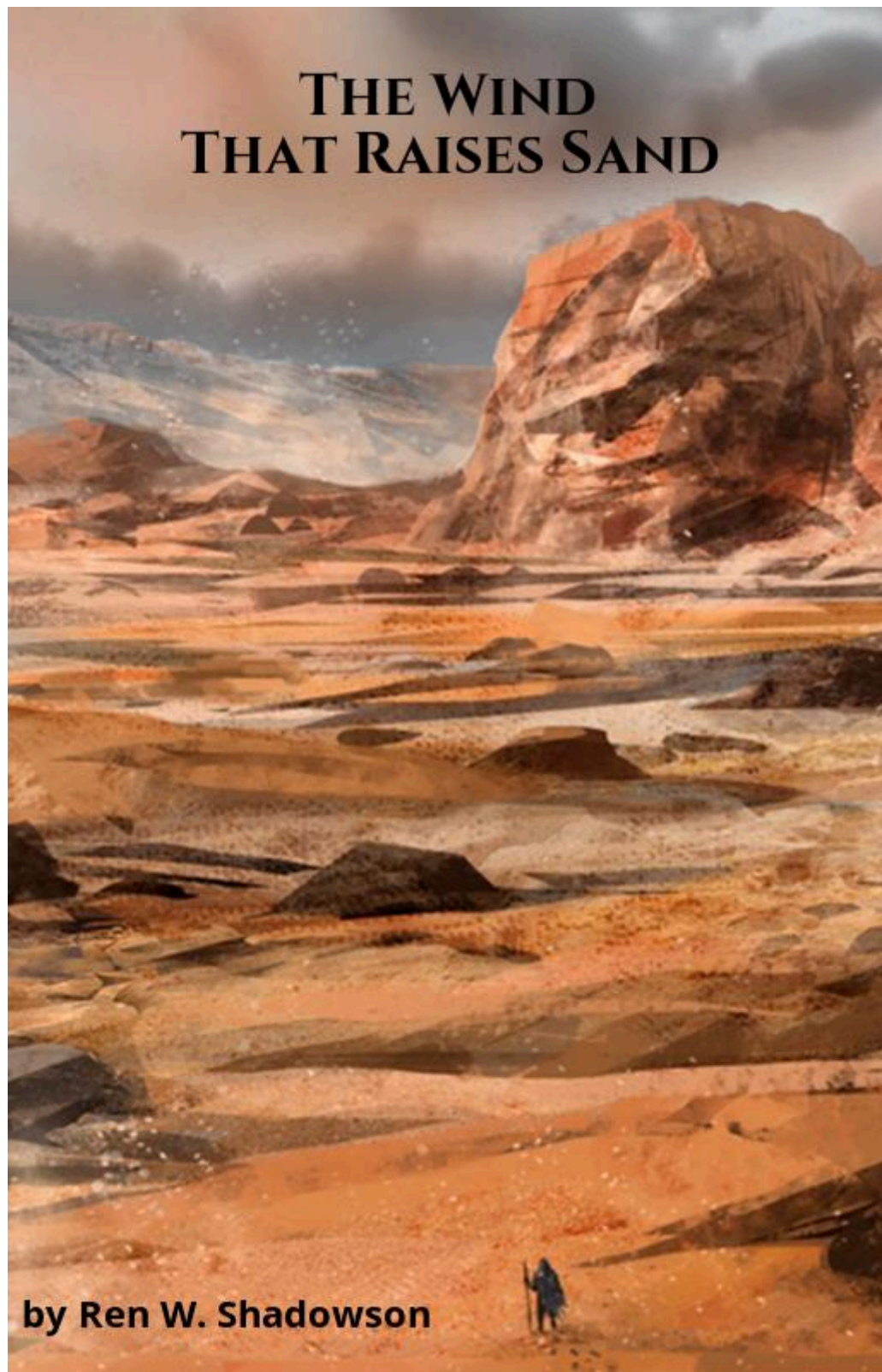


The Wind That Raises Sand



“Wind raises sand in Sector Kharmeesh. Be careful in the sandstorm. Life is precious.” - Talib read the words scribed on a small piece of paper.

A call to get back into the field. His face remained cold and distant but inside he was ready to start jumping, filled with joy. Talib hated vacations more than anything in Mear. He just didn't know what to do with his free time. No parents, no family, no friends, he had nothing in his life but his job.

“What kind of a Sandling are you?” - Said a croaky voice from behind and at least a couple more cracked a laugh.

Talib knew it was addressed to him but he ignored the gibe and without a hurry emptied the rest of his glass. Fiery liquid went down the throat and he had to fight the impulse to crease. He wasn't much of a drinker but from time to time tried something new, just to see how it tasted.

“Are you also deaf?” - The voice kept nagging.

“Every time they respond the same way.” - Talib thought.

His pale skin always drew attention and the younger him would have already jumped the guy behind. Slowly Talib stood up and pulled out a silver coin from the purse on his belt. While doing so, he also made sure his khopesh was visible from under the robust dark-red cloak. Usually it was enough.

The sound of six feet moving in his direction told him otherwise.

“Someone tracked me down.” - Was the first thought on his mind.

It wouldn't be the first time. In his work he made a lot of enemies but usually he knew if someone was on him. Talib turned, gripping the sword under the cloak. An Orc and two other Sandlings were walking towards him.

“Drunktards.” - He murmured.

He was even disappointed to see three unarmed men in casual clothes. He had no challenge for almost a month and that what civil life was to him - boredom. With his free hand he pulled the cloak back, this time openly demonstrating that he not only had a sword but was willing to use it if needed. All three stopped in their tracks and bluntly stared at the curvy sword on Talib's belt.

“If you value your lives get back to your table.” - He said, loud and clear this time.

Without a word they turned and hurried to get away.

Even with Orcs, Elves and the rest of magical races around people still came at him because his skin colour wasn't normal.

“Thank you.” - the barman said.

Talib turned around again and stared at the chubby Sandling behind the counter.

“For not starting a fight.” - added the barman.

Talib only shrugged and headed to the exit.

Hot wind blew in his face just as he stepped out on the busy street of Djedakh. And that reminded him of the message he received. Soon he would have plenty of the hot wind as Sector Kharmeesh was a code name for the southern part of Shemerewi Dessert known for its long lasting sandstorms.

“Ustaz!” - someone shouted in the crowd.

But he wasn't interested, in his mind he was already on the job.

“Ustaz!” - someone kept shouting.

