everything cleared for... what’s Moxar’s schedule?’

‘Week,’ Gar said.

‘Plenty of time then. We’ll finish the preliminary cleanup, and then the rest of the Company’s men should arrive in a few days and set everything up for the tours.’ He was mainly talking to himself now. ‘Right. Well, I’ll get to the throne and give it a shine. Let’s keep the slip-ups to a minimum.’

Lucian carried on towards the other end of the room. The throne was another standard issue bone-themed addition to the castle. What wasn’t a standard addition was the floor plate just before the throne - the one that depressed as he stepped on it. Generally not used, as inevitably the one sitting on said throne was the most likely to forget, and stand on it.

Not the best way to make a good impression on his team.

Everyone froze as they heard the distinctive click of the trap. For a second nothing happened and they all had the chance to stare daggers at Lucian.

‘Master tactician, my arse,’ Khleb said into the silence.

But it was okay. Necromancers were big on ritual and made sure these sorts of traps usually required blood to activate. So the group was safe. It was at that moment that Lucian remembered what had happened just before he arrived at the Necromancer’s castle. He had thought the sentries dying words were a warning, but now that he considered it, they might have been more of a spiteful promise. And a bloody corpse. A bead of nervous sweat trailed down his nose, pulling with it the tiniest remnant of blood that had smeared on his face. The drop landed at his feet.

A low pitched wail began, emanating from, rather specifically, nowhere. It grew louder and the party drew their weapons as one. The piles of bone which Darrius had spent hours stacking, rattled and began to form shapes.

‘Time to run!’ Lucian shouted, and turned to follow his own advice.

‘My kind of strategy!’ Khleb said as he sprinted for the exit.

Before any of them reached that lone exit, a portcullis slammed down, trapping them all inside. They screeched to a halt and looked longingly at the now blocked path to safety. They heard rattling and scraping behind them.

‘Shall we look?’ Darrius asked.

‘Don’t want,’ replied Gar.

Jess stood up straight. ‘We must.’

‘No, no,’ said Khleb. ‘I like my ignorance.’

‘Don’t worry, team. We can handle whatever it is. We have to do it.’ Lucian turned, shortly followed by the others.

‘Piss off!’ Khleb said.

‘That is quite a bugger, yes,’ said Darrius.

‘I do not like getting our commander killed,’ Jess said. ‘I like our commander getting us killed even less, Human.’

‘Gartumfug!’ No one knew what Gar meant but they all agreed with the sentiment.

A dozen armoured skeletons stood in two rows before them, battle axes held menacingly.

‘It could be worse. Stand fast, I’ve got a plan—’ Lucian began.

As he tried to formulate the plan he claimed to already have, the skeletons began marching forward. The group took an instinctive step back.

However, with the first step, the skeletons crumbled into piles of bone once again. All except one.

‘Uhh, Jess?’ Lucian asked, but not taking his eye off the skeleton.

‘The trap must have held a small amount of the necromancer’s power but be designed to draw more from him. With him dead, it only has enough for a single minion.’

‘Right. Five of us, one of him. Just hit it!’ Lucian shouted.

They knew the dangers, but as the perceived threat had just dropped eleven fold, they felt emboldened. They surged forwards, Gar leading the charge with his battered sword held high in one hand, and Darrius close behind brandishing his rapier. Khleb skirted to the outside drawing twin daggers, waiting for his moment. Jess took a ready stance at the back of the room, staff in hand, and Lucian would have liked to have drawn his bow, but knew that was pointless - an arrow couldn’t harm a skeleton - so pulled out his hatchet.

Being the first time he’d see his new group fight, Lucian decided to hang back and see how they handled things - just close enough to dash in if they needed help.

Gar arrived first and delivered a massive overhead swing, but the skeleton blocked it with the haft of its battle axe. Gar let his momentum carry him around the skeleton and turned to face its rear. Lucian was impressed. Clearly Gar was no stranger to battle positioning. Gar then dropped his sword and took hold of his buckler. Lucian presumed he had his reasons, or was going to die very quickly.

Darrius was a close second into the fight. He stopped within striking distance of the skeleton, shouted a wordless battle cry, and lunged. The rapier went straight through the skeleton. Skeletons don’t show emotion, but Lucian interpreted its blank face as a smirk. The skeleton turned to face Gar, its ribs ripping Darrius’ rapier from his hands.

Darrius scrambled to get his weapon back, leaving the skeleton’s rear open for a devastating fireball. It didn’t come.

Maybe Jess’ timing was off? Lucian tore his eyes from the skeleton for a momentary glance at her. Sure enough, the fireball was being readied. It seemed smaller than he expected, but fire’s fire.

Actually, it wasn’t so much a fireball as it was a spark. A large spark that went nowhere, with a frustrated looking Jess cursing at her staff. Maybe the necromantic magics were messing with Jess’ finely tuned Elven senses.

Khleb wasted no time. Seeing the exposed back, he darted in and landed a flurry of blows. Lucian heard and saw the first damage done as several ribs clattered to the floor. Khleb's follow up was to jog slowly away from the skeleton and lean against a wall, panting.

