

A free preview of

Silver on the Inside

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Chapter One

GUY VENTURE

Guy rattled the thick iron bars. At least, he tried to rattle them. Thick iron bars, after all, aren't the most flexible of barriers. All he really achieved, especially when his quiet groaning was taken into consideration, was that he appeared extremely desperate to leave the small prison cell which he was currently occupying.

Sitting on an old wooden chair outside the cell the current prison guard looked up from a worn tome he was reading and rolled his eyes at Guy's efforts. The guard was old, in his fifties at least, tall and with a bulky frame. He'd probably been working as a guard for most of his life. Guy doubted he would actually be able to stop most of the prisoners in this block though. That hardly mattered, of course, when considerably younger, stronger, and not to mention armed guards would be present quickly should he give the call. The temporary holding prison was built with multiple smaller blocks to minimise scheming between prisoners, so such guards wouldn't be able to watch everywhere at once. Instead the administration hired older, and cheaper, men or even women to make sure the prisoners weren't up to anything. The stone walls had responded to Guy as much as much as a teenager incarcerated nearby, anyway.

Guy glared defiantly back at the old guard and sauntered to the back of his cell – little more than a metre in distance, but it was all symbolic anyway. Older guards were both a blessing and a curse as far as Guy was concerned; on the one hand, they tended to be less reliable than their younger counterparts and it only took one slip-up at an opportune moment for an escape attempt. On the other hand, age had given them experience, which meant Guy was forced to play his part as convincingly as possible.

Still in perfect sight of the guard, indeed making sure he was still irritably watching him, Guy began to snuffle slightly as if fighting off tears. What most people didn't appreciate about prisoners was that the ones who rattled the bars, shouted defiance and kicked up a fuss in general were less likely to make any escape attempt, and certainly far less likely to succeed. He had seen it in prisoners before: desperation soon turned to depression, and eventually to acceptance. Instead, it was usually the quiet ones that got away. Nine times out of ten they

hadn't given up or accepted their position. They would wait, and plan, until the time was right. Most guards thus took much more care around them. The hopeless cases on the other hand, well, even if they did escape they were usually hauled back in chains and thrown into the strong rooms soon enough.

Guy was certainly anything but a hopeless case. But the old guard didn't have to know that.

Yet despite keeping up the act to near perfection for the last two days, Guy was running out of time. His court appearance was scheduled for late afternoon, and by his reckoning it was almost noon already. It might be possible for him to escape while being transported to one of the few court rooms in Cetra, but it was unlikely. From what Guy had seen he guessed prisoners were usually taken in groups, and the security, while not tight as such, was not inconsiderable. He might be able to use his 'talents' to break out, but it would be messy, and the last thing he wanted was to be the target of a manhunt.

There would be little chance of Guy escaping from Cetra's dungeon either, if he waited that long. He hadn't seen them himself, but he'd heard that they were nasty. Deep underground, armed and armoured guards at every corner, a labyrinth of locked doors between the prisoners and the entrance, no unsupervised contact between prisoners, and he'd heard the guards there were near impossible to bribe.

He didn't even bother to consider his trial's outcome. The Cetra courts were famous for their harshness, and it wasn't as if they were short on evidence against him. Nobody would doubt the words of the guards as witnesses, and Guy had been caught at the scene. That he *was* guilty was irrelevant to Guy.

Which left Guy's dwindling time in this holding cell. He had memorised the layout of the prison to an extent that would make the back of his hand feel jealous, but he glanced nervously around it anyway. The cell he was being held in was little more than stone cube, perhaps two metres across. There was some old hay on the ground for sleeping, and a small stained chamber pot in the corner. It was currently empty, but the cell smelt as if it were full. There was a spider web in one top corner of the cell, although the spider itself was absent.

This block of the prison only held four cells, but Guy had glimpsed other blocks on his way in. The gaol's central corridor ended with a larger room for prisoner interrogation and younger guards presumably slacking off. The other end led to what could only be called the

‘reception’ of the prison. There the overseer of the prison had noted Guy’s presence and gave him a short, formal, ineffective talking down. Four chests lined the walls, holding the prisoners’ possessions. Or at least, what used to be the prisoners’ possessions. Guy doubted he’d ever see his long sword again, which despite his situation irritated him. He’d been passing through the city Drung and earned the sword by winning a tough semi-legal gladiatorial style street contest, and yet he just knew that whichever guard stole the damn thing would just pawn it off like any other valuable.

Guy breathed in deeply to calm himself. He’d just have to grab it on his way out. Unlike the others with whom he was sharing the block, he wasn’t really disarmed at all. When the guards had thrown him into the holding cell what they didn’t know was that he was able to use magic. He was no expert in its use, his teaching at the Bariux Magical Academy being unpleasantly cut off after ... certain events transpired, but he had been told he had a ‘strong will’. Whatever his High Caster teacher had actually meant by that. It was a good thing, apparently. Something to do with drawing the streams; he hadn’t really paid much attention in the theoretical lessons.

Guy tapped his foot against the stone floor, and this time his impatience wasn’t faked. Despite what the guards thought of him, he viewed himself as essentially the good guy in all of this. The only reason he was in this cell now was, ironically enough, for saving somebody else from it.

For the last week, two day prison stint aside, he had been staying at a reasonable inn and bar near the entrance of the city, the Dreamer’s Den. The name might have sounded a bit weak, but after a day of walking Guy had been delighted to find their beer was anything but, and so he had taken up residence in their upstairs rooms. The next morning he had found himself with a dreadful hangover that no magic he knew could fix. The owner of the inn, a plump fellow called Bill, had offered him some foul tasting herbs that, if not really aiding his hangover at all, had distracted him from it for some time by the strong aftertaste. Which naturally led Guy to purchasing another drink to wash away the taste, and soon he had found himself in conversation with Bill. Bill was an amiable sort of person, and the two became friends in a short time.

So of course when Bill had come bursting into the Dreamer’s Den after an errand exclaiming wildly that he was wanted for murder, Guy had felt the need to help out. Unfortunately he had had little chance to

so much as put down the roll he was eating before two angry guards had burst in after him and arrested Bill in front of the inn's clients. Caught up in the moment, Guy grabbed his own sword and snuck after them the instant the guards had left. When the guards had entered an empty side street Guy had shown himself and attacked. He hadn't aimed to hurt the guards, only to distract them long enough for Bill to escape.

At least one half of his plan had worked. Bill escaped, but the two guards snapped and managed to beat him into submission before he could even back away. The next thing Guy knew he was being hauled to prison in Bill's place. About the only consolation was that the guards were trained enough with their weapons not to inflict any wounds that wouldn't heal in a day or two, and as it was there was only one light but long cut along his side that was still badly itching as it healed.

So while Guy probably could have launched some magical offensive against the old guard, the damage would likely have been too much for his worn body and killed him, and that would be wrong. Yet as the day wore on, it was becoming increasingly tempting to risk it.

Luckily for all involved, it turned out Guy didn't have to wait much longer for his chance. Despite his increasing agitation his patience was not the first thing to run out; rather, the old guard's bladder was. Casting a wary eye around the four prisoners in the cell block, the guard uncomfortably stood up and placed the tome down on the seat. As soon as he did so, Guy was instantly at attention, although he did his best to hide it. The old guard cast a nervous glance out the door before darting out as fast as a person of that size and age could reasonably move.

Guy leapt to his feet, drawing the attention of the other prisoners. None of them looked any more hopeful during the guard's brief absence than before it, but Guy's sudden change of attitude was a rare point of interest in an otherwise dull day. For a moment Guy worried about the other prisoners telling the guards about his escape – he knew the nobles in Cetra was strongly opposed to magic, and that might elevate his wanted status in the city's eyes – but paused for barely a moment. It felt like it must already be noon by now, and even if he had a minute's peace from the old guard the afternoon guard might appear at any moment.

Guy took a deep breath and closed his eyes. Neither was strictly necessary, but he found his castings a lot easier when he was as relaxed as possible. Within his mind he reached out, feeling his way through a sort of mental darkness to where he knew the Essence lay. It was difficult to describe the process to those who had not been instructed. Three Grand Casters had once been paid handsomely by the King and Queen to research just what the 'darkness' was, and after some time they had admitted they had no real proof, only theories. According to one, the darkness was an alternate plane of existence, in which all existed but only those trained could experience. A second claimed the darkness was a separate world, a twisted mirror of the one in which they dwell, and that the Essence marked the centre of this world. The third was sure that the darkness was nothing more than an inner struggle to find enlightenment, and that the Essence was merely the realisation of powers already held. Why else, he argued, could some casters reach the Essence with so much more ease and speed than others, for this surely could not be if it were fixed outside of each?

Whatever the case, Guy was finding the Essence more elusive than normal. Perhaps it was because he had been out of practice for the last few months; perhaps not all of his desperation was as feigned as he would like to think. A few moments later Guy felt the familiar inner warmth and light spread throughout his mind.

Guy reached towards the Essence and began to draw ka'des. The Essence held five different streams of magic, all equal in power, yet different in application. Ka'tin was commonly known as the creation stream. It could be used for bringing matter together to form objects from little, or even nothing at all, although this True Creation as it was known proved difficult to achieve in even the most simple of material. Ka'mal was the influence stream, and was used primarily for the influencing the mind of, or even using True Influence to control, people or animals. Simpler minds were substantially easier to influence. Ka'cux was the transformation stream, and was used for the manipulating and changing of objects. With True Transformation it was possible to convert an object into an entirely different one, creating the old rumours of transmuting lead into gold; in reality any caster skilled enough to do so would have no real need. Ka'sor was the sorcery stream, different from the other streams in that its powers dealt not with physical objects, but those of magical properties. Enchantments, detections, traps, or other such could be created using

ka'sor, often in conjunction with other streams. Ka'sor was also unique in that it had no true form or absolute powers.