But now his ears picked out metal clunking coming from behind. Talib carefully peeked over the shoulder and noticed a patrol of three guards, making their way through the crowd to him.

“What is it today with them? Why everyone keeps talking to me?” - Talib groaned.

He didn't have anyone in his life and he liked it this way. In his opinion, loneliness was a blessing.

“Ustaz, do you have a licence for your weapon?” - one of the guards spoke and Talib realised he didn't cover his khopesh with the cloak.

“I do.” - he nodded and focused to open the magical screen.

The screen popped up in the middle of the air with the page of his mercenary licence.

“Sorry to bother you.” - said the other guard whose face was covered with a red scarf.

“No problem.” - Talib smiled to them.

It was annoying but he understood well enough that they were doing their job. If they knew who he was they wouldn't even approach but that was the point of his identity. For the rest of Mear he was Abdel Al Kurawi - a freelance mercenary. Yet to the few people who knew his true identity he was Talib Khemhed - a henchman for the ruling Khalifah and the god of Sandmear Benvollio Marion. There where the Light couldn't reach to bring peace and prosperity someone had to step in and get his hands dirty. That was what Talib did for a living.

Talib crossed the street and dove into a side alley. A pack of children stormed out from one of the buildings and charged in his direction. A D'elf and an Orc were chasing a slightly older Sandmearish girl, all three laughing. They looked cute, innocent but Talib still threw himself to the other side of the alley. From his experience children were always nothing but trouble and he learnt it when he was one.

Growing up on the streets wasn't easy and with his pale skin it was worse than a nightmare. But while grown-ups were too busy to notice him, children never missed a chance to make his life worse. He wasn't afraid of children anymore, time in the military taught him that fear was a weakness and he knew better than show it. Still the sign of kids gave him shivers every time.

Talib waited until the kids disappeared behind the corner. Only then he dove into one of the courtyards. It was full of greenery with a tall elegant fountain in the centre. He liked it here mostly because it was quiet. Wealthy people lived here; rich and paranoid. That was one of the reasons he bought an apartment in this courtyard for more than it should have cost him.

The door automatically unlocked as he approached. Talib didn't care much for appliances. He used to spend nights in the worst conditions; bare rocks high in the mountains or in a swamp eaten by insects. All that really straightened his priorities and put comfort at the bottom of the chart. Still his apartment was well-furnished only because the real estate manager insisted on hiring a designer.

Talib didn't stop for anything and went right to the armoury he set up in the basement. Eager to hit the road as soon as possible Talib packed his large rucksack

with everything he could need during the mission. Yet he froze in front of the weapon rack, looking at a few spears of different lengths. After a short moment of consideration he picked up the shortest one with a wooden shaft, a black steel core inside to reinforce it and a thin triangular head of the same metal. He liked swords and they were useful in the urban environment but spears occupied a special place in his life. A spear was what kept him alive on the streets of a small fishing town; even if it was just a long stick he had sharpened with a stone. Then he enlisted and got into the 3rd Marine Corps that was copied of the Westmearish hoplite regiments. And every time he thought there was a chance to use a spear during his missions he used it.

Now his way lied to the nearest teleport station and from there in a matter of seconds he was already on the other side of the continent in the town on the border with Shemerewi dessert. Here in the town of Haluj that barely had any greenery due to locating in the dessert he was supposed to get briefed for the mission. What from the note he knew would be a rescue mission.

A lonely house on the outskirts of the town stood in isolation from others. There were no fences and the place itself looked like the owner didn't care much for it or simply had no money to do it. The roof looked like it could collapse anytime and instead of glass windows were covered with old rags from the inside. Yet it was only a front to ward off others.

"Talib! My man!" - growled the B'orc, opening a wooden at first sight door but it was heavily reinforced from the inside.

"Oh, I see you guys are having fun here." - Talib walked to the empty bunk and dropped his rucksack.

“So much fun!” - coughed the D’elfess on the corner bunk and blood splattered all over the wall.

“Damn! Gally, you know they have doctors and healers these days, right?”

“If I go to a doctor I have to report it and if I have to report it they will put me out of active services for who knows how long!” - she coughed again this time covering her mouth.

“Yeah, I’d probably do the same.” - Talib laughed.

These guys were the closest to friends Talib had. They did a few operations together and he kept running into them from time to time. The difference between them and him was that they were Sandmearian military special unit and he wasn’t, at least not officially.

“Chai?” - the B’orc growled again, demonstrating a metal teapot.

“Don’t drink that.” - a Sandling appeared in the doorway, wiping blood from his hands with a towel. “For what I know Korik’s brew might be drugged or toxic.”

Karim Djalwani - the leader of the unit.

“Y’all just don’t have any appreciation for good tea!” - growled Korik and poured himself a cup.

“Okay. What’s up here?” - Talib smiled.

“Five month ago Eve Galagher, Heartmearish journalist was kidnaped from her hotel room in Aurungapur.” - Karim opened a magical screen with the details.

Green eyed woman with black hair looked down from the picture but what really caught Talib’s attention was a large purple burn covering the left side of her face.

“She is still alive?” - Talib interrupted Karim but kept his eyes on the woman.

The burn didn't repulsed him. Quite the opposite, he found it attractive, captivating.

"Apparently, she is. Three month ago one of the assets from the Shemerewi nomadic tribe reported that a group of armed men were transporting a woman of matching description."

"I take it that there were no demands." - Talib kept looking at the woman's picture, floating in the air.

"No demands, no statements. They grabbed her from the hotel room and disappeared for two months." - Karim scrolled down and the picture changed to a map with a location where the woman was spotted last time. "Korik, you are up! Care to look, Tal?"

"Interrogation? Sure." - Talib shrugged.

Karim weaved a spell in the air with his hand and another magical screen opened, this time a large one that covered the whole wall. A L'elf was sat behind it, his hands and legs tied to a chair, and bright light poured into his face. Sleep deprivation. In Talib's experience it was far more effective than any physical torturing techniques. However, the two were usually combined; the L'elf's reddish brown skin was already soaked in sweat and blood.

"We captured him yesterday. According to our intel he is a part of the group responsible for resupplying the camp." - Karim added.

"If that's so we are very limited on time. They are expecting to receive those supplies and if they don't, Eve Galagher will disappear again." - Talib said.

"Korik will get him cracked." - Karim sounded confident.

Another person walked into the room with the captive. Korik's bulky figure got in front of the L'elf, towering over him.

"No! Please, no more! I don't know anything!" - the L'elf's voice cracked as if he was ready to burst into tears.

The Orc redirected the source of light to the ceiling and made it milder. Then he walked to grab a chair and sat in front of the captive.