The skeleton didn't seem to care about minor annoyances such as not having ribs, and swung his axe down against Gar's shield. Gar absorbed the impact with his buckler, the blow shaking his whole body. With a curse he braced himself for another hit.

Lucian could see Gar's buckler wouldn't survive many more heavy blows. It was time to show the team he was a useful addition to their fighting force. He leapt forward for his own attack. Just as Gar took another hit, pinned in place by the barrage, Lucian swung his hatchet against the skeleton's helmet. It made an impressive gonging sound, and the skeleton casually swung one hand backwards to swat Lucian away.

Lucian ducked but didn't need to, as Darrius had just returned to the fray and managed to block the skeleton's hand for Lucian.

With his face.

Darrius sprawled out on the floor and groaned.

'Weapon,' Gar said between attacks.

'I'm using mine!' Lucian shouted defensively as he swung at the skeleton again, loosening another rib.

'Take mine!' Gar bellowed.

Lucian hadn't considered it before, but if he could manage one good swing at the skeleton with Gar's monster of a sword, then this fight might be over.

'He's standing on it!'

Gar grunted a foreign curse, and after the next swing from the skeleton, smashed his buckler into the skeleton's face. The skeleton staggered back, but the buckler fell to pieces.

Lucian dashed for the sword and struggled to heft it up while Gar grappled with the skeleton.

Lucian braced himself for the effort, and lifted the sword to rest on his shoulder. With a quick gasp of breath he shouted, 'Break!'

Gar shoved the skeleton, allowing himself to jump backwards and giving Lucian all the room he needed. With a precision that would have been heroic if it hadn't been a complete accident, the battered old weapon cleaved the skeleton in two, the impetus of the sword's weight doing all the work. Lucian grinned in triumph. He had rather forgotten the whole battle had been his fault.

The others clearly had not.

There was a long, silent, pause. Lucian felt there was a definite air of tension as he received several glares. Four glares, if he counted.

He went into triage mode - got to keep the team together - and made sure that Darrius was breathing. Luckily not only was he able to breathe, but he was also able to wheeze out a, 'Happens to the best of us.'

Lucian gave a bashful smile and tried to preempt the complaints by taking control of the situation.

'Great job everyone, I noticed a few issues that I think we can—'

'Oh, noticed something did you? Maybe next time, notice the trap!' Khleb shouted, perhaps more annoyed that he was still winded from having to exert himself, than upset by the whole trap triggering ordeal.

'Even the thief noticed it,' Jess said.

'Yeah!' Khleb agreed. 'Wait, why "even"?''

'Because you are an insufferable fool, and anything that is not female with a pulse is normally beneath your attention.'

'Pulse isn't a deal breaker,' Khleb shrugged. 'But piss off! / actually did something!'

'I would have done something if there had been an opening, but the *commander* was clearly about to block my shot!'

'Oh, getting heated now? Could have done that during the fight! But nah, there's always an excuse.'

'He's not blocking my shot now.' Jess started to bind magic to her staff.

'Jezithel! You will not maim Khleb!' Lucian projected his voice and hoped the echo caught her attention. Sure enough, the glow from her staff ceased. 'Do you understand?'

She tapped her staff on the floor several times in annoyance, deciding whether to push the issue or not. 'Fine.'

'Whatever, she's thrown her little sparks at me before. Don't care.' Khleb added pointedly, "'Master tactician"? "Very little gets past you"? "Won't let us down"?''

'Come off it now, Khleb,' Darrius said, trying to rise to Lucian's defence, but his nose started bleeding profusely half way up. He lay down again. 'Could have happened to anyone. Bit of help here?'

Lucian noticed Gar hadn't joined in with this latest argument. He was massaging his wrist, his face scrunched up in pain. 'Are you okay?' Lucian asked, before realising how stupid a question it was given the evidence.

'Know layout of castle. Don't know where trap?' Gar said.

'Well, I've never actually been inside this variant before,' Lucian said, removing some bandages from his satchel. 'Just books, you know? Did the battering from the axe break your wrist?'

'No. Skeleton no problem.' Lucian looked at the splintered buckler but let Gar continue. 'Kakthar wrists. Weak. I hit things, they hurt. Not things, my wrists.'

'Weak wrists, our old chap here has, hence not really liking using swords,' Darrius helped.

'A warrior with weak wrists?' Lucian took Gar's hand to bandage it, but Gar swiped the bandages from Lucian and shouldered past him. He knelt and started bandaging Darrius' face.

'Pfft. Warrior. Give anyone sword and shield, call them warrior, they are warrior.'

'And who cares about their past training and their present joints. Right?' Darrius said.

'Ha. Right.' Gar said.

'Any spare bandages? I swear, my sides are splitting,' Khleb said.

'No,' they all said in unison. Jess may have added "Idiot" after it. It was hard to tell with the echo.

All things considered, this hadn't been his worst introduction to a new group. Not by far. But still, Lucian resigned himself to an awkward few weeks of travelling as he led his group back to the capital and their commerce break.