Of course, the most powerful magic did not come from limited true forms but from the skilful combination of streams. With this power went added difficulty. To draw from one stream was a triviality for those who had been taught. To draw from two was no difficulty, although in practice it limited how much of either stream the caster could hold. To draw from three was more difficult, and successfully manipulating three streams at once could be problematic. To draw from four became much more difficult, and few who were not High Casters could succeed in it. Drawing any real amount from all streams became a constant struggle, where a slip could be deadly, and manipulating and forming the streams mentally strenuous work for little output. To even touch all five streams at once was a substantial feat usually reserved for Grand Casters themselves. To manipulate and form from all five streams at once was virtually unheard of, although some Grand Casters boasted to have achieved the most powerful magic of all by doing so. Guy himself could use two, but rarely succeeded in achieving anything meaningful from three, and did not often risk trying. He had never even touched four.

In this case Guy's limitations didn't worry him. He only needed one stream to escape from his prison: ka'des, the destruction stream. The power to mutilate and tear objects apart, to wreck havoc on anything from the inside, even with True Destruction to remove something from existence entirely.

Like, for instance, the thick steel bars barring Guy's escape.

Guy may not have anywhere near the skill for True Destruction, but he felt confident enough to allow him an exit. He began quickly drawing ka'des into himself, filling his mind with its power. The way he held the flow in was not unlike a dam blockading a dangerous, destructive river. He stepped to the back of his cell, drawing further and further. To the teenager across from him Guy would look no different from normal, but inside he was struggling to hold the growing ka'des within him. There were limits to just how much magic a person could hold at once, but the stronger and more trained the mind, the more that person could hold safely. It was possible to continue drawing beyond that, but there was an increased risk of the mind slipping, and letting loose the magic held. Usually the streams were just dispelled back to wherever the Essence was stored, but as the amount of magic grew, so too did the risk of the magic forming

something on its own. This could be harmless, or it could be fatal, and there was little anybody could do to influence the result.

When his mind began straining from holding the ka'des, Guy released the Essence. It was possible to cast and draw at the same time, and with larger castings sometimes a necessity, but Guy had enough and didn't need the distraction. Mentally he began forming the ka'des, manipulating it into a form that would perform the task required. Thankfully, the task he had in mind wasn't especially complex. It was, after all, essentially what ka'des did.

Finally, Guy mentally opened his dam, and cast the flow of ka'des towards the lock on the cell door. There was a millisecond delay, and the lock exploded. Small chunks of iron flew over the prison block. The three bars nearest to the lock were smashed by the force and broke outwards, while the bars nearest those were noticeably dented. Guy smiled to himself. Iron wasn't the most flexible of barriers, and a little force from the inside did wonders.

Ignoring the shocked stares of the other prisoners Guy wasted no time pushing open the heavy door and running outside into the corridor. To his surprise and relief, there was a distinct lack of armed guards waiting to throw him into a more secure cell. It seemed nobody had heard his antics, largely thanks to thick iron doors between them and his cell. Nevertheless, he had no time to lose. Racing out into the prison's reception, he was suddenly confronted by the overseer.

"GUARDS!" the overseer – Guy thought he might have heard her name as Tahli – yelled the instant she saw him. He doubted Tahli herself would attempt to stop him; she didn't look too strong, and didn't appear to be armed. It was the guard's jobs to detain the prisoners; he gathered she just did the parchment work. Tahli instantly ran towards the large wooden door leading out of the prison. From down the corridor Guy could hear the footsteps of the guards running out to detain him themselves. He knew he probably had a scarce few seconds in which to leave. But how to spend them?

Guy sprinted towards the chest nearest the door and heaved it open. The lid knocked loudly into the wall about the same time as Tahli slammed the wooden door shut and the iron door down the corridor was pushed loudly open. Keeping one eye on the corridor he hastily examined the chest. It seemed all of the prisoner's weapons had been thrown in this one: swords, daggers, a single makeshift spear and even a shield were thrown within in it. Seeing a tiny shard of ruby Guy reached in and snatched up his sword from the chest, not even noticing

as he cut his hand on another. It wasn't like he couldn't get another weapon from an arms dealer somewhere, but he quite liked his own sword. It had been made especially for the competition in which he had won it, and although just as long as the standard long sword, it was thinner, lighter and sharper. The hilt was decorated with tiny shards, four each of ruby and sapphire.

Despite his fondness for the blade it had one major downside for Guy: those two types of gems, as well as a few others such as amethyst or jasper, made any casting much more difficult due to their strange behaviour around magic. It was a problem shared by all casters; when drawing from any of the streams, the gems seemed to somehow attract the flows and dispel them on contact. No casters had discovered why this happened any more than they had determined just where the Essence lay. Thankfully the minimal size of the gems inside the sword was such that Guy could usually manage to overcome them, but it didn't matter much as he rarely had the concentration to cast while using the sword. Anyway, he liked the look of them.

Guy heard the guards run out of the corridor into the room. It was time to leave.

Guy ignored the warning yells of the guards and charged towards Tahli at the door, who seemed to be struggling with the rusty lock on the door. Seeing him with his sword, she tried to jump out of the way. She was too slow. Guy swerved slightly and elbowed her hard. Tahli grunted with the impact and collapsed onto the ground.

Guy pulled the door slightly open and darted out, then spun around to meet the guards behind him. He grabbed onto the door with one hand to pull it closed, holding his sword up with the other to defend against the nearest guard. The two swords clashed, and the guard attacked again.

Guy ducked and twisted around, kicking the door hard open and sprinting away from the prison. He heard the guards coming after him, and winced as a sword lightly cut his back. Guy swung his sword behind him, not looking behind to see if it had any affect. There was no time, and it would only slow him down.

Still pursued by heavy footsteps, Guy headed into the first side street he saw, ignoring the few people gawking at the chase. He hardly expected to lose the guards in the streets as some people tended to hope for, but the more prominent areas the chase led them, the more likely of encountering other rested guards, and then he really was screwed. As he ran onwards, taking nearly every turn he came to, he

gradually began to hear the guards fall behind. Guy was young and fit, and the guards were weighed down with heavier weapons and even light armour slowed them down eventually.

Eventually the footsteps stopped entirely and Guy slipped quietly away into the shadows.

The Dreamer's Den was a traditional inn, and prided itself on being one of the oldest and most successful inns in Cetra, passed down from father to son, since the city was first constructed some five hundred years ago. It sounded all nice and pleasant on the advertising sign outside the inn, but in reality the Den had had to be entirely rebuilt no less than a dozen times since then, any heritage from the original founder had been long since lost in a series of convenient adoptions, and even the name and image had been altered to attract more customers as the times changed. Although, Bill had sworn to Guy on the first morning they had talked, the inn still retained the same traditional charm as it always had ... or the same block of land, at least. In truth, its recent success hadn't been much to boast about either.

Twenty years ago a Grand Caster from Oraun had attempted to rebel against the monarchy, claiming those with real power, casters, should be ruling. He was killed swiftly by casters loyal to the King, but took many lives with him. When word of the incident spread a strong anti-magic movement had begun, and despite mostly petering out it lingered in some people's minds across the country. Cetra's constant negative attitude towards magic had resulted in a massive popularity boost, and the city grew considerably in just a few years.

Assuming the growth would continue, the number of modern inns and other residential property had increased over proportionately. Even now traditional inns such as the Den were left with few customers. Bill had only just inherited the inn at the end of the boom, and so had made the radical decision to avoid extinction by going against the trend and turning the bottom floor of the traditional inn into a traditional bar. While the Den never quite got back the popularity it once had, there was always a market for alcohol and the Den became a reasonable place for travellers, or many permanent citizens for that matter, to get thoroughly drunk and stay the night. It might not have the quaint charm it had back during Cetra's construction, but it was exactly the kind of place Guy frequented during his travels.

Guy wasn't completely stupid; he knew that once Tahli checked her records the first place the guards would come looking for him would be the Dreamer's Den. However, after his rather dramatic escape the prisoners left behind would probably be kicking up a racket and it would take a short while to calm them down. It was unlikely there were any spare guards remaining in that prison to come directly after him, while those that had been chasing him would need to return and debrief before setting out again. If Guy was quick he could head straight to the Den and be in and out without any drama. After that ... well, he was tiring of Cetra anyway. He could lie low for a day or two and then sneak out with a few other travellers.

As Guy approached the Dreamer's Den he casually looked in through the large window that adorned the front of the building, letting light into the tavern. It was noon, or close enough, so there were a few customers inside eating lunch, or breakfast, depending how they'd spent the previous night. Stel, Bill's only son, was standing casually at the bar while the assistant Garn scurried around from table to table, just on the off chance somebody wanted something. Apparently nobody did, but Garn was new to the Den and seemed very eager to prove himself. What there weren't any of in the Den were guards. Guy pulled open the patterned mahogany door and slipped inside.

"Guy!" Stel called anxiously, immediately spotting him enter; Stel was not so unobservant as he seemed. Guy nodded as if in confirmation and stepped over towards the bar. One or two of the customers glanced up at him, but nobody Guy recognised.