"I don't know anything! Please let me go! Please!" - the L'elf kept wailing.

"Listen, we are top tier operators, we've been working on this case for three months, do you expect us to believe you know nothing?" - Korik's calm tone surprised Talib.

"I don't know anything! You have to believe me!" - The L'elf shook his head in desperation.

"Alright. You protect your comrades - I respect that." - Korik leaned back, making himself more comfortable. "Do you know what is the first thing they teach on the interrogation resistance course?"

The L'elf shook his head again.

"Everyone breaks. It's just a matter of time. So the only two occasions when you commit to resisting is when you know that somebody is coming to save you or you see a way to break out." - The Orc finished the sentence and silence hang in the room.

It wasn't entirely true. Not what Talib was taught during his interrogation resistance course and it wasn't in a classroom with a book in hands. Talib was tied to a chair just like the L'elf. He was burnt, drowned, stabbed, cut, beaten and lots of other pleasures intensive interrogation techniques have to offer but under no circumstances

he was to reveal who he was and who he worked for. That's why he had no one in his life so there was no liability, no temptation to save his own life.

"I'm more than sure none of your friends are coming to get you out. So how do you plan to escape?" - eventually Korik resumed.

The L'elf raised his head; his eyes full of dread.

"No, I don't! I swear!" - he cried out.

"Then you should understand I'm your only way out of this room, Gerich. That is your name, right?" - Korik straightened himself on the chair, showing with his whole body that he is ready to listen.

The L'elf nodded and hang his head. Talib saw that before. People cracked under less pressure but it always started with an answer to a small question; a small question and great tiredness.

3

Korik kept asking and the L'elf no longer tried to resist. He talked and talked and talked. Every little detail, every bit of information he had, now became a bargaining chip.

However, freedom wasn't really on the line. Deep inside Gerich knew that but then he didn't have any other options. He would be lucky if he didn't just disappear like many others and all he wanted now was a bit of peace and quiet.

In two hours Korik walked out of the room and returned a few moments later with a mattress, a pillow and a bowl of steaming bulgur mixed with vegetables and meat.

"You finished?" - Talib smiled when Korik came into the common room.

“Not by a long shot” - he growled, savouring the moment. “But I’ve got all you need, I think.”

“Let’s hear it then.” - Karim showed up right after the B’orc.

“They are camped in the abandoned village, in this canyon.” - the B’orc opened a magical screen and flipped it horizontally, turning it into an isometric map. “The village is small about a dozen buildings, most of which are ruins or half buried under the sand.”

A handful of roughly shaped buildings rose up on the map between red rocks that formed the canyon. Talib remembered the place. He stopped there for a night a few years ago. Villages like this were scattered all across the Shemerewi Desert. Without mages people there had no way to fight sandstorms that in this region could last for days.

“Apart from the supply group there are seventeen men in the camp. Three of them are mages including their leader. Most men are stationed here in the two-storey building in the southern part of the village. Three men and the leader occupy the building next door and they are holding Eve two houses up North. Here. Two men take turns.” - he tapped at the smaller building.

“Three months in the middle of nowhere and they still have two men guarding one woman? Sounds like they are very disciplined.” - Karim said, chewing.

“They aren’t taking turns to guard her...” - The B’orc bared his large lower canines in a grimace of disgust.

“That makes no sense. Why all the trouble then? Did our friend mention what they are keeping her for?” - Karim asked.

“He claims he doesn’t know. They were hired to transport her there and stay until further instructions.”

“When they expect the supply party to return?” - Talib asked.

“In three to four days, until the next sandstorm comes.” - Korik answered.

Talib stood up from the bunk on which he was sitting and went over to the map. With a twist of his hand he changed the scale so it was showing the map of the region now.

“If I hit the road tonight I have just enough time to get there before the sandstorm.” - he thought out loud. It might be his operation but he could definitely use others opinions.

“You want to go there on foot?” - Korik raised his bushy eyebrows in surprise.

“I’m not taking any mount into a sandstorm.” - Talib returned to studying the village and its surroundings. “What’s their protocol for sandstorms?”

“They all move into the main building and the mages keep the barrier up until it passes. But that’s where it gets interesting. According to our friend they did it only for the first month then decided they had enough of cleaning the sand out. Now they are staying in all three buildings with one mage in each of them.”

“What are you thinking here, Tal?” - Karim asked.

“I’ll get there, wait for the sandstorm to begin, get in, grab the package and move out. There is a cave ten clicks to the North from the canyon, we will hole there up until the storm passes and come back here.” - Talib laid out his plan but kept his eyes on the map.

“Are you sure you don’t want us to go with you?” - Karim asked, even though he knew the answer.

“Even if the Office approves an official op in the Wild Lands it will be too late by that time.”

“It’s seventeen hostiles we are talking about. You know I hate putting you in such position.” - Karim pursed his lips.

“It’s not like I need to fight them all. They won’t pursue into the sandstorm and by the time it passes there will be no tracks to follow. Besides your shooter is down.” - Talib threw a glance at the sleeping D’elfess.

“Yeah, you only need to walk over 10 kilometres in the sandstorm.” - added Korik sarcastically.

“Won’t be my first time.”

“Let us at least organise the extraction for you.” - Karim said.

Talib didn’t see much point in it but he nodded. If he was in Karim’s shoes it would be obnoxious to sit and wait.

“Here in this oasis?” - Karim pointed at a green island.

“No, that’s where they’ll go looking in the first place. I’d prefer the RV point to be here.” - Talib marked a zone amidst the desert with nothing around but plain desert.

“You really know your deserts, don’t you?” - Korik cracked a laugh.

“I wouldn’t be here if I didn’t.” - Talib returned a smile. “Anyhow, I suggest meeting there in 14 hours after the sandstorm.”

“That should give us enough time to approve the mission.” - Karim nodded.

“And bring a healer with you, who knows in what condition the woman will be.”

They discussed a few more minor things before Talib went to rearrange his rucksack, adding extra water and making sure he didn't carry with him any deadweight. After that he went to bed. Trained to sleep on demand his body and mind let him doze off quickly.

When Talib opened his eyes sun was already down and moon that was especially large in these parts of the world shone in the clear night sky. A quick meal, one final check of the gear and then Talib hit the road.

No one wished him luck; among Sandmearian operators it was a bad omen. During their training it was drilled into them that they had everything to overcome any obstacle, complete the mission and come back home safe with luck playing no part in it.