Chapter 2

Lucian had been back in the capital for less than a day when he found himself stumbling out of one of his old haunts. He had gone back there out of habit. He didn't like the tavern, and he didn't even want to drink again. He was just bored. Now his vision was blurry and his legs uncoordinated. The barkeep shouted something very insulting, but it didn't seem to matter in his current state.

Maybe he hadn't just been bored. Maybe he'd wanted to forget. But right now, he couldn't remember what it was he was trying to forget.

Success!

'Don't bother,' the barkeep said to the guild-provided roughers. 'He doesn't have any coin on him.'

'Yeah well I...' Lucian stuttered for a few long seconds. 'I spent it all inside.'

The barkeep walked back inside, shouting over his shoulder, 'You've only had one.'

Lucian did some quick drunken mental arithmetic. Huh. He could only remember the one drink, that much was true. Clearly even after two months of this Company mandated "drowning your sorrows" time, and meeting a new group, he still couldn't handle his ale.

He started home, stumbling all the way, getting a lot of solid drunken mumbling done in the brisk night air. He skirted around the slums of the city, the Monarch district. He was lucky not to live there, but only thanks to being gainfully employed as a Company man.

Employed... oh damn! Thinking of his job reminded him of why he had ended up in that tavern. Just before he was able to fully remember, he heard a scream.

He'd made it outside the walls of the capital now, nearly home. No guards would be patrolling, so maybe this could be his chance. He could redeem himself. Prove he wasn't as useless as he felt.

His drunken stumble quickened to a drunken march. He rounded a building close to where he had heard the cry, and saw... not quite what he had expected.

A woman was surrounded by three men. These men were the sort even he, a well trained Company man, would dread to meet. Two of the men were on the floor, rolling around holding vital parts. Now that he thought about it, the scream hadn't been female.

Lucian slurred the shout, 'Shtop!'

Sure enough, the woman did stop, no doubt due to Lucian's commanding presence. She released the thug's throat, dropping him to the ground.

'Why?' she shouted back.

Lucian advanced on the scene, and realised he had left his weapons elsewhere. 'Well, they look thoroughly done, to be honesht, sir... err, madam.'

The woman looked at her assailants. 'I suppose these ones are. But there's two more right behind you. You mind?'

Lucian spun, and sure enough two burly men were bearing down on him. With no weapons, he did the only thing he could think of in his current drunken state. He curled into a ball just before they reached him. A classic move that he'd perfected from years of practice. But something went awry this time, and his head connected with the closest man, forehead becoming intimately acquainted with groin.

A cry of deep pain and anguish was forced from the man. Lucian decided his best option was to promptly apologise and hope they could laugh about all this later back in the tavern. He stood, and saw both men on the floor. The one he'd hit was writhing in agony, and the other one was out cold, having been hit on the way down by the first man's helmet.

'Wow, you're pretty good. Sir...?' the woman asked.

Lucian was befuddled, but rallied at the sight of the woman up close. She was striking. 'Lu...' his voice squeaked, partly because of the adrenaline from the fight, but also the fear of this woman. He cleared his throat. 'Lucian.'

'Hello, Lucian.' The woman curtsied, uncaring of the five bruises on the ground around the couple. 'I'm Lily. Shall we?'

Lucian took her arm, and escorted her home. Just to make sure she was safe.

Perhaps things were taking a turn for the better.

* * * *

The bowstring thrummed as Lucian released it. A second later the deep thwack of an arrow hitting the target let him know that he hadn't lost his skill... or the arrow. It was a huge

improvement over missing the target and having a large man telling him where he should go and what he should do when he got there. That had happened the first day he'd dusted off his bow.

Lucian knew he would never excel at close combat, and he wouldn't claim to be an Elf when it came to the bow, but he knew what he was doing.

Only three days until work began again. The Company liked to leave its employees a month between missions. Very generously they handed out a small stipend to allow people to pursue their own businesses. Their definition of business was very loose, and so during this commerce break, like every other, Lucian had continued his training school "Battle Tactics, War Bows, and Technical Axes" just outside the city walls.

Lucian's skill wasn't with creative naming, and he'd never actually had a pupil, but it was a nice way to collect extra money for doing what he was going to do anyway. In his mind, if he could just study hard and focus, then he could do anything he wanted. He already had the connections, that's why he worked for the Company. Just a few months ago he had even met the Company chief, Lord Orson. Having a personal connection with the big boss could help him realise his dream of being a Hero.

He'd started his training with books. A well read commander is, at the very least, a commander who knows where he went wrong and why he got everyone killed. Tactics and inspirational sayings from commanders throughout history, moving small wooden carvings around on a board, these were all valuable insights into the strategy of war. It didn't help that some children had seen this and teased him about "wargames", but he knew this was serious business, not "adult dolls" as they'd jeered!

In the second week his plan had been to take a small hatchet and chop down the biggest tree he could find - to build muscle conditioning, he'd reasoned.

After a lengthy trial ending in a cease-and-desist from the district magistrate for attacking an Ent, he was left with only a week before work began.

That was when he'd given himself a gentle reminder for a few days with the bow, almost leading to a murder charge with the aforementioned large man. Now he was left to rest and relax. Before the incident with his last group, he'd have passed his time in the local tavern, but now he was trying to steer clear of such establishments. Besides, he had Lily to occupy his thoughts now.