"Stel," Guy responded soberly, keeping his voice quiet.

"What happened to you? Where have you been? Are you okay? Father said you attacked the guards that had taken him! What were you thinking; you could have gotten yourself killed doing that!" Stel whispered worriedly. Hearing Bill mentioned, Guy smiled.

"Bill managed to escape then? I was worried he might have been recaptured." Stel frowned.

"He did. Mother and I were really worried when the guards took him out. We closed the Den early. We could barely think straight – Father wouldn't commit a crime if he was ordered by the King himself!"

"But it wouldn't be a crime then, would it?" Guy pointed out. Stel rolled his eyes and sighed but seemed to cheer up at least slightly.

"Anyway, we were relieved when Father returned that night. He said that you'd attacked the guards, and that he'd manage to escape

and hide in an empty house around the corner. He didn't see what happened to you, and he was really worried. He only stayed for half an hour or so before he said he had to leave again," Stel recounted sadly. Guy was glad to hear Bill at least had enough sense to stay away from the Den for a while. Not that he wasn't concerned for Bill, but it would have been somewhat frustrating to go to all the effort to free him just to have him recaptured the next day.

"Did he say where he was going?" Stel shook his head and frowned. "Good. The guards could have forced it out of you if they'd caught on that you knew. I assume they came back?"

"Yeah, yesterday, and again this morning. I said he hadn't been back, but they didn't believe me. I was worried they'd take us in for questioning, but they decided to leave it. They turned the whole place over though, and scared off half our customers." Stel suddenly looked thoughtful. "Actually, wait. He did say one thing. Something about the gods fearing to drink." Hearing this, Guy grinned.

"I think I know where he might be." Guy had used the phrase himself a week or so earlier, when the two had been talking. He had been recounting his opinions of the various attractions he had seen around the city, and had mentioned a well he'd stopped at near the centre of the city. The well was deep and full, but Guy had claimed the water from it was so foul even the gods would fear to drink from it. He'd found it particularly ironic given how close it was to a chapel of Eiriël, the goddess of purity and spiritual wellbeing.

"Where?" Stel asked. Guy gave him the details. It wouldn't be Bill the guards asked about next time. "But what about you? What happened to you the last few days?"

"The guards were well trained. They managed to arrest me before I could get away. I've been in a holding block. I broke out."

"You- you broke out?!" Stel exclaimed, drawing the attention of several customers. Stel coughed and lowered his voice. "How did you break out?"

"Well now, that would be telling wouldn't it?" Guy smiled wryly. That, and he'd prefer not to have his talents becoming well known. It would make him stand out too much in a city like this, and not in a good way. "In any case, the guards may be visiting here a third time soon. I come here only briefly to see that all is well, and to collect my coin before, undoubtedly, the guards take it for themselves."

“Oh,” Stel said sadly. For a moment he rummaged underneath the bar and then pulled out a handful of silver. “Forgive me, but when you didn’t return I had assumed the worst, and took the coin for myself.”

“It would have been stolen by the less generous otherwise, and few others would do any different.” Guy shrugged, taking the coin and sliding it into his single pocket. It wasn’t exactly a grand sum, but it would get him by for a week or two before he had to start looking for work again. Although that only if he temporarily gave up his fondness for fine ale. After a moment’s thought he withdrew a few silvers again, and pressed them into Stel’s hand. Stel laughed sadly.

“If you helped free Father, I should be paying you,” Stel said, but took the coin anyway.

“Then consider it a small bribe to forget my name when the guards come knocking,” Guy offered and smiled. Stel nodded in agreement. A moment later he was frowning and staring behind Guy. Guy glanced backwards to see two guards walking up to the inn, dressed fully in thick, hardened leather armour and holding two unsheathed swords. “That was quick.”

“The back exit is unlocked.” Guy nodded his thanks and walked casually over to it, so as not to catch the attention of guards should they look through the window. Once he was outside his feet hit the ground at a run.

Guy walked along the side streets of Cetra, looking around in mild interest at the buildings he passed by. Most of the larger buildings, especially those in the public eye were built with stone, but away from the hustle and bustle of the commercial sectors the story was something else. The Dreamer’s Den’s tale wasn’t a unique one, sadly, and while the commercial districts may have been booming not all of Cetra fared so well. Many areas hidden from public view had become little better than slums, with poorly constructed wooden buildings built by those who could not afford housing elsewhere. With this slump came the inevitable rise in criminal actions, Guy’s own notwithstanding, and there was talk of gang warfare within the darker parts of the city that few civilised people dared to walk. Guy had no fear of such places, but knew better than to ask for trouble when it was not needed. Now these darker districts would serve a useful purpose – somewhere to vanish into, and keep him hidden until he could safely escape the city whole.

As the buildings became smaller, and of worse construction and repair, Guy knew he was heading down less travelled lanes. He had been in many larger cities with such areas, or backwards towns that seemed to be just one large slum, and no matter how different the courts or mansions in the city proper, they all looked the same. The similarities went beyond looks too, and he didn't need great perception or any special awareness to feel eyes watching him wherever he walked. Nobody walked openly here, only slinking along in shadows or taking long hidden passages amongst the buildings. There was a peculiar feeling of being so completely and utterly alone, and yet at the same time knowing you were being watched by others everywhere.

Most people would wisely have shied away from such streets, if they could still be called that, or if their need was dire, travelled quickly and out of sight. Guy held no such fear. Where he walked, he did so in plain view and at leisurely pace. The coin in his pocket jingled lightly, something that would normally have attracted desperate attackers long before now. He wore his sword openly at his side, but it was more than that that kept thieves away. It was Guy's confidence and carelessness, so rare on these streets, that kept him safe even as it made him a target. It made him smile to think of it. He knew he could still be set upon at any time, and he may have to fight for what little he had, but that was how it was here. It was about as close to home as he had been for some time.

When Guy was young, when he still had a family to turn to, he had lived with his mother and stepfather. Not that he was 'Guy' then. He had been known by another name, and perhaps in law at least he still held it. But to him, it didn't matter. A name was nothing more than a label, and he had long given up on what he had once been. Too many fresh starts and new beginnings, and a label began to wear thin. Guy was who he was.

Guy had never known his genetic father. His mother had said the two had separated only a year after his birth, that they had both agreed it was best. Even as a child, Guy had known this last part to be a lie. When he was five his mother had fallen in love again, and married when he was six. They had become a happy family, not without rows or disputes, but no more than any other.

Guy's parents had been small time jewellers, living on the outskirts of Oraun. Oraun may have been the largest and most successful city in the known world for as long as records went back, but the competition

was fierce, and they had had to travel far each day just to reach the larger marketplaces. They had had grand ideals and master plans, but never had the wealth to put them into practice. Sometimes they had been lucky, sometimes not, but they could never manage to get ahead. They traded small jewels and jewellery, earrings and the like. They bought the raw materials, what little they could afford, and crafted them into jewellery. Their craftsmanship had been skilled for the tools they had, at least as far as Guy could tell at his age, but their sales were few and far between. Still, they had made do with what they had, and always kept their spirits up.

Oraun was home to the largest festivals for the gods of all cities, paid for by the Queen herself, and open to all of any birth or wealth. It was during Tawmyst's, the god of coin, trade and politics, feast day for the year that the family had finally had the break they had been hoping for. A foreign trader from Zien had spotted their small stall, and impressed by the workmanship and quality of the jewellery despite the lack of excessive gems, he bought out the entire stock at a handsome price and arranged a meeting for the next day to discuss possible future business ventures.

They never made the meeting. The trader had not been the only one to notice the stall or view the transaction with glee. Guy and his family had returned home early to celebrate, only to be ambushed on the main road back to their house. A group of four thieves jumped them and tried to make off with the coin. His mother had been scared and willing to hand it over; the coin was not important, their debts were not so bad yet, and they could make and sell more with time. His stepfather had not thought so. He had been angered at their attack, and was determined to keep what he had rightfully earned. They fought. Guy's stepfather was killed, and his mother too when she defended him. Guy had escaped, as the thieves were not bothered with him and only eager to be off with their filthy spoils before anyone could see them. The Oraun government was ruthless and meticulous – he later learned that the thieves had been caught and hung within a week – but it was not always caring; the house was forfeited to pay the family's debts, and Guy was put out to fend for himself. He was eight at the time.

Realistically, Guy knew he had been lucky. What remained of his childhood was taken from him, his innocence dashed away. He could only survive by stealing and begging, by fleeing when any guards passed by. He was often half starved, sometimes damp, and always

cold. But he survived, and that was enough for him then. When Guy's parents were killed, he fled into the centre of Oraun. When he was hungry, he would steal. He knew little of right or wrong then, only that what had happened to him was wrong, and that whatever was needed for him to survive must be right. Many times he was almost caught, but he only stole by daytime when he could vanish unnoticed into the crowds, and he grew better with practice. At night he would huddle by himself in some side street, and wish the night away.

Guy knew he wouldn't have survived by himself for long, but after a few days he happened to glance upon another child a few years older than him stealing from a bakery. At the time Guy was impressed with his escapade, and followed him through the crowds. When the other boy noticed Guy he ran, but despite Guy's younger age he managed to keep up. The boy was impressed, and soon Guy found himself acquainted with a small group of such children, all abandoned, runaways or otherwise homeless. They were reluctant and exclusive at first, but his dedication won their respect and he soon became a member of their little gang.

