**Chapter one**

In the reflexion of his sword, Tristan saw two bright grey eyes, with a hint of green in the cloud-like depts. It where his, he knew even though he didn’t look at them very often. He shifted his attention away from his sword and forced himself for the tenth time that morning not to daydream but to focus on the task ahead.  
 His heart had inexplicably moved to his throat and he wished it would move back to his chest so that he could perhaps start breathing calmly for a change – “*this is my only chance.*” He thought for the one hundred time.   
 While walking towards the arena, he swung his sword a few times to test its balance, even though it was completely unnecessary considering the weight of the steel felt like an additional limb to him after all the time he had spelt with it - “*this is going to be my moment.”* He breathed small clouds of cold damp that went up and disappeared in the shivering air around them.  
 He could already hear the townsfolk talk before he saw the colourful construction of wooden beams and canvas rising between the shops of the Townsquare. Coming closer, he could distinguish the voice of Bernard the baker who was once again being exceptionally vocal about how sweet his dindleberrytarts where. And despite not being hungry at first, the smell of the delicious tartlets made Tristan's mouth water to near drooling and his stomach rumble like a storm. He persevered and ignored the aroma of dindleberry to arrive at the participants entrance for the arena.   
 A hulking man with shoulders like an anvil and a grey face like raw iron ore scowled at Tristan. “Wrong entrance, bugger of, smithboy.” Tristan smiled his most innocent smile and asked if the good sir could please re-check the list. “Tristan of Black, it should really be there". The man squinted at the thick piece of parchment and frowned his huge, dark grey eyebrows. For a second Tristan feared he might call his boss for further investigation but to his great relief the man grumbled. “Stupid kid will be homeless when he loses, but that’s your choice.”  
 In truth, he would be, if he would have actually had to pay the entrance price. But Tristan had told himself that it was for a greater purpose, and had snuck into the tent of the chubby man who was in charge of the administrational services, the night before. The man had concealed any sound Tristan would have made with his snoring so loud, Tristan could have forged a whole set of armour next to his plump head and the snoring would still have been the predominant sound in the tent. In the end he decided against the forging, and just wrote down his own name on the list with tournament participants, in his best impression of the man's handwriting.  
 He walked past the man who was still peering at him from under his bushy grey eyebrows while not trying to stumble over his nerves. Tristan moved a bright yellow canvas flap to enter a lantern lit space underneath the spectator benches. He could hear the distant chatter of all the gathered people from Florindell and the Northern villages who could afford to attend this generational event.  
 In the flickering lantern light, he could distinguish a number of dark silhouettes, which he presumed where his soon-to-be opponents. Despite Tristan not being too short for his age of sixteen, most of the figures were quite imposing and sometimes a whole foot larger than him. He convinced himself that it didn't bother him. “*It's all about skill*,” He thought while giving himself an imaginary pat on the back. “*And you will outskill every single one of those brutes."* He might have cheated getting into the tournament, but he had trained his whole life for this.  
 A young lad, about Tristans age, came walking in between the wooden support beams holding a glowing lantern in one hand, and a large piece of parchment in the next. The boy said spoke in a low voice to a metal chested middle-aged knight with deep dark eyes and equally dark hair. The knight nodded solemnly.  
 Next the boy walked on to a somewhat older man, average hight, a short black beard with hints of grey, and a large battle axe, which he held seemingly effortlessly, in his hands. But the man's most remarkable feature where his eyes. They reminded Tristan of a deep, frozen lake. Bright blue, but so cold that if you made the mistake of looking in them, a freezing steel hand grips tightly around your Soul and squeezes all the warmth from it. And that was exactly the mistake Tristan made. A shiver went through his whole body and the hairs in his neck stood straight up. It was like nothing he had ever felt before – except... That was the last thing he had wanted to think about right now.  
 Apparently, the boy had told the two man that they were to be the contestants in the primary round of the tournament. Because the man with the icy eyes was led to the other side of the arena while the knight was testing if all the straps of his armour were fastened properly, while his squire handed him a heavy, heater type shield, painted bright red with a black rock-pawed rhynosaurus. With its six rock-like feet relatively small compared to its hulking body, and a large dome shaped shield sprouting from its neck, almost like mane. Its intimidating silhouette on the blood-like shield was enough to frighten most foes. Tristan rather liked it.  