So he walked. Partly to get his endurance back for the coming assignment - they all involved extensive travel - partly because there was no better medicine than allowing the mind to

wander. While admiring local architecture, and considering just how much it annoyed him when people stopped right in front of him as he was trying to have a leisurely walk, his back brain could figure things out.

His front brain would see talented artisans repairing a bridge and think how lovely it was that the Empire was keeping such an active apprentice program viable. Quite what his back brain was getting up to, Lucian had no idea. That was how it worked.

He watched the guild of engineers repair a bridge running on a small side street. It wasn't an affluent area, and the bridge wasn't going over water, but effluence. The sewer system outside of the city walls was touch and go at the best of times. As in, if you touched it, you would need to go far, far, away.

The master was arguing with his two apprentices. They all held a variety of tools that Lucian couldn't even fathom the use of, and jerked them violently towards each other. He guessed at the cause. The Imperial war.

It was the labouring guilds that had suffered most in the fallout. The way everything was measured had changed, and rants from younger lads, grown up under Lord Metriousc's system, against their master's outdated school of thought, was common enough.

Lucian supposed he probably owed everyone a small token after setting off that trap, and started to look in the windows of shops as he passed, hoping to see appropriate gifts.

As he ambled on, his thoughts turned to the future, away from past mistakes. The upcoming Quest. Not that his group would be on the Quest themselves of course, but they would be following Moxar on *his* Quest, making sure everything went according to plan. He wondered how much longer he would have to do this before getting his own big break. Moxar wasn't much older than him. Fitter, and more skilled, perhaps, but Lucian had...

He stopped, and reminded himself to take things day by day. Eventually, he would be the one on his very own Quest.

After the ordeal with his last group, he had been taken to meet the head of the Company, Lord Orson. It's all about who you know, and now, he knew him, head of the largest heraldry Company in the Empire, Zenith Keep.

Lucian imagined that under Lord Orson's strict guidance, the necromancer's castle would have already started hosting tours. The purple flamed torches would be a great talking point, and also a warning that the piles of bone could reanimate at any time. 'So stay close to the group!' he could practically hear the tour guides saying. Completely false of course, but the tourists would love the thrill.

Then the final scene would be revealed. The necromancer's corpse would have been preserved by magic just as it was found, so that it could be viewed for years to come. The tale of Moxar being made old and crippled, yet not requiring physical strength to defeat evil. It would make for a great story. Then these die-hard tourists would go back to their friends and families and pass on the tale, and that's when the big money would start rolling in.

Lucian found himself walking past a Moxar-branded smithy along Smith's Road. He always enjoyed the complete lack of subtlety the road names showed in the capital. Yes, a small gift for everyone would be a good idea after he stepped on that trap - it had been a frosty few weeks travel back from the necromancer's castle - but he wasn't made of money. He decided to come back later to pick up a shield for Gar. He hadn't brought his staff discount insignia.

This was for the best, as lugging a big shield around would slow him down, and he wouldn't want to be late for his lunch with Lily. He'd felt bad enough the first time, so wouldn't repeat his mistake. She'd become quite the companion since their chance meeting.

As he walked back to his home and classroom, outside the walls, he wondered what the rest of his team were up to...

Chapter 3

Garadan Thalkom Thalmek peered through the window, trying to listen intently, and looking at the tools arranged on the desks.

There were tools he hadn't seen before!

He had heard rumours that a new technique had been perfected, and he was trying his best to find out what it was.

The building he was peering into was large and ornate. He wasn't an expert on Empire architecture, but even he could tell it predated the Imperial war. That one hadn't left many buildings standing, and any that were would have been used as strongholds. He marvelled at the stupid things these Northern lands would go to war over. A measuring system, and not even the one from Karakgar. Pointless.

This building had history. The blood from past wars had been scrubbed clean or painted over.

But the blood shed outside was no match for the blood that flowed inside. This was the guild hall for the Guild of Surgeons. It always concerned him that the interrogators guild used the basement for their own operations. Not that he was allowed in to see anything for himself, hence the peering.

The Empire was a great place - if you were born there. Free health care, youth training, plenty of jobs, even the poorest were supported by the state.

A blind eye was turned to immigrants though. The Empire wasn't against racial diversity, Garadan had decided, they were against people that weren't born there. They were denied some of the most basic rights, effectively prisoners without the excellent free meals package. The idea of a man from Karakgar, or a half breed from the star-lit valley, being allowed inside the Guild of Surgeons was preposterous, but once again, his passion for healing was getting him into trouble.

These were all salient thoughts, as the trigger for them was a city guard shouting, 'Oi! Burnt Ogre! Get over here!'

He was never too offended by the slur “burnt ogre”, as he was proud of his skin colour and his home Karakgar. And he knew he wasn’t really as tall as an ogre, not that he ever wanted to see one, so it was just a small insult from a small mind.

Garadan did however recognise it was a bad sign coming from the city guard.

He looked their way and saw two pale skinned city guards heading towards him. But then, he saw everyone in this city as pale skinned.