Being on the clock Talib had to cover as much distance as possible until the sun was up as during the daylight he wouldn't be able to move fast. And so far he managed to stay on schedule. Around midnight he approached a bright magical line. The border where the Sandmerean Caliphate ended and the Wild Lands began.

Talib opened a magical screen where a confirmation was already pending. He filled the form and submitted. A few seconds later it came back approved. He stepped over the line and sensed a magical splash behind. The information of him crossing the border had been just recorded.

From there all he had to do was to keep walking. So he did until in the late morning the heat caught up with him and he had to stop for a few hours to outwait the scorching sun under the improvised tent made of a woolen blanket and the spear.

Closer to the evening Talib continued his journey. When he stopped the next morning for the same reason the red rocks of the canyon rose in the distance.

Because of the proximity to the targeted area Talib put a cloaking spell on his tent before taking a short nap. It was too far away for anyone to sense the spell usage but someone, especially elves, could see his tent from the canyon. This time he waited until the sun was completely down and under the disguise of night he continued his journey.

Just right on schedule Talib climbed the rocks and set up an observation point before the sun was up again. He count exactly seventeen men in the camp. They weren't military material just regular mercenaries and they were bored. Apart from the two sentries the rest of them didn't even carried weapons with them and the archer on the roof spent most of his time in the tent barely looking around. They definitely didn't expect to be hit in this forsaken place. Talib didn't judge them for that. He saw what idleness could do to the best of soldiers and these guys spent last three months here with nothing but sand, rocks and ruins around.

It was two hours before sunset when Talib felt the first blow of the wind. He hurried to climb down. After the day under the desert sun the rocks were burning hot but Talib was used to it. He even enjoyed it, after all, pale skin or not but he was a Sandling.

When he was back on the ground the wind was howling all over the canyon, replacing all other noises. Talib untied his white turban and wrapped the cloth around the head leaving only eyes open. Then he pulled out cleared stained glass goggles and put

them on, tightened the straps of his armour and kept waiting. It was just a matter of a few moments now.

The wind was raising sand. The sandstorm was already here.

4

Lying up there under the scorching sun Talib had all the time he needed to measure distances, to learn every turn he was going to take. Because now wind didn't just howled it whirled sand around him, it whirled sand around everything, hiding what little sunlight the day was left. Talib could barely see his fingers if he stretched his hand and the only method to navigate in this mess was by the mental map he had in his head. Step by step he moved forward, not looking around. The wind was wiping off all traces the moment Talib moved his feet. One misstep now and he could be lost until the end of the sandstorm if not dead.

When Talib sensed magical energy he knew he was on the right path. The barrier kept the sand out of the building the one where they had been holding Eve Gallagher. It was formed in the shape of a light blue dome and extended about a metre outside of the building.

Talib darted to the wall and slammed his back against it because he didn't have to fight the wind inside the barrier. Even the howling was quieter inside. He snuck off to the door and carefully peeked through a crack between old planks which served as a door. The magical lighter kept the room from plunging into the blackness. The Eastling that seemed to be the mage sat on the floor and had a magical screen opened with what looked like a newsfeed. The second man was napping in a chair by the window.

"So much for guard duty." - Talib thought, gripping his spear firmly.

Not willing to waste a second of his time Talib barged in. From the impact the flimsy door split in two. He charged and dug the spear into the mage's chest. The Eastling was dead instantly. The noise woke the second man up and he barely fell off the chair. By the time the second man was on his feet Talib stood right in front of him, his dagger deep into the man's side. Talib watched life leave the Sandling's eyes. In his experience, the only way for that face not to come haunting him in his sleep was not to think of the man in front of him as of a living conscious creature. So for Talib the two bodies that now laid in that room were no more than enemies and he preferred his enemies dead.

The barrier flickered and the wind stormed in, bringing the sand with itself but only for a moment. The spell which the mage had casted now became unstable but it should hold for a dozen minutes or so.

Talib extracted the spear from the dead body and wiped the blood off the cloth of the Eastling's flared trousers. The other door in the room looked off; it simply didn't belong there. The door was solid, the one you can't just go through especially with a strong metallic lock on it.

"The key should be on one of them." - Talib thought and went through the mage's pockets.

Nothing was on the first body so he repeated the procedure with the second one and found what he was looking for - a large key with glowing Gnomish runes. It fit perfectly and Talib turned the key, opening the door. The stench of sweat, piss and shit stroke Talib's nose, the stench so potent he coughed.

Light poured into the room with no windows and there Talib saw her. Eve laid on a bunk made of what seemed like parts of the old furniture, what little of clothes were on her was torn up and dirty, the entire body covered in cuts and bruises. The sight of the woman suddenly angered Talib. He gripped the spear harder, nails gritting against the wooden shaft. Talib fought the urge to turn around and kill the rest of the bastards for a moment.

“Eve? Eve Galagher?” - Talib said as soothing as he only could but covered her mouth with his hand.

The woman didn't react to his touch. He knew she was alive, he felt the warmth of her body and she was breathing. Talib had a pretty good idea what these bastards put the poor woman through but it all made no sense. Unless someone wanted to turn Eve's life into a miserable existence. He gently shook her head and the woman opened her eyes. Lifeless they were barely moving and showed no emotions whatsoever.

“Eve, I'm here to get you out. You are coming home. Now I'm going to take my hand off you, do not scream. Nod if you understand.” - Talib spoke slowly. After a moment, the woman nodded but without much of enthusiasm as if she was only doing what she was told.

“Can you walk?” - Talib asked and gave her another look - he needed to get her new clothes.

The woman nodded again and Talib noticed that her neck was bruised and dotted with finger marks. A wave of anger washed over him again but he brushed it off

and walked Eve out into the first room. The sight of the dead bodies stunned her and for the first time Talib saw a spark of hope flicker in her green eyes.

He started pulling the clothes off the dead bodies and Eve was standing in the doorway, watching his every move. Eventually Talib selected the flared trousers, a grey cotton shirt which was only slightly stained in blood on the side and a leather coat from the mage. The rest that wasn't in blood he tore apart and stuffed into the boots he also took off the dead Eastling. But before Talib put them on her, with all the carefulness his large and weathered hands were capable of he wrapped her feet in bandages. Talib also got another turban and goggles and fitted them onto the woman. She did everything he told her like those mannequin mages use in the civilised world as their servants so when he pulled out a long rope from his rucksack Eve raised both her hands, expecting him to tie her up. She still didn't trust him, didn't believe that he was there to rescue her and Talib didn't blame her for that. Eve Gallagher had been through Inferno and no matter how far away he would get her she would still be in that dark room for quite some time.