 However, when after a loud announcement and even louder cheering, the man with his rhyno-shield and a shiny arming sword stepped into the arena, the cold-eyed man seemed unimpressed.  
Tristan was watching through a slit between two large pieces of canvas. With anticipation pumping through his veins, he listened to the landlord of Florindell counting down loudly. “Three!..” “Two!!.... ONE!!  
 The frost eyed man did not have a shield, Only his two-handed battle axe. Yet he was the one to start in defence. The Rhyno bounced at him with surprising agility and hacked, sliced and stabbed at a staggering speed. It paled in comparison, however, to the skilfulness with which the battle axe deflected every single blow, causing a melody of lethal chimes.  
 It did not take long for a pattern to emerge where Rhino repeated the same set of blows and the massive axe deflected them swiftly as ever. This turned out to be part of sir Rhino's strategy though, because where he had made a quick stab, the previous three times in a similar scenario, he now made a quick sideward bounce, followed up by an elegant spin. With his sword like a deadly, iron hurricane, it looked as if this would be a quick end to the duel. If not for the gust of metal wind that was the icy battle axe, which caught the sword between its blades.   
 Rhino looked thunderstruck for a split-second. But quickly regained his stern look, jerked his sword free while pushing away the battle axe. This gave Rhino the opening he needed; he hacked, somehow gracefully and brutally at the same time. Although it was impossible to tell where the man aimed, because the frosty eyed warrior had realized his mistake as soon as he had made it, he turned in an attempt to correct it, so the sword bounced of his robust shoulder plate with a loud “Clang.”   
 A hit was a hit though, and a red flag was put in a standard by the squire of sir Rhyno while the crowd was louder than a flock of hopperchirps on a sunny afternoon; Rhino was evidently the favourite of the pair. Two more blows like that and he had won this match.  
 The two men started circling each other, neither even as much as glance away. Although both predators, only one could be the prey. The slip up would have made most man look more vulnerable, but Tristan thought the man with the cold eyes looked fiercer than ever.  
 He had apparently decided that it had taken long enough. He spun his axe as if it were but a thin piece of bamboo, and jumped with a velocity matched only by an ostraptor. Now the Rhino was in defence. Trying desperately to block the rapid blows coming in from all possible directions. Chunks of bleeding red wood flew of his once imposing shield. In a last effort attempt to turn the tide of the battle he shook his shield loose from his arm and flung it with all his might at his opponent, hoping for it to distract him to deliver a final blow.   
 But the manoeuvre was in vain. With a look as cold as ever, de man knocked aside the piece of splintered wood, as if it where but a mosquito, annoyingly flying round his head. And as if the Rhino was but an insect himself, he kicked him in his stomach so hard he stumbled a few feet backward, giving a hard groan in the process. And before he could recover, with a quick stroke of his axe he disarmed the man of his seemingly puny sword, followed by a second blow aimed at the Rhino’s neck.   
 Tristan estimated it half an inch distance from the man’s neck, before the razor-sharp battle axe stopped mid-air. As a testament to the build-up tension, it seemed as if the whole audience released their withheld breath at the same time. With the biggest sigh of relief coming from the Rhino himself. “And the cunning mister Greddor takes the victory!” The broad-jawed landlord of Florindell burst out. Followed up by an applause that started rather hesitantly.  
 “*So, the man wasn't a knight*.” Tristan pondered. “That did not make him any less intimidating though,” was his follow-up thought. He almost jumped when the young, slender boy from earlier tapped him on his shoulder; “you are next sir.” “*sir*..” sir Tristan...” Tristan liked the sound of that very much. The boy showed him the piece of parchment. On it, all the names of the contestants were set in a chart, with most of them accompanied by a coat of arms. Tristan looked at where the young man's finger was pointing. Tristan of Black against Sir Brontos Melferyo, it read. Above Tristan’s name, an ink black shield was illustrated. He liked that too.  
 “*This is it.”* The preceding dual had not particularly encouraged him. But Tristan did not need encouragement, for he was brave enough for ten, he assured himself. “*Don’t let your emotions get hold of you.”* It might have been the first lesson he ever leaned.  