He could run, but he knew he was breaking the law just by being on the Guild grounds. He was in the wrong, so he’d own up and take the punishment. The fact the law was ridiculous didn’t matter to Garadan. Unfortunately the principles drilled into him in Karakgar did not serve him well in foreign lands. In Karakgar, loyalty was owed only to those who deserved it, not those who demanded it.

He raised his hands placatingly. He tried to say, ‘I’m sorry, fine gentleman, merely keeping up to date on the latest methods so I don’t kill too many people’ but due to his mother tongue sharing very few similar sounds, a mangled version in a thick accent came out. ‘Sorry, guard. New met... new meth... new skill. Help me, help many.’

He was always frustrated by how stupid he seemed in this language. The persecution was frustrating too, but that wasn’t something he could help.

‘Bloody savage,’ one guard whispered to the other.

‘Yeah. No Rebel Alliance scum, though,’ the other replied.

‘Get over here!’ shouted the first.

Garadan kept his hands open, clearly not reaching for a weapon - not that he had one to reach for - and walked towards them as they jogged his way, steel batons drawn.

Like most people in this land, they were about two heads shorter than Garadan. As they reached him they grabbed his arms and began to march him off the property.

He thought they were trying to be rough with him, but was aware that when such tiny people tried to be rough, it was hard to tell. In his homeland, if someone were built like the average man here, they would be considered cripples and forced to do what, over here, they would call “women’s work”.

That was another thing he lamented. The women over here were like children compared to the women of Karakgar. Tall, strong, proud people. He missed his homeland, but there was no going back now.

The two guards were jabbering on about something, but Garadan was left feeling sullen after not finding out what the surgeons were discovering. He did tune in briefly, and heard something

about not being bothered to go back to the tower, so Garadan thought at least he wouldn't be wasting a night in the cells.

They left the old building behind and started down Guild Street. Like most of the capital it was cobbled and kept immaculately clean under the Empire's "everyone gets a job" scheme.

The guards guided him round a turn he wasn't expecting. A small alley that looked as though it should have connected Guild Road and Main Avenue, but had a wall bisecting it. A dead end.

The Empire did a great job of making its weak men and women live fulfilling lives, where everyone seemed to have a future, a way out of poverty, but Garadan always seemed to find the outcasts. Or they found him because of his skin colour. And massive height. And width. It wasn't hard.

He knew what these guards were going to do. They couldn't be bothered to take him back to the tower, so they'd leave him lying in an alley.

The Empire couldn't remove all the bad people, hard as it might try.

Garadan's wrists hurt from having to hit things so often. It wasn't what he was born to do. He preferred to heal, not harm. Where was the skill in taking off an arm? Any beast could do that. Or any brute, as Jess liked to say.

But attaching an arm? Now that was his art. Harm paid his bills in the Empire, but healing cured his soul - it used to pay his bills in Karakgar. Not that he was against hurting people, but that usually ended up with him being hurt too.

As was the Karakgar way, he asked himself the question, 'Am I ready to die today?' It was the Imperial sentence he had practiced most and could say it almost without pause - only a very heavy accent.

The two guards looked at him. One said, 'Shut it, burnt ogre,' and shoved Garadan forwards.

Garadan took a step, not quite the stumble the guards had probably hoped for, and turned to face them. Steel batons weren't swords, but he didn't fancy being bludgeoned to death.

He had never been much of a fighter, despite his current occupation. He answered his own question, 'Not today.'

He roared a terrifying warcry, the like of which an Empire man's throat couldn't imitate.

The guards flinched involuntarily. Then he turned and ran away from them.

It wasn't that he couldn't easily dispatch two armed and trained guards, he told himself, not at all, but why take the risk?

He heard the guards scramble to catch up with him. If he could scale the wall, he was sure that they wouldn't follow.

They were yelling variations on 'Stop!' but they must have known as well as he did how pointless that was. It was just their ingrained training taking over - just as a body will keep spasming after the head is cut off, they kept shouting orders knowing he wouldn't obey.

Garadan approached the wall. It was at least double his height, but that meant that with his run-up he'd be able to get over it quickly. He suspected the guards would have little chance with their armour weighing them down.

Just as he had changed his stride for the jump up the wall, something smacked into the back of his head. A guard's steel baton, if he had to guess.

He lost his footing and stumbled. He would have gone head first at a full run into the wall, but twisted at the last second and was left with a badly grazed shoulder. The impact shook him, and he felt dazed. Better than breaking your neck being thrown into a wall, he decided.

When his eyes focused, the two guards were almost on top of him. He rushed to stand up, but the first greeted him with a flying boot aimed at his face.

He jumped to the side. It may have looked more as though he flopped to the side, but he was confident it was a jump.

The second guard tried to stamp on his head, but Garadan twisted away allowing him to plant his gigantic feet into the guard's stomach, stopping the man in his tracks and leaving him gasping for breath on the floor.

The first guard had decided to find his baton after throwing it, so Garadan jumped to his feet. But he realised he couldn't get over the wall without a run-up. He searched from side to side but there were no handy stepping stones to boost him over.