Despite the friendship of the other children, growing up the streets was not easy. Oraun was a massive city, but with time even it seemed small and confining. Guy became angry and frustrated with his situation, and began teaching himself swordplay to let off anger. Not that he actually had a sword at first; it was just him and a few others fighting with sticks, but the development of his technique surprised even him. One day he did manage to find a weapon, stealing it from a distracted resting city guard. Guy proudly brandished it in front of the gang, but knew enough to hide it in public. As time passed some children were caught or left, and others came in. He learnt there were many such gangs throughout the city, and he was lucky enough to meet a teenager who had actually had training in the sword before his parents too had been killed. They became close friends and he taught Guy how to use his sword properly. As Guy hit puberty he even had one or two girlfriends for a time, but they too passed. Everything seemed to pass on the streets, and he was overcome with bouts of depression as he remained.

It was during one such period, when Guy was fourteen, that he was finally caught. He had been going through the motions with his sword, oblivious to all around him, when a city guard wandered off his usual route and spotted him. Guy hadn't noticed, and after a short while the guard was back with reinforcements. Half a dozen city guards

surrounded him, and called out they would have to arrest him. He didn't bother resisting. In a way he was glad that the years of looking over his shoulder were over.

Guy had spent just over eighteen months in a prison wing designed for children. He was surprised at just how gentle the prison was for children; his life in prison was no worse than on the streets, and at least he had no fear of going hungry or freezing to death at night. He and the other prisoners were put to work at mindless tasks such as breaking and shaping marble slabs, or dying cloth, but they were given rest and time to socialise. Guy had little desire to socialise though, and tended to pace alone in the prison grounds. At first he had tried to escape, but there was never really any chance of success. Nobody had ever escaped from Oraun's gaols. Guy had studied prisoners, studied guards, studied routines, mannerisms, times ... nothing helped. Eventually those telltale signs he came to see in other prisoners – desperation, depression, acceptance – he came to see in himself.

When Guy turned sixteen, he was finally released. Sixteen was a peculiar age in Oraun law – he was old enough to no longer be a child, and was no longer barred from such activities as trading or drinking, as he found himself beginning already, but not yet an adult and so could not legally own land or incur debts. For the last six months in prison Guy had been studying when he was able, and due to his good behaviour he was granted a place in the Grand Caster Bariux's magical academy to learn to be a caster.

Bariux; that was one the name from his past Guy could never forget, or ignore.

Guy was surprised he had been admitted at all, but he had been told he had the right kind of mind for learning to cast, strong and determined, but careful and learning. At the time he had not known how they could know what his mind was like at all, but looking back he could see how his actions had stood him apart.

The living quarters at the academy were minimal at best, but compared to life on the streets or in prison they were luxury. The accommodation and food were provided along with the course, but it didn't come entirely for free. Although there were lessons from the early morning, during most of the afternoon Guy and all the other students were put to work in a way not too different from when he was in gaol. Everything from washing and cleaning, to acting as message boys for nobles, the students were used as almost a public service to

‘teach them humility’. He suspected it was less to do with humility and more to do with coin, as most things were.

Students were given a small amount of coin for personal expenses beyond the tutoring. Most students either spent their coin on furthering their teaching with old scrolls or instructional tomes, usually bought at a ridiculous price from gloating nobles, or on frivolities in taverns or brothels. Guy himself did neither. After his initial joy at being released he was overcome by bouts of depression, brought on by thoughts of his childhood. It wasn’t so much what had happened to him, but that for the eight years he had been on the streets or in prison he had achieved nothing solid, nothing to further his life, nothing but a waste. Despite his position now, he needed something, anything, that would in some small way make the time worthwhile. After a month or so he began again working on the only thing he had really gained from the time – his swordplay.

With his mornings filled with vigorous magical tutoring, his afternoons spent running errands and half his nights spent learning the art of the sword from an old mercenary too weak to do anything now but teach, Guy had little energy left and was constantly exhausted. But he began to throw all his effort into all his work, and make the most of the opportunity he had been given.

Guy had little time for friendships, but he became well acquainted with a few of those with whom he was tutored, and whenever he was lucky enough to be tipped by a noble he spent his spare nights in a popular tavern. Guy was never the best in his classes, but he did well enough and enjoyed every achievement: First to grasp the Essence at all, and later to draw from two or even three streams at once. His skill at fighting grew far beyond what he could have hoped for when he first began to teach himself. When he first managed to best the mercenary in a fair fight he was given a light blade as a gift, and he practised with it constantly. Time seemed to pass quickly for the first time since his parents had been killed, and first months but then years passed by.

But the more time passed, the more Guy became dissatisfied. His classes were going well, and after the second year he had surpassed the old mercenary, but something seemed to be missing. He was reluctant to admit it even to himself, but it became increasingly obvious. He found his life dull. Guy seemed to have reached his limit with magic, whatever his teachers said, and without enough coin to hire a better teacher all he could do was practise exercises with his sword. The

accommodation that had once seemed luxury now felt dull and constraining. He had another two years before he could leave and become a High Caster, one who used his magic by way of occupation in some manner, or if he was lucky even a Grand Caster, employed directly by the government, but he wasn't sure he even really wanted to. Guy found himself wandering old familiar streets at night, as if to find some answer, but there was nothing he didn't already know. He was tired of Oraun and longed for the misremembered excitement of his earlier teenage years.

Early in Guy's fourth year at the academy, the excitement he had been hoping for struck, but not in a way anyone would have hoped for. There had been a murder in the academy, a student of Guy's age. The city guards and Grand Casters were all over the academy for several days, but how the death had come about remained a mystery. Eventually their investigations petered out and the teaching resumed as normal. Until another student, in his final year, suddenly went missing.

The academy was thrown into chaos worse than before at the thought of a serial killer amongst them. Despite orders otherwise Guy did some investigating of his own alongside the city guards and Grand Casters, as subtly as he could. The whole scenario was looking hopeless, and no trace of the student could be found, until Guy accidentally stumbled upon the worst and best kind of evidence – the body. Rather than inform the authorities as by rights he should have, he looked into the body, its placing, and few odd coincidences, and became horrified at what they pointed to: that the killer was none other than the Grand Caster Bariux himself. At first Guy didn't believe it, but going over what he knew of the first death it had seemed to fit.

Guy would have to tell the city guards what he had found, but he knew as soon as he did Bariux, working closely with the investigators, could likely corrupt any evidence against him. Who would believe Guy, a former criminal and street urchin, against a Grand Caster? So he made the fatal mistake of confronting Bariux. Looking back, he wasn't even sure what it was he had intended to do. Force a confession? Or did he just hope he was wrong and Bariux would have a reasonable explanation?

Guy approached Bariux's office, keeping out of sight – swordplay wasn't the only skill he had retained from his years on the streets. He entered, and found Bariux in. Bariux was instantly angered at Guy's intrusion, and when Guy accused him of murder he was only enraged more so. Guy threatened to inform the city guards of his deceit, and it

pushed him over the edge. Guy had been holding a small flow of ka'sor for the purpose, and had sensed Bariux begin to draw from the Essence – Guy had not known how to discern which streams from which then. He was scared, thinking Bariux to be readying an attack. He had caught Bariux by surprise and lunged at him with his sword. Guy never found out what he had meant to cast; Bariux was caught unawares by the suddenness and strength of Guy's attack, no less than Guy himself, and had died.

It hadn't been Bariux who had killed the students.

Guy had fled from the academy, worried about the repercussions of what he had done, when he had heard. Ironically, as he had been confronting Bariux another Grand Caster had been confronting an angry student, whose mind had become twisted during a failed experimentation with wielding all five streams. The student had attacked a city guard in plain view, then when subdued and realising he was caught, he had confessed to the two murders. When Guy heard the news he was overcome with guilt. But not enough to return to prison now, not after his three years of relative freedom. Never enough for that. Guy had returned to his accommodation for only long enough to grab what little coin he had, scarcely a dozen silver, and fled. For eleven years he had been stuck within Oraun, growing restless, and now he was forced to leave. Bariux had apparently only just been discovered when Guy left, his haste assumed to be nothing more than fear for his own life after another caster's death.

Guy still didn't know if city guards had found him responsible for Bariux's death or not. As far as he knew, nobody had known he had visited Bariux but Bariux himself. Still, it wouldn't take much for anybody to put it together: Bariux killed by a sword, and who else had been asking too many questions of late? If those alone hadn't targeted him, his disappearance then would have. The Grand Casters had various spells that could aid them as well. In Guy's mind, it mattered little. Whatever the case, he knew he could never safely return to Oraun, never psychologically return to Oraun. He could only leave, and hope. Even if he was found undeniably guilty, most cities weren't too chummy with each other of late, many even less so with Oraun, jealous of its success, so he would probably not be caught in cities far away. Not for that, anyway.

When Guy had first fled he had all but abandoned the law. Knowing he was guilty of murder, stealing a horse seemed an insignificant crime. He had ridden across the plains of Naru until he

had arrived at a small coastal town. There he had sold the horse cheaply to a poor trader and bought passage upon a boat heading far south, to the city of Demien. Still in shock, he had taken refuge amongst the other poor in the city, huddling together against the freezing cold that seemed present whatever the season. He wasn't sure how long he had stayed there living amongst the homeless, surviving on handouts of soup and bread set up by rare generous nobles to help the poor. It felt like years, but it was probably no more than a month. His mind felt as numb as his body there.

