

The window opened inwards and he slipped inside onto a stone plinth filled with dust and fragmenting scroll work. All around him huge manuscripts lay or were stacked haphazardly, the gentlest of nudges sure to send them tumbling. Scrolls on shelves were wound tight or sealed in leather pouches. There were a few of the new style of books, that had been introduced from beyond the wall of dawn but these were very few and very precious. The room took the scent of the parchment and mixed it with the dust that settled every surface. It was like nectar to Anaadian.

With a scramble he eased himself to the floor, knocking only a few parchments over. In the darkness the familiar surroundings cast ominous shadows that had him jumping. He had not felt nervous during his climb across the bazar but now he was inside he could feel his heart in his ears and his feet seemed to tingle. He now thought that he was moments away from being caught.

Wanting to be out of the darkness quickly he moved to the master of the quills office and finding it as empty as the rest he took the master keys. Beyond the office an iron gate, locked at all times, faced Anaadian. There his prize lay, the reason for his late night excursion. Locked away from the sunlight was true knowledge. Only the masters had access to those vaults, where ancient knowledge of the Iloven were kept and watched. Texts that were deemed too dangerous or precious for the general population. He craved the knowledge stored in this vault and always it had been denied him.

With shaking hands he unlocked the gate and taking a torch from the wall he took a step down the dark stairwell. Once he was sure he could not be seen, he took his tinder box from his satchel and struck. Every spark illuminated the stairwell, revealing the blackness below. It took seven strikes for the torch to take. The stairs continued in three loops before ending in the basement. On the wall a mark was illuminated by the fire, DANGER.

He stopped upon the fresh hold and turned to examine the way back up. He wouldn't face jail for being here but he would be tossed from the acolytes. He would have to find work in the town watch, the place his father had worked tirelessly to keep him out of.

He thought he caught sight of the manuscripts in the flickering light and his resolve hardened. In there was the knowledge he needed to set him above his peers. To be named among the great Iloven scholars.

He stepped into the room, the smell from upstairs extenuated tenfold. He had expected scrolls locked behind bars, enchantments to stop those who should not be reading them. The only spell he could see was chaos.

Every wall, shelf and table was filled with scrolls and large books, tossed haphazardly on top of each other with little to know indication of the contents. It was like the master's had collected scraps from the streets and tossed them down here at a pretence of strangeness.

He knew better than that though. When the flames died slightly, some parchments seemed to glow with their own light. From some artifacts and parchments, he caught whispers in strange languages.

Avoiding those that gave off light or spoke into his mind, he began his search. He scanned scrolls of all sorts. Descriptions of the powers of the Iloven. Guides on how humans may gain those powers. Descriptions of ancient weapons and stories of the dark days, under the rule of the Mordivine Iloven.

After one loop he found himself drawn back to a table where hundreds of maps had been discarded. He saw maps of ancient Aurdan, realms and cities from before the first Iloven wars. All lost now. He saw also maps of lands he did not know, in languages completely foreign.

'You want that one there.' A voice said.

Anaadian jumped, only instinct stopping him from dropping the torch. A figure appeared in the darkness. He had heard no footsteps and no echoing from the stairwell. He thought of the scrolls. A ghost or some protector of this knowledge.

'Sorry to make you jump there.' The figure said, 'I just couldn't help myself.'

Anaadian tried to place the accent. The voice was well educated but seemed almost too clean.

Not a ghost. Anaadian decided.

The man stepped into the light. No he was not a ghost but he was not normal either. He was like no man Anaadian had ever seen. His skin was pale, flawless without blemish or mark. He was a couple of inches taller than Anaadian, with brown cropped hair that was kissed by grey at the temples. It was his eyes, being blue, that was so strange. He had seen none but the Iloven have eyes of blue. His clothes also made him stand out. He wore a fitted coat of some clothe Anaadian did not recognise. He thought it was dark green, but it looked black in the darkness. Silver embroidery stood out on the sleeves where white ruffles protruded from the cuff. He did not wear a skirt. His legs were covered in the same fabric completely to his leather boots. As though he was a hide wearing Alpan. Yet no hide had ever been made so well.

The man was unarmed but he carried a scroll, half open in his hand. Anaadian read it, Weapons of the Mordivine.