The guard had found his baton now, and swivelled round to face off with Garadan. Parallel to the wall, one guard in front of him, one staggering back to his feet behind, Garadan was struck by a thought.

He didn't have to climb the wall.

He dashed back the way they had come, the not-winded guard following him.

He didn't know how long they would give chase when citizens could see, but he knew this area well, and was confident they wouldn't want to follow into the Monarch district.

He burst out from the alley on to the busy street. Weaving in and out of the crowd wasn't really an option as his height and skin were impossible to miss, he'd just be wasting energy. The crowd parted for him as he ran.

The guard gave chase, but was losing ground. Also, it was one on one now.

Garadan stopped and turned, deciding that his knees would hurt too much in the morning if he kept running like this. The guard stopped a few metres away, baton in hand, sneer on face.

‘Given up? Good boy, come with us,’ the guard shouted over the bustle of the crowd, who were ignoring the commotion as good citizens were taught to do.

‘Us?’ Garadan said as he began to step forwards, hands raised ready for a fight.

The guard looked around him, and without the adrenaline of a chase pumping through him, realised that rather than attacking someone who was significantly taller, wider, and stronger than him, he might want to vacate the area.

‘Uhhh...’ the guard said, showing the level of intellect Garadan expected. ‘On your way, citizen.’

Garadan watched the guard walk away. Once he was sure it wasn’t a trick, he turned and continued home, to his small shack in the Monarch district, his ambition of furthering his medical knowledge thwarted.

* * * *

Khleb watched the Orc turn a corner, too far away to catch up with.

‘Would have been a waste of breath, anyway. Bloody Orcs.’

‘Bloody Orcs,’ the three men behind him echoed.

‘You never said there’d be running,’ Scraggy said.

‘And did we run?’ Khleb asked, turning to face the group.

‘Yeah,’ Fibrosis Fred agreed. ‘You know how I am with running.’

‘We didn’t run!’ Khleb shouted. ‘*He* ran! Away from us!’

‘All right, all right. So what now?’ Scraggy asked.

Khleb leaned against the wall of the alley, ignoring the question. He wouldn’t have said he liked the Monarch district, but it was home. A trickle of sludge ran past his boots. He’d learned long ago not to question what that could be.

‘We wait for the next customer,’ Khleb finally answered.

‘By customer, do you mean—’

‘Yes, Scraggy, I mean victim.’

It was a warm day and Khleb was starting to heat up in his cloak. It had secret pockets stitched into the lining where he could stash all sorts of illegal items. But simply selling drugs to

addicts didn't make much money. So he had a plan. He knew there were as many addicts among the rich merchants as the poor, so he'd just—

'Where's Softie Steve?' Scraggy asked.

'Damn it, Scraggy! Don't interrupt my train of thought.'

—just wait for one of the rich addicts to buy from him, and kidnap them. Not just any rich person though - he had a specific one in mind. A habitual user of darrow flint. Harmless enough substance, just gave a light buzz. Very popular among those who had to sit through a lot of meetings. When he turned up for his usual fix, Khleb and his friends would grab him. This is where it got clever, because ransom money was a fool's game. You had to arrange meetings, and invariably the guard would get involved. No, no, they'd be using him to break into his own premises, and take all of his money.

Efrac Mulhom. A wealthy merchant from the western city of Saphor. That was the target. Khleb wasn't sure how the guy made his money, but what did it matter? Cloth? Food? It was all just money in the pocket.

'Where is Softie Steve?' Khleb asked, unprompted by anyone else. 'Is he off scandalizing again?'

'Yeah. He's at the Cock Inn,' said Deadly Ted, who was as unnerving as ever, digging his dagger into the brickwork.

The Cock Inn was a rundown scandal house - although the name "scandal house" didn't mean much since the Imperial war. There were no longer any royal family to cause a scandal with the women, but everyone liked the name "scandal girls" so kept it. This lot of undesirables liked it as the women were cheap, and the ale more so.

'When will he learn? We didn't call him Softie Steve as a joke.'

Khleb had to admit that he wasn't hanging around with the sharpest knives in the sheath, but friends were friends. Apart from Deadly Ted. Khleb kept his back to a wall around him. Didn't leave a drink unguarded around him either.

'This is kind of boring,' Scraggy said.

'Yeah.' Deadly Ted agreed. 'If we wanted boring, reliable work we'd have joined the Rebel Alliance. They do an honest day's terrorising, you know?'

Khleb was always on the lookout for new ways to fill his commerce breaks. 'Do they pay well?'

Everyone shrugged. Khleb should have guessed no one knew after the phrase "honest day" was mentioned.

'Talking of employment, are you still set on this new line of work?' Scraggy asked.

This Efrac guy was taking ages. Khleb had already had to make some legitimate illegal transactions with upstanding citizens. He just wanted to get to the hostage taking already.

‘It’s not new,’ Khleb said. ‘I’ve been doing it for years. I work for a Heraldry company. We... herald... stuff.’

‘Can it really be better than this though?’

‘Scraggy, I’m sweating so much under this cloak, a pig wouldn’t come near me. And you are sat in a large pool of—’

The rest of the group shouted until Khleb stopped talking. ‘You know the rules,’ Scraggy admonished. ‘No one even *thinks* about what this is.’