"Oh, it's not for that." - Talib said and came closer. One end of the rope he tied around Eve's waist and the other around his own. "Now, we are going to go out into the sandstorm. I want your hand constantly on my back but if so happens that you get separated just follow the rope, it's about ten metres long. Under no circumstances pull it or try to walk on your own. If I lose my coordination out there we are as good as dead. Do you understand?"

Eve nodded. He eyed her up. The clothes would be large for her even if she hadn't been starved but now it was hanging off her like a sail on the mast.

“Good. Let’s go then.” - Talib said and stepped outside. The woman trailed behind with her hand clinching to his red cloak. Together they pierced the barrier and dived into the wall of flying sand on the other side.

5

Navigating through the ruins was the easy part so it didn’t take long to reach the edge of what once was a village. That was when the barrier went down and if Talib sensed it the other mages in the camp should have too. The good thing was that the barriers were static and couldn’t be moved.

A group of mercenaries that had little to no experience of operating in the sandstorm wouldn’t go into one. At least that was Talib’s calculation and it also was a wild guess. There was no way to know if any of that was true. That far from the camp Talib couldn’t hear a thing, the wind wheezing in the rocks and sand that was scratching against the fabric of his clothing covered any sound that could come from that direction.

Talib and Eve walked along the canyon wall and left the ruins behind quite a while ago. The woman followed Talib’s every step and didn’t took her hand off his back even for a second. The amount of strength her skinny body had didn’t just surprised him - it amazed. He figured that after everything she went through a bit of wind and sand were only a nuisance.

In this direction the canyon went on for 3,800 metres or about 5,000 steps. Talib was counting and so far he wasn’t wrong. It ended with a tall rock that was separated from the rest of the wall and on the northern part it was splintered. The two of them were looking for the sharp piece that laid on the ground. Its upper part was pointing in

the exact direction to the cave in which Talib planned to stay until the end of the sand storm.

That's where the most difficult part began. In front of them there was nothing but open desert. No landmarks to align the path, no signs to follow. The entire mission now relied on the idea that Talib would manage to walk for almost 7 kilometres in a straight line. It sounded like madness if only he hadn't done it before about a dozen times.

The first three times were scary but he managed. On the fourth he allowed himself to be confident - wandered in the desert for two days and was lucky to stumble on a bedouins camp. After that Talib never again treated sandstorms and deserts disrespectfully.

Further they went from the canyon weaker the wind became. It also didn't howled anymore but there wasn't much difference between being able to see 1 metre ahead or 5. So when the sun went down, it didn't really matter for Talib as he kept on walking and Eve followed. She was like a shadow and sometimes Talib wondered if he didn't lose her somewhere on the way but the hand on his back stopped him from turning around to check. She didn't take it off even once.

There was no way to measure time and the only indication was the amount of steps they made. When Talib realised they were now climbing upwards he knew they were on the right track - the cave should be somewhere up ahead in these hills. Eventually he hit the hard rock above which a mouth of the cave blackened. Talib climbed up and then pulled Eve in. Only inside he dragged down his goggles and exhaled relieved. The area around his eyes was burning from the pressure the goggles applied.

They were now far enough and Talib casted a light source. The simplest of spells now glowed above their heads, spilling light around.

“You can take them off now.” - He turned to the woman.

Eve pulled down goggles along with the turban and Talib noticed tears in her eyes and blood on her dry lower lip. It caught him off guard, he didn't know how to react. Talib dropped the rucksack and pulled out a bottle of water.

“Here. Have some.” - he opened the bottle and offered it to the woman.

Her hands were shaking but she grabbed it, spilling water on herself. Talib watched her drink half of it and dove deeper into the rucksack for some dried meat and a pack of breadcrumbs. Then Talib heard something, it wasn't something the wind carried,no. This rustling sound came from inside the cave.

“Do not move.” - He said and stood up with the spear in his hands.

Talib redirected the light source and send it deeper into the cave as he himself followed slightly behind. From the cave opening it was a narrow tunnel of about a dozen metres long then it spread out into a hall. The sound seemed to come from there.

The light source went in and Talib waited in the tunnel for the glowing ball to fill the hall with its light. Only then he came in. It was spacious, with a few roughly cut columns here and there. Only now Talib realised the cave must have been handmade.

He threaded carefully with the spear ready. Yet when in the corner of his eye he noticed a shadow move it was too late. He didn't know what hit him but it was strong. Talib felt how his body was thrown into the air and flew across the hall until slammed into the wall.

His head was spinning and after the collision it was ringing in his ears. He struggled to get control of his body but it was trained to get back up. A deep-chested shriek filled the cave and Talib finally saw what hit them.

A humanoid creature stood right under the ball of light so Talib now could take a good look at it. Arms looked disproportionately long on the slender body all because of the bone claws. The bold head was like a deformed skull covered with ashen skin, two holes instead of the nose as if it had fallen off, and eyes glaring with unnatural hunger. In the dark he might have mistaken it for a Troll but under the light Talib knew who it was even though he had never seen one with his own eyes. A Lavia, one of the lowest forms of Vampires.

The creature noticed that the man trailed the spear in its direction and now the Lavia growled, spreading its arms and getting ready to attack. Talib saw it coming and was precise with his strike. The tip of the spear went into the Vampire's right side of the chest.

The monster jerked its head back and wailed, grabbing the shaft with its both hands. The Lavia snapped its crooked teeth at Talib and now stared at him with all its primal hatred.

The Vampire started pushing and even though it was seriously wounded, Talib barely found enough strength within himself to stand the ground. The struggle over the spear continued for a few moments. However, patience wasn't one of the Larvias' strong suits. Now growling, it swung at the man on the other end of the spear. The claws whiffed but the change in the power balance shifted in Talib's favour. He pushed

off the monster but it refused to go down. As the Larvia broke free off the spear it charged again.

The experience of the 15 years that Talib had served in the marine corp as a hoplite now kicked in. The spearman stepped back and then like a wave he rolled forward onto the charging enemy. This time Talib wasn't only precise but he was confident in his strike.

A well timed strike of a spear into the charging enemy's chest - it would stop even the strongest of Orcs. Splintering the rib and crushing the shoulder blade the spear went through the Larvia, skewering it. But it wasn't enough to kill a Vampire. The monster took a swing again and Talib felt how the claws pounded on his side, meeting the chainmail he wore under his garment. The creature pushed forward, impaling itself even more but getting closer to its long-awaited prey.