Guy couldn't remember exactly when he entered the city, but he knew well the day he had left it. It was the first of the month, and Garackus's, the god of war and battle, feast day. Demien had little coin to spend on the lavish festivals that some cities could manage, but they still held their own small tribute to Garackus – a public contest to find the city's greatest sword fighter. Anybody could enter, and the winner was rewarded with a modest sum of coin. Several of the other homeless had seen Guy practising with his sword – a strange, mindless ritual he still performed even then – and encouraged him to enter. He was still reluctant and worried to be seen in public for his own reasons, but had already begun to realise he could not hide in the streets forever.

Guy entered, and fought his hardest. The competitors fought with harmless wooden swords, but all he could see were guards coming at him again and again. He fought with a fierce strength that surprised everyone. He managed to advance into the final eight, but was defeated by a more skilled opponent. Guy might have lost the competition, but for himself, he had won something greater.

Suddenly Guy was sick of Demien. His whole life he had been restricted, confined. He longed to travel again, to see the world he had previously been denied. Even were Oraun actively searching for him, unlikely after so long, the world was a large place. If he was careful it would take a miracle for them to find him, assuming they were even still looking. Oraun was a large city, the largest, and there were other matters that would be more pressing by now. He had skills enough to make a living, if he sought it. He would have to be careful with his magic, but travelling mercenaries were not uncommon, and maybe he could do some good to make up for his mistakes in the past.

He'd left Demien that night, taking with him nothing but his old sword, and a new name: Guy Venture.

Chapter Two**SILVER ON THE INSIDE**

It had had a nice ring to it, Guy thought as he walked down Cetra's back streets. Most other mercenaries he'd met over the last few years had given themselves new names or titles for their occupation, but generally they were only things like 'Damanax the Strong' or 'Saltain Swift'. Not particularly creative, but apparently it worked for them. Guy was not the type to loudly advertise on city streets, or join guilds as many hired arms seemed to do, but he found enough work to get by. He didn't just drink for pleasure – it was amazing what opportunities for work a sharp ear could overhear in a tavern. Even if he didn't hear anything useful, most cities and towns had some place to post requests for help. Usually these were from nobles, who paid well, but Guy didn't always agree with their terms. He cared little for coin or possessions now, and would rather help those in real need. Sometimes opportunities would just appear before him.

One such opportunity seemed to be appearing right now.

Ahead Guy could see some woman approaching. Whoever she was, she was dressed in a dirty, tattered dress. Not unusual here. What caught his attention was that although she appeared nervous and worried, she made no attempt to avoid eye contact, and walked straight towards him. Guy stopped and stood waiting, taking hold of the hilt of his sword. He could not be too careful. Here, desperation surpassed gender, and it was not unknown for dangerous women to prowl the streets under guise of innocence or helplessness.

"Are- are you Guy?" the woman asked nervously as she neared Guy, stopping. Up close he could see she was quite young, probably even a year or two younger than Guy. She was small, and shorter than him. Her face was pretty in a way, but her features seemed hardened for someone of her age. Her hair was a dirty blonde, and cropped short. Her body language was open and defenceless, but Guy somehow felt there was more to her than appeared.

"Who's asking?" Guy replied. A cliché on the streets, but there it was. Three years of mercenary work had taught him not to be as trusting as he once was. If he ever was trusting.

“I- I need help. I heard Guy ...” the woman swallowed before continuing. “I heard he might be able to help.” Guy narrowed his eyes. Three stutters? Was he so intimidating?

“Heard from whom?” Guy asked suspiciously. He hadn’t been in Cetra for long, and had done no work in the week besides. It wasn’t like he had a great reputation. Or any reputation, which was how he preferred it.

“I’ve heard tale of an innocent man being freed from prison, and his rescuer freeing himself besides.” Guy frowned. He hadn’t thought anybody from the Dreamer’s Den had noticed or recognised him. Perhaps his rather hasty exit had caused notice. Still, it seemed unlikely someone as poor as the woman seemed to be would have heard tale from a moderate inn in such time. Guy knew he had not seen her in the tavern. Although his initial rescue hadn’t exactly been subtle and if the guards had been asking for him it was plausible someone might have heard and remembered, he supposed.

“I may know of Guy,” Guy replied cautiously. The woman gave a weak smile.

“Please, can we cut the pretences?” Guy was surprised by her directness, if nothing else. “My name is Susa Sreat.”

“Guy Venture, then.” Guy let his hands relax. “But maybe this isn’t the best place to talk.” Susa glanced around, but Guy didn’t need to look to know eyes would be on them. Susa nodded silently, and he motioned to a small alley nearby. She walked ahead and him behind. As they entered he heard faint footsteps of somebody leaving out the other side. Half way through Guy stopped, and Susa turned to face him. She looked more confident now.

“You were caught by guards, trying to free another,” Susa began after a moment. “Few people would risk that.”

“Some people have called me a ‘good guy’,” Guy quipped uncreatively, trying to put Susa at ease. If it did, she didn’t show it.

“I hoped maybe you could do something for me. If- if you don’t mind.” Susa sounded almost pleading.

“Go on,” Guy prompted. Susa shifted awkwardly and began her story.

“Well, I live by myself, usually. I guess you can tell I’m not exactly well off. But I made enough to survive, if you can call being in this place surviving. Anyway, I did have one possession of value. It was a golden chalice, about so high.” Susa gestured with her hands to indicate the size. Guy thought it seemed small, but likely this ‘chalice’

was ornamental only. “And so wide. There was only a thin layer on the outside that was actually gold; most of the chalice was just silver. It was still quite valuable, but I wouldn’t have sold it. My- my grandmother gave it to me as a gift just a few days before she died. She was very sick in the last few weeks. That was the last time she was really all there, if you know what I mean?”

“I’m sorry to hear it.” Guy felt a pang of sadness for his own parents as he spoke. He never had a chance to say goodbye to them.

“The chalice was special to me. But a few days ago I’d just returned from my ... work, and found the house wrecked. Recently gangs of thugs have been attacking houses around the area. I should have known it might happen, I should have hidden it or taken it with me or ...” Susa sighed sadly. “The chalice had been stolen. Oh, a few other things had been taken, and what little coin I had, but the chalice really meant something.”

“And you want me to find it, and get it back to you?” Guy asked, cutting to the chase. Susa stepped closer and looked up into his eyes.

“I mean no offence, but when I heard you had fought city guards and escaped even a holding cell, I could only assume you might be somewhat more ... acquainted ... with the darker parts of this city. You walk freely down a street I barely dare to tread for fear of attack, even in daylight. And yet you risk yourself for a friend.”

“Is the situation here so bad? Caution for the unprepared is never a bad thing, I know, but what you speak of seems worse than that,” Guy said in surprise, looking out past the end of the alley they stood in. Was that a face he had seen peering back at him for a moment? Susa shook her head, and for a moment seemed almost less nervous.

“Lately it has been worse. I count myself lucky I was not at my home when it was attacked. If you stay hidden, maybe you will just be passed by, but the few who stand up against the gangs here are silenced quickly, one way or another. These aren’t gangs, really, more like efficient organisations.” Susa laughed hollowly. “You would do well to hide your boldness here.”

“I have no intentions of bowing down to any gang, whatever its size.” It was not only bravado, he meant every word. “I am not as familiar with this place as you might hope, but I will do what I can to find your chalice.”

“Thank- Thank you,” Susa replied, looking relieved. She paused for a moment then stepped closer to Guy again, pressing the side of her body against his and whispering. “I don’t have any coin or

possessions to pay you, but I'm sure I can manage to thank you in ... other ways."

"Not," Guy said lightly, pushing Susa carefully away from him, "that I wouldn't appreciate such an offer from a woman as beautiful as yourself, but if you can't spare anything I will help you at no cost." Susa blushed slightly and stepped backwards.

"Few would agree to that, though." Susa sounded surprised at his response.

"I would," Guy confirmed, smiling. "I can't guarantee I'll find anything at all, but I'll do what I can tonight. I'll need to know where you live, or another place to meet if you're not comfortable with that."

"I haven't been staying at home the last few days. The place is a mess, and I couldn't bear being there knowing ..." Susa's voice trailed off, then continued a moment later. "I'm staying in the Copper Queen. It's sort of a cheap inn a friend Sara set up last year for victims of home attacks. She's been really supportive, and letting me stay for free until I get the place cleaned up in my spare time." Susa smiled slightly and gave a small laugh. "I think she does that for a lot of people actually. It's a wonder she makes any coin from it at all."

"Okay. I'll come around in a day or two. With any luck, I might even have something for you." Susa nodded. On an impulse Guy reached out and put a hand on her shoulder. Susa flinched and looked as if she'd pull back, but instead remained still. "Remember, this wasn't your fault. Don't beat yourself up over it." Susa gave Guy a strange look, then turned and began to walk quickly away.

Guy stood watching until she reached the end of the alley, and disappeared out of sight.

It was late afternoon before Guy found a place to lie low for the next few days. It would have been much easier for him to simply pick an abandoned building or quiet corner to sleep in, but he did have some standards he preferred to keep to now and it wasn't like the coin in his pocket was being saved for anything else. Or was even guaranteed to be there the next day, if Susa's description of the crime here was anything near accurate. Cetra was a large city and Guy doubted he would be spared enough guards or time to search every inn. From his experience, there were some places even city guards were wary of entering without sufficient backup. The chances were his description might be circulated amongst the guards but that would probably be it. Besides, he wasn't likely to find much information

without meeting the locals, as it were. He even had an excuse to drink of cheap ale now.