‘Sorry. Been on the road a while.’

‘Is the money good?’ Scraggy continued.

‘It’s not bad. I get to travel. Meet interesting people.’ To be fair, maybe not quite as *interesting* as the ones that surrounded him now. ‘Plenty of adventure. I still steal things.’

‘Sounds the same as this to me.’

‘I suppose I get a sense of... meaning from it,’ Khleb said.

‘Oh, like when Mad Marky started working for some guy?’ said Scraggy. ‘He always said he felt... what was it? Oh yeah, a sense of purpose! Until he disappeared mysteriously one day.’

‘Firstly, Mad Marky wasn’t called Mad Marky because he was a rational person,’ Khleb argued. ‘Secondly, I’m pretty sure he joined a cult and went up north.’

‘I get a sense of meaning from this,’ Fibrosis Fred said, and then began coughing so hard, everyone turned to face him to see if he’d make it through. After a minute, he continued as if nothing had happened. ‘I mean, just yesterday I stole a loaf of bread, and that *meant* I could eat.’

‘He’s got a point,’ Scraggy said.

Khleb was on the verge of seriously considering that comment, when a man wearing what could only really be called a dress, turned into the alley.

Efrac Mulhom.

* * * *

Darrius deflected the sword blow with a smooth parry and riposted, stabbing into the stomach of his opponent. The little boy giggled.

‘Good try, David. Keep at it and you’ll get there,’ Darrius congratulated the child.

He put his wooden sword back in the barrel and shouted to be heard over the clanging of sticks all around him. 'Okay everyone, great job today, but this finishes your month's course!'

There was a chorus of complaints from the kids, who wanted to keep practicing on such a beautiful sunny day, but Darrius just laughed. 'Don't worry! I hope to see you all again as soon as I'm back next time!'

A round of cheers, and like a swarm of locusts covering a field, they threw their wooden swords in the barrels and ran away - Darrius hoped to their homes - shouting goodbyes and goodlucks as they went.

Two small children stayed behind looking expectantly at Darrius. They were twins, finest in the class at only... four years old? He should probably double check that. His wife would never let him live it down if he forgot his children's ages.

'And what do you two want?'

'Why's this the last one?' his daughter Sarah said.

'Daddy's got to go off on his adventure again.'

'Can we come this time?'

'Not this time, but maybe next, okay?'

Sarah took a long time to consider this proposal before allowing that she could make it fit into her plans.

'Ready to go?' Darrius prompted them.

They both nodded enthusiastically, but his son Nigel said, 'We talked and we want to hold your hand on the way home.'

'Goodness! Well I don't know about that,' Darrius said in mock seriousness just to see their faces twist in horror at the thought of being denied. He quickly added before it became too real for them, 'Of course you can. Come on!'

The short trip home was filled with laughter, everyone enjoying their time together during this, unfortunately too short, month.

They arrived at their home on a quiet street behind Main Road. It was filled with neat terraced houses and flowered balconies. His children were most insistent on not letting go of his hand, but equally so of trying to trip each other up. Even Darrius started to find it a bit annoying when he was the one almost falling over for the fifth time in as many minutes.

He finally released them when they were close enough to run to the goddess standing in the garden of his house. The children were reluctant to let go, but when they did, they ran forwards

like maddened Orcish berserkers attacking a fair maiden - with less of a bloody splatter left behind once their terror had been wrought. They ran inside shouting about which of them were the best at sword fighting, and how daddy would have to get better.

'Hello, my love,' said Darrius.

'Your nose is almost healed,' she said, smiling.

'Well, I guess there are no excuses now then,' he said, and kissed her.

'I wasn't thinking of a kiss there.'

'Oh, you'll be a lucky one.'

'Yes. I will.' A statement that brooked no argument.

'The kids are in, and Gar's coming round tonight.' He wasn't entirely sure why he was fighting this.

'Kids!' Darrius' ears rung from the commanding boom his wife usually saved for running the business. 'Go down the street and play with friends!'

Darrius sighed. 'I guess the rascallions won't save me from this fate.'

The children ran past, half skipping while holding hands, half attacking each other.

'So, darling, we've got hours before Gar arrives, and no one from work needs me today. I haven't gotten to see the Incubus side of you all month.'

Darrius cringed. He never should have told her that his colleagues called him that.

'I can't wait,' Darrius said, the cringe changing to a grin spreading across his face. 'Just, try not to break my nose again.'

'You know I don't make promises I can't keep. Now get upstairs!'

'As you wish.'

* * * *

Jezithel was helping her father, Lord Tharadian, create his mantle. He'd been crafting a new one for several decades, and it was a project they had bonded over. It helped focus her abilities, and allowed them some quality time together.

She enjoyed spending time in the estate's workshop. A squat, round, concrete building, workshops were always very different to the rest of the architecture found in Elvish lands. More Human. Of course Human structures were the epitome of ugly, however the Elvish skill with glass and curvature allowed the room to be filled with bright sunlight, and changed the aesthetics to something far more pleasing.