Talib knew the spear was no longer of any use to him. The reinforced shaft didn't break from the impact and now when the Larvia was stuck on it halfway through, he released his grip and reached out for the dagger.

With the spear sticking out of its body like a gigantic arrow the Vampire moved onto Talib, swinging. This time the man braced the attack and trapped the Larvia's hand under his armpit. With the other hand he dug the blade of his dagger into the bonny body where he expected its heart to be.

Agonizing pain flared up in Talib's back as he felt something sharp, ripping through his flesh. He had one Vampire's hand trapped but the other one was free and now its pointy sharp claws found the way through his chainmail.

Even gravely wounded the Larvia was strong enough to overpower the man. Refusing to let go of the Vampire Talib dragged it down with himself. The spear that was still sticking out of the monster's chest pressed against the rocky floor of the cave as the man hang on the Larvia. He reached to the handle of the dagger with his other hand and pulled.

The claws that were tearing through his flesh now happened to be trapped between the chainmail rings and were erratically scratching his back. It was painful and Talib responded to pain with the only way he knew. With aggression.

He was growling now himself and the Larvia went quiet. The blade started slipping inside, carving the Vampire's chest wide open. Blood poured into Talib's face, blinding him, and finally the two of them slid down on the spear. Landing, Talib felt how something crunched under his back.

The Vampire no longer moved but nonetheless Talib kept stabbing its body again and again. When the frenzy washed off he climbed from under the Larvia's body and turned over. He dropped the dagger and dug into the wound with his hand. He found the heart fast enough and was beating. Talib squeezed it and ripped it from the monster's chest. Holding it in his hand, Talib still could feel it pulsating. Vampires couldn't be truly killed.

Some said that Larvias were false Vampires. They almost didn't drink blood and fed mostly on corpses, ravaging through abandoned burials. Yet Talib didn't want to see whether some scholars who had never seen a Larvia up close were right.

Separated from the body the heart couldn't pump blood what would have stopped any Vampire from regeneration what was the closest to the death a Vampire

could experience. Talib gave another squeeze to the heart and threw into the far corner of the cave.

Now the effect of the adrenaline started wearing off and the exhaustion along with the pain rolled over him. He gathered the last of his strengths and stood up, wobbling. He took out the spear and dropped it on the floor. Then Talib grabbed the Larvia by its leg and started dragging it to the exit. It wasn't heavy but the wounds on Talib's back didn't go unnoticed. Every next step he made now was harder and harder. His head refused to think and every movement was a struggle.

"Keep pushing, marine. Keep pushing." - Talib mumbled again and again.

He went past Eve who was exactly where left her, clutching to the pack of breadcrumbs as if it was the most precious possession in her life. Talib went out and pulled the Larvia's body down.

"The mission accomplished." - He muttered as his knees betrayed him and he toppled on his back.

The wind now was throwing sand at him. It scratched against his face and it went into his eyes which Talib struggled to keep opened. He was hurt and exhausted but he didn't care about it all. Like a blunted spear that had served its purpose - to defeat the enemy, Talib laid in the sand and felt somehow relieved.

He didn't remember how he got back into the cave or even stood up for that matter but when Talib opened his eyes he found himself lying on his belly, with the blanket underneath him. Yet he didn't wake up because had enough rest. No, Talib woke up because he was in pain. The wounds on his back were now burning.

His body was heavy and ached but Talib managed to launch himself on his knees. It wasn't the pain that was the first thing on his mind.

"Eve?" - He called and looked around.

Talib was relieved to see her. Eve was wrapped in the blanket and through the tears the woman was cleaning out the sand from her feet which were all swollen and bleeding. She didn't reply, not with her voice, anyways. Eve was sitting a couple metres from Talib, right under the ball of light. When she heard the man she froze as if she was trying to realise whether she was allowed that.

Talib found the rucksack lying next to him and dove into. He pulled out what looked like a roll of leather which was the medkit. Of course, he knew a few healing spells but they were too strong to risk using them. So the old ways had to suffice.

"Let me." - Talib sat by Eve's side and rolled out the medkit.

The light glittered on all sorts of instruments and vials. Talib picked one of the smallest and opened it up.

"Drink the half. It'll speed up the regeneration." - He said and offered the vial to Eve.

She threw a mistrusting glance at the vial before taking it and giving it a sniff. It smelled nice but then most things did to her after months spent in that hole. Even this cave did. Eve drank half as she was told and gave the vial back.

Talib finished the rest of the vial and took a bandage, he poured a bit of water on it and started cleaning Eve's feet. She saw he was hurt. Both his eyes were bloodshot and the breath was heavy. As to the skin colour Eve couldn't really figure out whether it was naturally this pale or due to a sickness. Still the man was meticulously tending to

her wounds. All that made her feel something she had forgotten what now felt like an eternity ago - safe.

When all the sand was cleaned out Talib opened a salve and applied it around the Eve's wounds then bandaged her feet.

"Better?" - He asked, looking her in the eyes.

She nodded.

Talib stood up and pulled off his robust red cloak and the black robe which were all covered in gore and then the chainmail hauberk. Broken off parts of the bone claws were still stuck between the rings. By now the wound on his back burnt and Talib suspected it wasn't just because of the cuts. He opened two magical screens and stood between them. The one behind him was a mirror and the one in front showed the image of what was in the first.

Apart from many scratches there were three deep cuts which were covered in murky white-yellow slime. A long 24-legged creature crawled out of one wound crossed Talib's back and dove into the other cut, making the man crease in pain.

The name of the creature was unknown to Talib but from what he knew about Larvias was that their bodies were often a home to many parasites, basically serving as an infinite source of food.

"Eve, I'm afraid I need your help on this one." - He tried to reach one of the deeper cuts with a scalpel but all the wounds on his back were out of reach.

The woman was startled and stared at the pale Sandling for a moment, trying to process. Not the fact that he needed her help but that she was asked, instead of ordered. She stood up and limping approached Talib.

“I need you to cut it out and clear it first.” - He said and offered the surgical instrument to her.

Eve threw a stupified gaze at the scalpel but took it. Talib turned his back to her and kneeled. There were some painkillers in the medkit but he needed his head clear, so grabbed a piece of wood and stuffed it between his teeth.

The woman carefully poked one of the wounds and pus run down Talib’s lean muscled back. She jerked her hand back and stepped away.

“It's alright.” - Said Talib through the wood in his mouth.

He wasn’t a stranger to pain. It accompanied him his entire life and Talib knew how to take it.