The Golden Gates was as close to what Guy was looking for as he was going to find. In a similar style to the Dreamer's Den it was a combined tavern and inn, although the much smaller inn, just four rooms, was probably only used for holding the unconscious bodies of the over-imbibers until they could wake up. Or didn't. The Golden Gates was certainly low key and inconspicuous, perhaps even deliberately so; were it not for the sign and 'gates' marking the tavern's entrance even Guy would have been hard pushed to tell it apart from any of the other buildings that had fallen into disrepair. He could reasonably assume it was cheap.

Guy approached the tavern and rolled his eyes at the 'gates' that presumably had given the tavern its name. They were two large metal arches, which any potential customer would need to walk through before entering the tavern. The gates looked old and wobbled slightly as Guy brushed against one. Crude language had been scratched into various points of the gate, and there was incredibly little of the gold paint remaining anywhere over it. The actual swinging gates themselves were missing. What made the whole thing seem even worse in comparison was that Guy had once seen the real Golden Gates, a massive structure covered in real gold that provided the only way into Orcara, a heavily defended mountain city. The tavern's crude imitation was laughable. About the only real correlation between the two was that the Golden Gates tavern itself had only one entrance. He frowned as he observed the tavern. It was unlikely he would need to make a quick exit, but it still bothered him.

As Guy entered the tavern he was greeted by a dozen or so suspicious glares from just about every occupant. Guy smiled inwardly. It seemed he had made the right choice. Outwardly, he glared back with double ferocity and presented the occupants with a rude gesture. Sure enough, most lost interest in him and turned back to their conversations and drinking. Carefully avoiding the broken glass over the floor, Guy strutted up to the bar and sat down on the worn wooden stool closest to the barkeeper. The barkeeper, an overweight middle-aged man with a large nose and messy beard, grunted and turned to him.

"Yeah? What do you want?" the barkeeper all but snarled at him. Guy sighed. Such a friendly and welcoming place he'd chosen to stay. Maybe this would turn out harder than he'd thought.

“I want to stay a few nights at your inn,” Guy replied.

“You what?” Strangely, he sounded suspicious, and almost nervous.

“Your inn. You know, the rooms with the beds in them. Assuming this place actually has beds.” Guy rolled his eyes. Somehow, he wouldn’t put that past this place. “And don’t try charging anything stupid, I saw the prices written outside, and unlike most of your dim-witted clientele I can actually read.” The barkeeper studied him for a moment, and then grunted.

“I want coin up front, and no funny stuff or you’ll be out. Now what’s your name?” The barkeeper grabbed a sheet of parchment, ink and quill from a wooden shelf. Guy glanced at the parchment and saw a list of names and dates. It wasn’t a particularly long list.

“Guy,” Guy said, taking a few silver coins from his pocket and casually throwing them onto the bar.

“Guy,” the barkeeper repeated flatly, narrowing his eyes.

“Guy. And I’d prefer if I wasn’t on the list, if it’s all the same to you.” Guy casually flicked a few more coins amongst the rest. The barkeeper eyed him suspiciously, but it seemed greed won out. The barkeeper grunted again and put the list back, sweeping the coins into his hand and stowing them away in a steel strongbox. Guy gave a brief smile and leaned back on the stool casually.

“Room four, out the back.” The barkeeper pointed to a door at the back of the tavern. Guy nodded and let his gaze glide over the tankards and bottles behind the bar. A few he recognised: cheap and nasty stuff. Nothing he would normally consider, but he guessed most people didn’t exactly come here for anything fancy. Or healthy.

“A pint of Hakina, if you don’t mind.” Guy pushed another few silver towards the barkeeper. The barkeeper looked surprised at the coins for a moment.

“The Hakina, it, uh ...” the barkeeper began hesitantly. Guy made a sweeping gesture around the tavern.

“One for everyone.” Guy spoke loudly, then as an afterthought held up two fingers. “And two for me.” The barkeeper shrugged and took the coin, then began filling glasses. Guy turned around on his stool and took the moment to examine the customers properly. Unsurprisingly, none looked particularly touched by his gesture, although one or two gave an acknowledging nod. For the most part the crowd was typical of such places as this: unclean, poorly dressed, unhappy ... and yet, in one way they were the lucky ones. At least

they had the coin to afford the drink. Most poor couldn't even spare that, no matter how cheap and nasty.

There were a few that stood out from the group. There was only one woman, sitting alone in the corner of the tavern. On any other day Guy might have gone over to try to cheer her up somehow, but he had other things to do tonight. A group of four males was huddled together near the centre of the tavern, looking too engrossed in their conversation for normal tavern talk. Their drinks were mostly untouched. Suspicious, no doubt, but Guy doubted he would have luck getting anything from them. At the other end of the bar a skinny man sat by himself. He was wearing dark clothing, and was wrapped in a black cloak. At first he appeared absorbed in his own drink, but he drank slowly and seemed more aware and alert than the rest of the customers. Guy smiled slightly; he had found his target.

The barkeeper slid two glasses towards Guy and began to hand out the rest to everyone else. Most took them without a word. The woman scarcely seemed to notice, and the group of four men ignored the drinks completely. The man at the bar simply shifted the glass in front of him. Guy took a long draw from his drink and tried not to grimace. The ale tasted weak and faintly foul, but seemed to go to his head instantly. Best to get this over with quickly, then.

Staring into his partially emptied glass Guy began to reach towards the Essence. For a few moments he floundered, distracted by the lingering taste of the ale. It must be an acquired taste. Finally Guy grasped it, and began to draw both from ka'sor and ka'mal. Taking another mouthful of ale to avoid suspicion, he nearly slipped with the magic and only just caught it in time. Guy frowned. He was out of practice. Vowing to begin practising some of his old novice exercises the next morning, he began to direct the two flows together and form them around the coins he had remaining. It was a simple spell he was forming, but it required fine manipulation of the two streams or it wouldn't work. Continuing to draw and cast simultaneously, Guy barely noticed the other man's gaze fall over him. The man drained what was left in his first glass and pushed it aside for the barkeeper. Picking up the glass Guy had bought him he walked over and sat down next to Guy.

"A rare man who would buy for a whole crowd," the man said watching Guy suspiciously.

"A gesture of goodwill. I wouldn't want to wake up beaten in the morning for staying during the night," Guy answered simply. He

turned his gaze to the man but his mind remained on the coins in his pocket. He was straining to keep up with his casting, but he had to keep casting the spell for each coin. Moreover, since the spell was joined over the coins if he skimmed on one the whole illusion would weaken much quicker.

“All the more likely if you show off wealth.” The man raised an eyebrow.

“I’m not afraid to defend what’s mine. And who’s to say I have more to spend?”

“Poor men do not spend so freely.”

“Then you have me,” Guy admitted, shrugging. Hastily he released the Essence and cast what was the left of the flows he had drawn. He had not had time to affect all the coin he had, but he had done enough. It was just lucky that all coins were the same size, and fairly small, or he wouldn’t have been able to do even that so easily. Guy reached into his pocket and pulled out the coin. He opened his hand to show the man a glimpse of the coin within before slipping it back into his pocket. As Guy had hoped, about half of the coins he had pulled out had appeared to be of gold, rather than silver. It wasn’t quite as impressive as True Transformation, but it would do. While the spell lasted, any who looked upon the affected coins would see only gold; a magical trick of the mind. Unfortunately he’d had little success in getting it to last for long across a number of coins, so actually trying to buy anything with them would likely result in nothing but a very angry shopkeeper. “I am no poor man.”

“Hmm,” the man considered, taking a drink from his glass. Guy did likewise, then continued.

“Although,” Guy pressed. “I would not be so reluctant to be poor were I to have some place to rid myself of coin on certain items cheaply. Market prices seem so high of late.”

The man was quiet for a moment. “You are bold to show wealth and ask of such things so plainly. That, or foolish.”

“I’m not afraid to defend what’s mine.”

“No doubt,” the man snapped. “But I have no business in such matters. I thank you for the drink, but I bid you good night.” With that, the man turned away and walked back to the other side of the bar. Guy frowned and took another drink from his glass. Was he telling the truth? Guy wasn’t sure. Out of the corner of his eye he noticed the four men sitting together all rise and leave the tavern together.

“You don’t want me as your enemy,” Guy called casually across the bar towards the man. He laughed and smirked at Guy.

“If you were with anyone else, you’d already know the answer. I have friends who would deal with a nosy brat without hesitation.” The man smirked at Guy. That answered that question, anyway.

“I don’t see any here,” Guy replied calmly. Nearby the barkeeper watched the exchange worriedly.

“Oh, that’s right, you can’t see them so they mustn’t exist! My mistake.”

“Unless they’re waiting outside, they couldn’t help you now,” Guy threatened. The man glared, but Guy could see he was starting to get nervous.

“Don’t make me laugh. You wouldn’t dare,” the man replied, a cross between anger and worry. He and Guy well and truly had the attention of the tavern now, aside from the woman in the corner.

“Try me.” Guy took a mouthful from his drink and folding his arms. He doubted the man would actually try anything inside the tavern, but he kept a close watch on the man’s hands.

“You don’t know who you’re dealing with,” the man spat out. For a moment Guy felt a flicker of nerves himself. He didn’t really know anything about the gangs, or major criminal figures in the city. But then, even if he was threatening the leader of the largest gang, would he back down now? He’d given his word to Susa.