‘Weapons of the dark Iloven? Are you a master of stories?’ Anaadian asked. The man didn’t have the platinum feather pin of a master but he had seen others not wear theirs.

The man laughed but the smile never truly touched his eyes, ‘No I don’t have the patience for long study.’

‘Who are you then?’ He felt like he had a thousand different questions but he settled on that one.

‘A thief in the night.’ He examined Anaadian, ‘But the better question is, who are you. You are young. Clearly from the city. With coin but not from wealth. A tin quill pin so a scribe and wannabe scholar.’ He stopped, ‘I’m rambling so let me finish, what are you doing here?’

Anaadian felt sweat bead on his forehead. He felt like he had been questioned for hours. While he wiped it away his mind went straight on talking, ‘I’m looking for treasure.’

‘Ahh yes. The call of adventure. Get the prize to win the queen. Isn’t that how the stories go?’

‘I don’t want treasure for that?’

‘For what then?’

‘People are starving.’ He said confidently, ‘The Aureldine are producing less and less gold and gems. Dwarves are hoarding the riches they mine from the earth and there are too many people in this city for the food we produce.’ Excitement seemed to flood through him, ‘I’ve heard there are still treasure troves hidden away in the wilderness. Great stores of gold gems and weapons that were hidden by the dark Iloven lords. If I can find some of those treasure, I can gift them to the city. We can buy more grain, demolish the slums and build more farms to feed people.’

Anaadian stopped dead. The man’s false smile was gone. His blue eyes seemed to bore into him. He felt like he was being weighed on a merchants scale.

‘You really do mean that don’t you.’ The thought seemed to confuse the man, ‘What is your name?’

‘Anaadian Stonebore. Scribe of the Acolytes college.’

The man pressed his hand to his head in some salute that Anaadian did not know, ‘Keep to those reasonings and we may just be on for a winner.’ He stepped forward and pulled out a map, ‘This one.’ He blew dust from the parchment that caught in the flames of the torch, that burnt a vibrant shade of violet, ‘The ruins of Anakdin just north of here. It was once a dreadful city. Built of black stone where even plants dared not thrive. Queen of the Mordivine Iloven with the powers of Necromancy. Humans lived as slaves within her city, then when they died they served again until their bodies crumbled into dust. One fell madly in love with her though the stories say. A king

of men who gave her all the gold and jewels she could wish for from the mountains to the south. She took them all and buried them deep beneath the earth. After she killed the man of course and enslaved his soul. Then she put a curse upon them and guarded them with the dead. Her city is destroyed now Livinya and Aurelia made sure of that. Still they never uncovered her treasure hold. It exists with only this map as the guide to it. I'm sure it will serve you well.

He took the map, 'Vile creatures?'

The man nodded, 'So the stories say. I wouldn't recommend going near her treasure but you can't leave here with nothing after your climb through the city can you?'

Memory of where he was suddenly flooded back to Anaadian and the strangers words made his heart thump again. If he had seen his climb then who else had. His feet started to itch and the whispers from the scrolls were getting larger in his ear. He was sure the last shouts from the colosseum had ended. The streets would soon be full of revellers.

The man folded the map and without Anaadian saying a word he placed it within his satchel, 'Just in case.'

'Who are you?' Anaadian said in a fluster.

The man did the strange salute again, 'The name is Denara Al Sudamine my friend. Now you had better be off.'

'Barta be with you Denara.'

The man gave a wicked grin, stepped into the shadows and then vanished. There was no a sound, or a creak but the whispers from the scrolls. The man had simply been swallowed by the darkness.

'Denara Al Sudamine.' He said out loud. The language was Araseic. The language of the Illoven. Nearly everyone in the court spoke it and Anaadian learnt it in his studies. The dialect was slightly unfamiliar though. He tried to work it out and the best he could come up with was broken and fatherless. A fake name and one ominous too.

He didn't search for the stranger. The man had left with a scroll of his own and so would certainly not tell the mayor he was there. Anaadian could tell no one either, not that they would believe him if they did. The man's appearance was like something from a jesters tale.

With the map secure in his satchel and dreams of the treasure horse in his mind he went back up the steps and doused his torch in a bucket full of oil before returning it to the stand. The master of the quill was not an observant man and would be unlikely to realise it had been taken. He locked the gate back tight before returning the keys. With one more hesitant look inside he stepped onto the balcony. He closed the window behind him. He would come in early to relatch it.