Her hands were trembling but she dug the scalpel into the wound again. More pus came out and Eve had to grab another bandage to wipe it off. As she was clearing the wound she grew more and more confident. The fact that the man in front of her held himself perfectly still made her even think that it didn’t hurt him as much. But it did as Talib’s teeth greeted against the wood.

It took her awhile to clean the wounds out, at least as much as she could.

“Can you cast a magical fire?” - Talib took the wood piece from his mouth, turning to her and asked.

Eve nodded uncertain where he was leading with this.

“Then I need you to burn the Inferno out of these wounds.” - He said and took a cauterising knife, which looked nothing like a knife. It had a wood handle from which went a long thin metal spoke with a wide blade branching out of it on the end.

The woman didn't move, she only stared at the surgical instrument in his hands. Talib took her hand into his and put the handle in.

"Do it or I will be dead by the time the sandstorm passes." - He released her hand and turn away.

He felt a minor magical splash behind and was actually surprised how good the woman was at casting. For Eve, though, it felt really good to cast again. She tried to cast during the first month of her captivity, tried to send a message into the world but magical energy was sucked out of that room. And if to the physical pain her body and mind got eventually used to, the emptiness that was left inside of her with the Light gone tortured her the entire time.

The fire ignited on the floor and since it didn't need any fuel it made no smoke. Eve heated the cauterising knife and took a deep breath as if she was going to burn herself. Then applied the blade to one of the cuts. Talib shuddered in a convulsion and bit harder on the wood.

Eve moved the instrument down the wound and felt how it touched something inside. Then the 24-legged arthropod showed up and the woman instinctively swept it away from the wound. The creature fell on the ground and for a second thrashed about in agony then froze and no longer moved. Eve swallowed and held the knife above the flames.

She continued cauterising until the last cut on Talib's back was completely clean of the slime and so far she took out four of these hideous arthropods now laid dead on the floor. By the time she finished Talib barely managed to keep himself from falling. So when Eve put down the knife she helped him to lay down on the blanket. And then

showed him the salve, the one he put on her feet. Talib nodded approvingly, struggling not to black out.

He felt her bony fingers apply the medicine around the cauterised wounds what was like caressing after all the pain he had just endured. Now to exhaustion, relaxation added making it even harder to stay awake. Yet Talib couldn't let himself fall asleep not now, not until Eve was returned home.

Weak, the Sandling reached out for the medkit. His hand chaotically ran through the vials in search for a long thin vial. When he finally groped it he dried the vial in one gulp. It would keep him awake. Talib felt the surge of energy going through his body and suddenly he felt strong again. Pushing the body to its limits, depriving it of an opportunity to rest and recover always came at the price and Talib knew well that he would have to pay the price for it but mission always came first.

They kept the fire and now waited for the sandstorm to pass. On the second night the wind outside started weakening. In Talib's estimation by midday it would be gone and he didn't like it. That meant they would have to cross the desert in the daylight and they could be easily spotted from the canyon.

The sand settled two hours before the midday and the two of them waited for another 3 hours before finally leaving the cave. This time he didn't tie Eve to himself, there was no reason to and they were weaving their way between dunes. For now they were hidden from anyone's eyes. However, the moment they reached the end of dunes where the desert became an open space once more, Talib stopped and for quite awhile looked in the direction of the canyon that was now on their right.

Not a sign of mercenaries but Talib didn't count on them being just gone. If he was in their shoes he would have people, preferably Elves, climb high on the rocks of the canyon, trying to spot the runners who couldn't get too far away in the sandstrom. At least he hoped some of them if not all would head to the oasis to check it.

Since there was no other option they climbed over the last line of dunes and started walking through the open desert. They walked slow to sweat as little as possible and Talib kept throwing cautious glances towards the canyon.

When the sun started settling down and the red rocks of the canyon were barely seen in the distance it was Eve who spotted a cloud of dust that was moving towards them from that direction. She pulled up Talib and pointed at it.

"Horses!" - Talib said. "Why nobody told me that there were horses?" - now he shouted in anger but mostly at himself that he didn't ask during the briefing nor thought of this possibility later.

"If we make a run for it we might get away with it." - Talib said to Eve, measuring up the distance between them, riders and the extraction point. Of course, he only hoped that the extraction unit would be already there.

Eve shook her head and stared at her feet.

Even in full health Talib's chances of taking on a group of riders alone were non-existent but he did consider it for a moment. But the decision came into his head instantly. He dropped his large rucksack, pulled out two full bottles with water, stuffed them behind his belt and looked at Eve.

"Get on my back." - He said and this time he wasn't asking her.

The woman tried to be as careful as she could but every time she touched one of Talib's wounds he creased.

"Hold tight." - He said, turning towards the extraction point and starting running.

The woman's body was in fact much easier than the rucksack he carried but the problem was they now had little to no water amidst the desert. But if the riders reached them, Talib most likely would be dead and Eve would be back to that hole. He wasn't going to let that happen.

"Karim better be there on time." - Talib thought running as the sweat was covering his eyes.

The cloud of dust grew bigger and bigger as the riders were getting closer but Talib wasn't turning to look, his only focus was to run as fast as he could. From time to time he threw glances ahead, hoping to see the reinforcements but there was nothing. Only the sky was getting darker. He started doubting if he was going in the right direction. Running he opened a magical screen with the map. A red dot that showed his position was moving in the right direction so it wasn't his mistake.

Talib wondered if the Office decided to leave them there or, perhaps, Karim run into some trouble on his way. It wouldn't be the first time and he understood it. That's why he never saw much point in extractions, he always preferred to do the job his way and get away his way too. His mind was racing searching for other options but Talib couldn't come up with a better plan than just keep running.

The riders were only a few hundred metres away when suddenly Talib sensed a magical splash up ahead. A cloaking spell down and four projectiles raised into the air.

Arrows arched over his and Eve's head and landed just in front of the rider that was leading the charge. It was a warning shot, the only one they would get.

Talib recognised the D'elven figure and her large crossbow. She was kneeling and behind her stood three men with their bows drawn. A couple steps aside six spearman held the line and behind them all Talib counted at least five men mounted on camels.

That made him catch the second wind as he darted to the allied forces. Meanwhile the mercenaries halted and stood, staring how the Sandling and the woman on his back were getting away from their clasp.

Talib started slowing down in front of the spearmen and pulled down Eve still on the move. Only then he stumbled and collapsed first on his knees and then with his face ploughing sand. His breath was heavy, wounds were open again and blood soaked even through the cloak.