“Words travel fast, but I can move faster. At worst I’d have to leave. And I apologise to the management.” Guy nodded his head towards the barkeeper. “But somehow that doesn’t bother me. You’re clearly too much of a coward to try anything, and couldn’t touch me anyway.” With that little speech over, Guy turned away from the man and took another drink from his glass. He was almost relieved to see it was nearly empty.

“For that insult I should drop you right now.” The man was furious now, standing up and pushing his glass aside.

“I don’t want any violence,” the barkeeper interrupted nervously, caught off guard by the sudden escalation of hostility.

“Neither do I. Top right shirt pocket, left shoe sole, hanging behind your neck, a third of the way down your left pant leg.” Guy smiled. They were the locations of the man’s concealed knives that he’d noticed when the man had walked up and back. It was a little skill a friend had taught him once on the streets as a teenager. It wouldn’t do much good if someone was to actually attack, but it was always useful

for impressing people. “I think four is bit excessive, don’t you think?” The man stared in surprise, and then a moment later sagged slightly and glared about twice as many daggers at Guy as he had concealed.

“Fine then. We’ll play it your way,” the man growled, walking over to Guy and sitting down beside him. After a moment it seemed the drama was over and there wouldn’t be a fight after all, so the attention in the bar returned to the drinking.

“So then. The time and location, if you will.” Glowering the whole time the man quietly instructed him on where to go, and that it would be best to arrive not long after sundown, but most would stay until midnight before they moved on to ‘other business’. Like sleeping, Guy guessed, but that didn’t sound anywhere near as impressive.

“It is the only one I know of; there may be others, but I’ll leave it to you to bluff your way to them,” the man scowled, then added. “Tell anyone who asks that Jazon sent you.” Guy merely smiled and downed what was left of his drink. Pushing the other glass towards Jazon, Guy rose to leave.

“Now that wasn’t so hard, was it?” Guy said in mock amusement. Without looking behind to see Jazon’s reaction, Guy walked away from the bar and out of the tavern. His amusement faded as he saw the woman still in the corner, crying. He’d have to talk to her once he got back. Sometimes he almost wished he could be as indifferent as most of those he met on the streets. Maybe it was wrong, but it was easier to deal with.

Pondering on this, Guy headed onto the now dark streets towards his destination.

Guy was being tailed. As far as he knew he had only been so for the last fifteen minutes, but then again he might have picked it up as far back as the Golden Gates itself. He doubted that though, given he’d been walking for forty minutes or so – even without timekeeping devices Guy had found himself able to judge the passage of time accurately, another useful skill occasionally – and whoever was following him wasn’t exactly being subtle about it. Several times Guy had caught glimpses of them following too closely behind him and had even heard the footsteps in the quiet night. He half wondered whether they were deliberately letting him know they were there just to intimidate him. It wouldn’t have surprised him, since it wasn’t like his tail had made any effort to surprise or attack him. It was strange, but he ignored it. If the tail came any closer he was ready.

Emerging into the open square amongst the slums Jazon had described, Guy was almost disappointed. There were only three figures waiting in the shadows and Guy glimpsed one other, presumably a customer, before they left. Of the three, one was of median height and build, and wore a long cloak that was weighed down by something heavy – it scarcely moved in the light wind that was blowing. A second was taller and looked older, but didn't seem to have anything large on him. The third was shorter and standing next to an open sack that nearly reached up to his waist, though it was mostly empty. While Guy looked around he reached for the Essence and began again to draw ka'sor and ka'mal for the same illusion spell as he had cast in the tavern.

To Guy's surprise, as he began to form the flows around the coins the second, taller, figure standing nearby looked upwards and stared straight at Guy for a few seconds before dropping his gaze. Guy was slightly shaken. Had he sensed Guy's casting? It seemed unlikely, unless the figure could use magic himself. The detection of magic was a trivial application of ka'sor, and Guy hadn't thought to make any effort to hide his casting. Diverting a small flow of ka'sor himself, Guy cast out towards the figure, but sensed nothing untoward. A coincidence? Unlikely, Guy decided, but he continued casting the illusion.

This time the illusion took less time to finish, ignoring the lesser number of coins, as traces of the original illusion still remained on those that had been affected that Guy could work from. Guy released the Essence. Shivering slightly against the night air and wondering if he too should perhaps buy a cloak, Guy approached the third, shorter figure. Faintly he heard his mystery tail move closer.

"What do you want?" the figure asked aggressively, placing his hands on his hips.

"I've heard you might have some deals for me," Guy said quietly. The figure looked him up and down for a moment, then sneered.

"You ain't got nothing," the figure replied dismissively. Guy pulled out the coins and showed them to the figure. The figure's interest instantly perked. "Well now, ain't that something. But I'm not doing any deals with some thug who got lucky on his wanderings."

"Jazon seemed sure you might." At the name the figure frowned and reached down his side for something. Guy was instantly on guard, and a moment later the figure stabbed forward with a short sword that had appeared from his person. In one swift motion Guy stepped back

and drew his own sword. The two blades clashed barely a hand width away from Guy's stomach.

"I don't think so." Guy angrily stepped backwards out of the figure's reach. The figure spat on the ground and slid the weapon back into its hidden sheath.

"Don't you come around here mentioning that filthy coward," the figure growled angrily.

"I am no friend of his. I practically had to wring this damn location out of him. Maybe I'm new to this city, but don't think I'm new to the backstreets. Show me what you've got." The figure snorted and reached down for the sack, throwing it towards Guy. Guy heard the objects inside clatter as the sack hit the ground.

"I know what's in there. Me and my pals here have an agreement. Try taking something and you'll be lucky to get two steps without a bolt in your neck." Guy glanced around. Crossbows? They weren't common, and certainly not cheap, but he wouldn't put it past them. The first figure saw Guy's glance and grinned evilly in the moonlight, reaching into his cloak and patting something hidden underneath. For a moment Guy considered the surroundings. He was almost in the middle of the open area now. They might be bluffing, but if not and the other figure was a decent shot, there was little chance Guy could get to cover in time. If he took his time browsing the sack maybe he could cast something nasty, but if the other figure could detect magic or even cast it himself it might not be such a good idea. His illusion seemed to be weakening already, too.

Guy silently stepped towards the sack and opened it. The contents were quite impressive. Guy quietly rummaged through it and saw a large number of expensive jewels, including a fair few that would disrupt any casting now he was this close, rings, amulets, as well as more illicit substances ranging from poisons to hallucinogens and a dozen or so small, easily concealable knives. But no chalice.

"Is this it?" Guy asked with a touch of incredulity, letting the sack drop and lightly kicking it aside.

"For you." The figure took the sack and placed it back beside him.

"And if I told you I was looking for an item in particular?" The figure snorted again.

"You couldn't afford half of what was in there. Get lost," the figure dismissed.

"You think I would be stupid enough to carry everything I own around? I don't think so. I can get whatever gold you need." How he

would actually do so was another matter, but he'd figure that one out later.

"Will you just," the figure said flatly. Guy nodded once. "Go on then – what is it you're so bloody interested in? And this had better be worth my time." His voice carried a threatening tone.

"I've heard of a chalice. Gold on the outside, silver on the inside. Small, but useable. Of no particular value, but I took a fancy for it." The figure was silent for a moment before shaking his head.

"Never heard of it."

"A pity." There was a chance it might have just not turned up yet, but he doubted any thieves would bother waiting on something from someone so inconsequential before selling. It was not yet late – he would have to stop somewhere else and try to find another such 'vendor'. "Are there any others who might have heard of it?"

"No dice. I'm not spilling any of my contacts, and I'm not about to go chasing after some damn cup that you take a fancy for. Now scram."

"Your loss then." Guy shrugged, and turned away. Finding anything specific in a city this large could take weeks, if he could find it at all, and if somebody else fancied it before then it was unlikely Susa would ever lay eyes on it again. Perhaps he was taking this the wrong way – instead of working the markets he should start looking straight for the source, to find those who had been doing over the houses lately. Although if they were part of a larger gang it would take a miracle to learn any information at all. It was a pity he had become known to the city guards already – he could have used their indirect help somehow.

As Guy was considering this he noticed the second, taller, figure walking quickly over to him. Guy paused and turned to face him, keeping one hand on the hilt of his sword.

"Now, now, there's no need for violence," the figure said, his voice light and cheerful. Guy didn't move his hand. Up close Guy could see the figure's face looked old and withered, although his body seemed relatively young and nimble. His hair was short and half grey. His eyebrows were so thin Guy could hardly see them at all in the night. There was a scar running just below his left eye.

"You saw I took nothing, and I want nothing more. Leave me be," Guy growled. The figure smiled. From behind him, Guy could see the shorter figure talking quietly to another potential customer. The cloaked figure stood watching them.

“My name is Desmond, but you can call me Des,” Des said with a slight quirk of his lips. “I think you might want to talk with me.”

“I don’t care what your name is. If you’re still with me when the others are out of sight, don’t expect to return to them in such good health.” With that threat Guy set off at a quick pace back towards a small alley on the closest edge of the square.

“Okay, I’ll cut to the chase.” Des’s longer legs could easily keep pace with Guy’s. “I know you were using magic before you talked to my ‘friend’. The use of such trickery could get you into trouble with certain people here. It would be a shame if somebody were to find out.”

Guy stopped a few paces before the alley and stared at Des, who smiled smugly.