Noise met him as soon as he stepped outside. The games had indeed ended and people crossed the bazar in great numbers as they walked to inns or back to homes, complaining of the days work that would follow. Anaadian search them all from his perch. He hoped to the glint of silver embroidery. There must have been another entrance that he did not know of that the man used. Through the throng though he saw nothing. As the crowd begun to lull he swung his legs over the balcony and crossed the trellis before scaling one to join the crowd in their march.

Most walked along the wide thoroughfare to the more affluent side of the city. Where along the southern wall, Anaadian's home lay. Another group marched northwards. That crowd spoke the loudest, with bellies full for the first time in weeks. They would go to the tenements or beyond the city walls to the shacks and dens of the farm hands or quarry workers.

It was this crowd Anaadian followed. The paved road of fine stone soon changed to cobbles as they left the Bazar and then became dirt and rough stone, Dry and cracked, rutted from wagon wheels.

The smell of the city changed here too. The constant scent of smoke lingered on the ground, the brickwork and even the green trees. The buildings bricks were covered in black soot

and the ground was marred by ash that turned the red soil to dark grey. The furnace of the kiln's were cold at that time of night. In the morning, they would spew out black smoke while the workers turned the red clay that the city was famous for, into works of impressive pottery. These would house the cities prized wines.

As Anaadian walked the crowd thinned and as he reached the industrial core he was almost alone. The streets appeared empty but he could hear through the still night, the scutter of little feet and the shadows held small silhouettes. Occasionally he caught the tiny noise of voices.

He didn't hold his satchel tighter or change his gait. He walked, whistling the tune of the dance of the Neldivine and smiling at his tiny escort. Eventually a child, not older than ten, with no shoes and a face smudged with ash burst into the street, stopping him dead.

'HEY ANAADIAN LAD.' The boy yelled, 'GOT ANYTHIGN FOR US?'

He smiled, 'Not tonight. Sorry Goop but tomorrow morning you can all gather behind Dandie's. Ala will have something for you then.'

The boy looked disgruntled but he shrugged. Anaadian had never gone against a promise before.

'We checked guards for ya Anaadian lad. Did good job we did. Saw when he went and where.'

Anaadian continued his walk, passing the boy and ruffling his hair as he did, sending ash to the floor, 'You did well Goop. Don't worry I have something special for you. Oh and spread the news. Ludair is about to bring in the harvest. He will need lads for picking and for crushing. The Borde's are needing some older lads to lug some carts to. Should be some coin and good food in it for you all over the next month. Maybe even enough to get you through winter.'

'Ludair and Bordes.' The boy said excitedly, 'We will be there.'

'Ala in her usual spot?'

'She there.' He said before he ran off into the darkness, where he was joined by a procession of other shadows.

He watched them go. A city war had broken out almost eight summers ago. It had left a lot of orphaned children. The mayor and assembly did what they could for these people but there was not enough money in the city. Not since the city war and the resulting bad harvest that had seen even the well-off on the search for bread to feed their children. Still they lived better here than in other cities. The city wars had diminished the workforce. Young apprentices, farm hands and labourers had been killed in the war. There was not enough work force for the cities industry so this time of year the kids would find good work. In this industrial section the kids could find remnants of warm fires, days work for a good meal and the occasional pulp from the grapes that had been crushed.

He continued through the industrial part of the city until it gave way to scant houses. They were all one story, with wood roofs and trickles of smoke coming up through ruined chimneys. The poor and destitute lived here. The workers on whose backs the rest of the city stayed populous. There were plans to improve the city but always something else took the minds of the assembly. Beyond the ruined houses a dilapidated church hung on by its foundations. No one had sung songs to Arasee in those walls for as long as Anadin could remember but the roof, what little was left beyond the few shingles, gave some protection to the urchins and wild dogs. The only thing that remained of the prayer rituals was the single tower of iron that rose into the sky, designed to attract a strike from the mirror storm, where it would collect the souls of the dead and transport them to Arasee.

The great church of Arola in the bazar held a similar tower but Anadin had seen only one mirror storm in his whole lifetime, that being nearly four years ago. He wondered whether that meant that the souls of the cities dead still gathered here, waiting like the poor for their weekly