The spearmen moved forward covering Talib and Eve from mercenaries while three men on the camls unmounted and ran towards the wounded Sandling on the sand and the Heartmearish woman that stood above his head stunned. That was the last thing Talib saw as he know allowed himself to doze off. He didn't care what would happen to him now. He brought Eve into safety, he fulfilled his mission that was the only thing that mattered.

It was busy 6 months since Talib got out of the hospital after getting Eve Gallagher out of that dark room amidst the desert. The intel she provided the National Security Office of Sandmear with uncovered a major slave trading operation. Only in

Sandmear a few mayors of the border towns lost their heads for their involvement and a few more were on the run. To hunt those involved Talib visited Westmear and Heartmear twice and spent about a month in the mountains of Nordmear. Of course, when he was sent on another vacation he didn't like it but this time Talib knew he needed rest.

He sat in the same bar and this time in his glass something Eastmearian was poured, made of rice or at least he was told so.

"For a marine with albinism you are not easy to find." - said a woman, taking a sit at the counter next to him.

"What are you doing here, Eve?" - he responded with a smile on his face but didn't turn to look at the woman.

"I never got a chance to say thank you." - She pulled down the hood and shook her head.

"That's something new. Usually people track me down to try to kill me." - Talib raised the glass and smiled into it before taking a sip.

"What will it be, miss?" - the barman asked Eve.

"Northern whiskey, please." - she put a file on the counter and pushed it towards Talib.

The barman took a bottle from the shelf, the one with the rime all over it. The vapour came off the liquid as he started pouring it into a glass.

"I figured it was the least I could do after you got me out of that hole." - She said and hurried to drink her whiskey. It was ice-cold as her lips touched it but once she swallowed the liquid burnt inside.

One glance was enough for Talib to understand what was in the file. He flickered through and there was nothing new for him to learn. There couldn't be.

"People who you work for murdered your family." - Eve said when she saw that Talib didn't react to the file, what she took for a shock.

Talib slowly turned on his stool to the woman and looked her in the eyes. It was a nice change after he saw her last time. Her black hair shone and green eyes were full of life. Once again Talib caught himself on the thought that he really liked her purple burn on the left side of her face.

"The National Security Office ordered to kill your parents." - Eve added and her confusion grew even bigger as the man in front of her didn't change in his face at all.

"I know." - Talib said.

"You know?"

"I've known it for almost thirty years by now."

It even amused Talib to see Eve's confusion. She wasn't the first who came to him with this information.

"How can you work for that kind of people?" - Eve asked eventually.

"For what kind of people?" - Talib smiled.

"The one who murders families!"

"Back in the desert I killed two men, the chances are they were someone's fathers too. What does that make me?" - Talib asked the woman and took another sip.

"It was different." - Her voice cracked and became a whisper as she turned away.

"They were bad. You are not."

“How so? The same people gave the order. Eve, do you know who my father was?”

“Whoever he was a child should not pay for parents’ mistakes!” - The journalist nature spoke now in Eve.

“In the ideal world, sure, no kid should pay for his old man’s deeds but even with all the Gods around this is not an ideal world, is it, Eve?” - Talib asked her but didn’t expect an answer. He saw it in her eyes - the glimpses of her dark place finding ways into her mind again and again.

She shook her head and looked away again.

“My father personally murdered half of the old Pharaoh’s family and the rest of it was hunted down under his command. The only reason our Khalifah survived was because as an infant he was sent to Westmear as a gift to secure the alliance. And my mother, she was a brave woman who happened to be in love with the wrong man. She was offered a way out but chose to stay by my father’s side.”

Eve didn’t replied to that either. She didn’t know how and only stared at the pale Sandling in front of her. They sat this way, looking at each other, for a moment until eventually Talib stood up and reached for the coin purse.

“Let me at least pay for your drinks.” - Eve stopped him, putting her hand on his.

She didn’t sound enthusiastic anymore but Talib saw in Eve’s eyes that the woman understood him. He nodded.

“Good bye, Eve.” - He said and started walking away.

“Thank you!” - The woman shouted when Talib was already at the door.

He nodded again and came out.

Outside Talib undid his turban and wrapped it around the face. The wind was raising sand. The sandstorm was coming.

“Your Divinity, we’ve just received information that agent Henyet was approached in a possible attempt of conversion.” - Spoke a bold Sandling who was on his knees with his head nearly touching the floor. He might have been the head of the National Security Office and one of the most powerful men on the continent if not in the world but even he had to hit the ground, facing Khalifah on his throne.

The throne itself stood in a vast oval hall the roof of which was so high above and the columns were so massive that the man on the floor looked insignificantly small. Not the person on the throne, though. Purple and gold were the colours of The Sandmerian Caliphate with which the throne room was decorated yet other two colours drew all the attention. The black with which Khalifa’s scaly armour shone like the snake skin on the sun and the sapphire blue that spillt from the purest magical energy in the shape of wings behind his back.

“By Eve Galagher, I suppose?” - Khalifa’s voice filled the hall, it was crude and unpleasant yet whoever heard always found themselves somehow charmed by it.

“Yes, Your Divinity. What should we do about agent Henyet? Bring him in for an investigation?” - Said the man on the floor.

The Khalifah smiled. “No, give him another couple weeks of rest and see if he and Eve Galagher gets drawn to each other naturally. That will be all.”

The head of the National Security Office stood up, keeping his eyes to the ground and walked a few meters backwards before finally turning around and hurrying

out of the throne hall. Khalifah waited for him to exit and only then rose up. He stepped down from the pedestal upon which sat his throne and headed it to the large gates.

He walked along the columns with hieroglyphs carved in them, picturing the deeds of the previous rulers of these lands, the deeds of the old pharaohs. Yet the throne belonged to Him, to Khalifa, the unifier of the South, the messenger of the Light, the only survivor of the last pharaoh's family.

The gates opened as he approached and about a dozen people froze and bowed. Khalifa waved his hand and everyone resumed their usual routines, here in the palace.

"Tar'green?" - He called a V'elf in the armless silken robe, his personal assistant. "Let our friends in Heartwic know that I intend to visit the last Heartmearish qualifier of the Divine Tournament in Trallermo."

"Will Her Divinity join you?" - Asked the assistant, making a note on the magical screen.

"No, not this time. I will be in my office." - Said Khalifa and headed down the corridor.

As he walked everyone who would happen to cross his path, stopped and waited for him to pass, keeping their heads low. Khalifa's thoughts were now with his fellow God, the ruler of the Heartmearish Empire King Rokanone.

"Oh, dear friend, I'm afraid you were right and we have so much to discuss now."