“There’s only one way to detect magic that I know of,” Guy retorted. “The same applies to you.”

“That’s not true, actually,” Des said conversationally. “Have you not noticed diamonds glitter all the more brightly when someone is casting?” For a moment Guy was curious, despite the situation.

“I’ve never heard such.” Des smiled.

“Not many people have. Most Grand Casters dismiss the idea, but I’ve seen the proof with my own eyes. You should try it sometime. But I confess, it was no diamond that let me know what I know.”

“What do you want?” Guy asked, to the point. Maybe it was something to test later, but true or not Guy somehow doubted Des had stopped him just to talk over magical theory. “I have places to be, and no time to stand around talking. If you threaten to reveal me don’t think I won’t do the same.” Des sighed and looked disappointed.

“You seemed quite determined back there.” Des pointed back towards the centre of the open square. “I’d hazard a guess you were looking for something specific maybe, or had some grand plan in mind. Unlikely for you either way, but know any hopes for whatever it is you want would be dashed were certain people to know you were trying to cheat them with magic. I, on the other hand, have no such plans. I can vanish at any time with nothing to hold me back. And no matter how tricky you think you are, I can track you down and finish you.” Des’s tone was threatening for the first time, and Guy could tell that despite his previous manner he meant business. Guy didn’t doubt he could escape from this older rogue, but it was one more complication he didn’t need. Des was right, too, he would have to leave, and he had given his word to Susa. Guy did not like going back

on his word, and besides, he wanted to stay around for long enough to make sure Bill remained free and safe.

“Fine.” Guy bowed his head slightly but remaining defiant. “My promise still holds, but I may grant you a favour, if it is a minor thing only.”

“I thought so,” Des said darkly, and then returned to his smiling and pleasant voice as if the exchange had not happened at all. “As we are two of the very few in this city who know the arts, I merely suggest it may be advantageous to meet and exchange what tricks or skills we might know. This city does not approve of our skills, and I fear it would be impossible to learn anything from a more official source while here. A pity.”

“You want me to teach you?” Guy asked incredulously.

“Oh, I know the theory. It isn’t too hard to find tomes on it even here, if you know where to look. Given your response to the diamonds, I’d gather I might even know more than you. But all I’ve cast is largely self-taught.” Guy’s eyes widen slightly in surprise. Any casting was difficult without proper instructions, and actually forming spells was difficult to explain in words, so did not lend itself to tome-learning. Guy had heard of few self-taught casters. Usually when they’d burnt their house down or destroyed their mind or something else equally disastrous from a failed spell attempt.

“To experiment with magic is dangerous. If you’ve been casting without proper instructions you should count yourself lucky you’re still alive to blackmail anyone!” Guy exclaimed quietly. Des grinned.

“I’m not stupid. I started small, of course. I’ll admit I might have made a few mistakes.” Des laughed, indicating his face. “I drained half the life out of me once. That slowed me down a bit. Which is why I’ve been waiting for someone with training to lend a hand.”

“You’re crazy. I’m not dealing with someone who might kill me when he makes a mistake.”

“I think you will. Besides, there’s no risk. I’ll be careful,” Des promised almost mockingly. Guy glared at him.

“Where and when?” Des gave him the directions.

“It’s an abandoned building. Be there after sundown tomorrow. Not too late, mind, or I might assume you’ve forgotten about me and I’ll just have to do something to remind you.”

“I’ll be there.” Just how much time did Des intend to take from him, and for how long? He needed the night to continue his search. As

soon as he'd found Susa's chalice, he was leaving this city. "And I'll be armed in more ways than one, so don't try anything."

"I wouldn't dream of it, Bobby."

"My name is Guy," Guy corrected irritably.

"How rude of you not to tell me earlier." Des chuckled and before Guy could get in a retort he had turned aside and begun walking back to his position in the square. Guy glared angrily at his back before starting into the small alley nearby. He couldn't deal with much more tonight, so headed back to the Golden Gates to get some sleep.

Guy was about two thirds of the way back to the tavern when he noticed his mysterious tail seemed to have reappeared. He continued walking undaunted for a few minutes before he heard something more threatening: a second set of footsteps behind him. He frowned and picked up his pace. There was minimal chance a second person would have just begun arbitrarily tailing him, and if they had been following him the whole time they must be much better at staying silent than the first. In the night it was easy to imagine others following silently too, with the original tail even just being a distraction. No wise thief would travel with someone that poorly trained otherwise.

Guy heard another quiet movement. Fed up with this, he spun around and unsheathed his sword. He could see no one in the darkness, but they must be close. From nearby he heard another noise, closer this time and from a different direction. Three of them? Guy was no novice with his sword but even he had limits.

Guy began running down the alley. From behind him he heard those following give up any pretence of stealth and begin noisily chasing after him. It was hard to tell, but there seemed to be only three. Guy poured his energy into his legs. If he could get to the tavern the thieves would probably give up. But did he really want them knowing where he was staying? There might only be one entrance to the tavern but it was hardly well protected.

Guy swore as two thieves suddenly jumped out of ruined houses in front of him, and then another two from houses to the side. They were hard to see in the night, wearing black, hooded clothing with some odd white insignia Guy couldn't make out. All four were wielding daggers and grinning evilly. One of them laughed at him. None of them made any move to advance. It seemed Guy had been directed into a trap.

“Who wants an enemy now?” a familiar voice coldly laughed out. Guy turned to see his pursuers had caught up to him: Jazon, and two more thieves in identical clothing.

“Shut it, Jazon,” one of the thieves ordered irritably. Jazon did so, scowling. Guy glanced around to see the other four thieves advancing on him. Up closer, Guy could see the insignia on their clothing was of a dagger, identical in size to a real one. The two thieves behind him began moving, but Jazon stayed back without drawing a weapon. Six on one. It seemed excessive for a simple robbery.

Guy took a deep breath and rushed towards the nearest.

Instantly all six thieves leapt towards Guy, their knives drawn. Guy sidestepped away from the closest thief’s thrust and sliced upwards with his sword. The sword cut into the thief’s knife arm. The thief jerked back and swore, clutching his arm.

Guy spun around and swung the sword towards the next thief, but it clashed with their knife made no other contact. Guy swung widely trying to fend the thieves off, but one managed to step close enough to attack. Guy body-slammed into the thief in hope of knocking him off balance, but was too slow. The thief had his knife up and Guy was forced to fling himself to the side to avoid crashing straight into it. He still felt it nick his shoulder painfully.

Guy kicked at the thief’s knees and thrust his sword to the side to block an approaching knife. Catching the thief off guard Guy quickly stepped aside and spun around to face the group of thieves, holding his sword out to keep them at a distance.

Guy swung his sword widely but even in the middle of the narrow street there was plenty of room for the thieves to start edging around the side. He dashed to his left and thrust forward, lightly grazing the thief attempting to get behind him. He stepped backwards and to the side again, hugging the wall. There was another street not too far back that he might be able to flee down if he could get back far enough.

Unfortunately, Guy didn’t get the chance. To the side of him, the thief he had first cut had swapped hands and lunged angrily towards him. Guy stepped forward and slashed to fend the thief off, and at that moment the other thieves pushed forward.

Guy landed a blow onto the injured thief on the same arm and drew blood, but by the time he had turned back to the others they were ready. Guy’s thrust towards the nearest two was blocked by one and the other stepped next to Guy. He raised an arm to fend off a punch,

but failed to block a follow-up that crashed into his jaw. He grunted and stepped backwards, and suddenly the thieves were all over him.

Guy tried to fend off the attacks with his sword, but his arm was grabbed and slashed deeply. Guy swore and let go of the sword by instinct. It was quickly snatched up by the injured thief, glaring defiantly at him. Several swift kicks caused him to tumble into an awkward crouch. Guy might have been able to fight with his sword, but he was no expert at unarmed combat. The thieves quickly had him defenceless on the ground, and kick after kick followed. Guy gritted his teeth and tried to bear the pain with some dignity. He had to think positive – if they hadn't killed him now, they probably weren't going to.

Eventually the blows began to slow until there was only one thief, the same one Guy injured, kicking angrily. Guy felt like his whole body was on fire. He almost would have preferred it; fire could be put out.

“Enough Geo!” one of thieves, evidently the leader, snapped angrily. Geo cast one final glare at Guy – his gaze held some unnatural rage – and stepped back behind the others. Guy groaned lightly and tried to turn to see the leader, but he ached too much to move. From behind him the leader was evidently dishing out orders. “You know what to do.”

Out of the corner of his eye Guy saw Jazon kneel down, quickly feel into his pocket and pull the silver coins out. Guy couldn't help but smirk at Jazon's expression on seeing a lack of any gold, which earned him another painful kick. Jazon stepped out of Guy's sight for a moment, and then knelt down in front of Guy.

“Let this be a warning to you, and anyone else you might work for. Forget the chalice. Or forget living in this city,” Jazon said aggressively, emphasising the word ‘living’. Jazon spat at him, and the thieves, their work apparently done, vanished into the night. Guy lay in pain, and confusion. Why would any gang care so much about one chalice of comparatively minor value?

Once the thieves had gone Guy tried to sit up. Pain flowed afresh through his body as he moved, but he did manage to raise himself awkwardly. For a moment Guy contemplated using magic to still the pain, but he couldn't manage to focus long enough to grasp the Essence at all.

Eventually Guy stood up and began staggering back to the Golden Gates.