Lord Tharadian was a prominent council member in the Elvish city, which lay on the outskirts of the Empire, just before the Soulless Wastes. His previous mantle had been destroyed after his blood brother had fallen in battle in the Imperial war a century ago. He had only felt ready to begin a new mantle in the past thirty years. Jezithel had jumped at the chance to see a mantle being created, a rare sight in this time of peace among Elves.

'I understand the concept, father, but I can't do it,' Jezithel complained.

'Understanding it is half the battle, daughter. Keep trying and you'll get it.'

Jezithel was trying to infuse one of the sapphires with a protective shield. She had never mastered shields. Not that she'd mastered anything in the pressure of battle, but out of battle she was rather competent. Apart from shields. She had been focusing for several days solid now on this one jewel and finally decided she needed to eat and rest. She stood up, and as she stood a cup fell and shattered beside her.

'Father!' she cried.

Lord Tharadian laughed, 'I'm sorry, daughter, but these opportunities won't be endless for me.'

'Stop balancing things on me when I'm in a trance!'

'Ahh, you won't be eighty cycles and inexperienced with magic for long. I couldn't stop myself.'

He went to put a hand around her shoulder.

Jezithel moved out of range and smoothed her now wrinkled robe. 'I'm not a child any more. Stop treating me like one.'

'Oh dear. I knew that being around Humans would give you these ideas. I suppose you think you should have been out living on your own at sixteen cycles now?'

'Don't be foolish, father.'

'A common problem among us council members, yes.' Jezithel knew her father was only teasing, but it was very annoying coming back home to be treated like a child.

'As I've said, your mother and I both did what you do now. Working for the Company is an excellent training ground for your skills. You're gaining cycles of experience with every field mission you go on.'

'I'm telling you, I've outgrown it.'

'So I should trust these sapphires with my life?'

'Shielding isn't my speciality, but yes! I've done one already.' Jezithel pointed to the one that she had already socketed into the mantle.

Lord Tharadian inspected it briefly, and picked up a small hammer lying on the table. He gave the sapphire a solid whack. There was a brief discharge of magic, and the stone cracked.

'Ahh yes. Quite a talent, and to be honest I'm not sure I could do this myself.'

Jezithel stared frostily at her father.

'Not enough magic to block any physical threat, but just enough to shatter the stone,' he said.

'Shields. Are not. My thing,' Jezithel said through gritted teeth.

'Haven't grown out of the Tharadian temper your mother gave you yet, I see.' He gave a small sigh. 'Very well, no more shields. Hit me with your best shot.'

'No. It wouldn't be fair to you.' Even Jezithel knew this was nothing but bluster. Any council member could decimate a throng of magus apprentices with little trouble. She knew that her father was powerful enough to be one of the great heroes had he so wished.

'Very well, attack or be attacked!'

Jezithel felt the pull of magic as her father drew it to him, like wind rushing past her. She knew she was in no real danger, so stood still, arms crossed, trying her best to ignore his bluff. That rushing of magic made her heart beat faster though, and she felt it tug at something deep inside her.

With an exaggerated pull back of his arm he threw a lumbering ball of flame at her. She didn't believe he'd actually do it! She only just managed to jump to the side at the last second. The edges of her robe caught fire.

'Father!' she screamed.

He moved around the table that she'd dived behind and set another fireball in his hand. He ignored the flames now engulfing the wooden racks at his side.

Jezithel knew this could only be a lesson. She'd never seen a fireball move so slowly.

She flicked out a hand but her own fireball sputtered and died.

Lord Tharadian released a second fireball and Jezithel rolled to avoid it. Flames licked the stone floor where she had been as she scrambled to her feet.

She thrust her hand out in front of her and sent everything she had into it. It was harder without her focus staff for aid, and all she got was a small light-show a metre in front of her.

Lord Tharadian seemed to notice the flames growing out of control on the wooden shelves he had hit, and changed tack. He held his hand out in front of him, palm up, and slowly began to close his fingers.

The air rushed to meet his hand as he sucked it from the room to starve the fire. He was also starving his daughter's lungs.

'What now?' he asked. 'You can't cast magic under stress, so you're powerless against a simple air spell.'

Jezithel started gasping for air. She had never had such a harsh lesson and didn't know how far he'd go.

Surely he wouldn't actually kill her, would he?

She began to feel light headed. With one final effort, she threw a blast of flame in the general direction of her father, and slipped out of consciousness.

When she came to, she was in her father's arms, no trace of breathlessness remaining.

'I fell?'

'Indeed, daughter. I caught you. I would never actually hurt you,' he said truthfully. 'Then who would make my mantle for me?' He smiled, amused at his own joke.

'What happened to your face?' Jezithel asked.

'It has been known for generations that after your magical gifts have manifested, that's it. Like flipping a lever, it's either on or it's off. You are as powerful on the day of manifestation as after a thousand years of practice. It's only your conscious mind that stops you from unleashing your power. Well, as you passed out, the tail end of your spell got a bit of that unrestrained energy.'

Jezithel looked at the singed hair on her father's head and felt guilty. 'Well you should have had your shields up, father.' Getting past her father's guard rarely happened, so she enjoyed turning the tables.

'They were.'