 Tristan marched through the same passage as the Rhino had before him, but could not have anticipated the sensation he felt as he walked on to the rough soil of the arena. Surrounded by a buzzing crowd everywhere he looked. Cold air filling his lungs as he breathed faster than he would have liked. Opposite of him a dark figure emerged. As he got closer, Tristan started to distinguish features; Clothes, the colour of the night sky. Complimented with dark, metal plates covering parts of his lean, but muscular body. Even darker was his hair, neatly cut at his ear line. Yet it did not compare to the knight’s eyes. His aunt had told Tristan countless times that you could tell a lot of a man's character by looking them in the eye. But he might as well look into the dark depths of Phyrathion.  
 Tristan shook himself awake from his thoughts when he realized the noise he had heard in the background were actually the announcements, and now the countdown had begun - “Two...” “One!!” A large banner swooped up, and down again. A colourful signal for him to confront his black opponent.  
 Tristan wore a worn, brown gambeson, and had chosen a small, round shield to accompany his trusty, lightweight sword to maximize mobility and speed. His light, visorless helmet, being just that little bit too small.  
 Sir Brontos was armed slightly heavier, though by no means were his movements rigid as he moved towards Tristan. His sword being about equal length, but double edged opposed to Tristan's thinner, single edge.   
 Tristan gathered up his courage, breathing heavily, he decided an assault would be his best defence. He started sweeping and hacking well aimed, while trying to keep somewhat of a distance. The shadowy figure showed no emotion whatsoever on his pale face, as he blocked the attacks using his pointed, night-blue shield.   
 The counterattack came suddenly; the knight threw his armoured shoulder against Tristans shield. Tristan had just enough time to regain his balance to block an incoming blow that would have cost him more than a flag. Slowly being driven backward, Tristan knew he could not sustain this much longer. The vigorous blows were making his arms slowly turn to numb, lead casted twigs.  
 After two attempts of regaining ground, one of which resulted in a bruise in the side and a dark blue flag being raised, and the other in the loss of his helmet, Tristan had an idea. He panted a little harder than he needed to, in order to convince the shadow knight that he was standing on his last leg. Sir Brontos went for the bait and went on the offense once again; his sword swept with an audible swoosh toward Tristan’s head.   
 Afterwards, Tristan would tell how he had lost a piece of his long, shaggy blond hair that day, as he ducked at the last possible moment. Not anticipating the force of his own swing, sir Brontos lost his balance for just a moment. Just one moment too many. Tristan stepped forward while he rose up. Knocking his shield with all his force against the knight's sword hand, resulting in the sword spinning a couple of yards through the air, before landing with a soft thud in the sand. He tried to suppress a triumphant smirk as pointed his sword at the knight's chest.   
 He did not know what he was expecting, as the pumping adrenaline showily reduced. But what happened next, he could have never anticipated. A broad grin appeared on the sir Brontos’ pale face, and he held out his, now empty, right hand. “that wasn’t too shabby, kid.” The knight nodded in approval. “not too shabby at all.”   
 Tristan tried not to show his astonishment as he shook the mans gloved handed. He tried to think of something witty to say, but he could only manage a soft “thanks.” He put his sword in his scabbard, and walked over to pick up the black-handled sword to hand to Ser Brontos. “Try not to lose that next time,” Tristan said, now also smiling from ear to ear.   
 Back in the semi-lit, waiting area, Tristan started to actually process what had all just happened. The primary round counted six more duels, of varying length and spectacle. Most of which Tristan watched with great interest. Hulking warriors and swift, birdlike swordsman, duking it out under thunderous cheers and a rain of applause.   
 Tristan recognized the son of the rich smith at the end of Hammerslane, Ironmaster Hectos. Only two years older than Tristan, the young man swept, and spun with speed and skill matched by few. Not to long after, he found out that young Javin Hectos would be the second one to face him in the arena.  
 Reassured by his success of the first fight, and the booming audience as he entered the arena, Tristan drew his sword, and took a defensive stance. As the countdown finished, Tristan determined that defensive was not his style, so he charged the rich kid and his shiny armour.   
 Tristan noted, to his satisfaction, that his opponent was taken aback, and could only barely hold him of. Feeling emboldened, Tristan decided to turn it up a notch, and with a quick feint, he managed to deliver a loud chiming blow on the boy's helmet. Being completely dazzled by this, the poor soul was unable to defend himself against a second blow, on the plate of armour on his upper right leg.  
 Breathing loudly, the boy took of his dented helmet, to reveal his short, sweat-drenched, brown hair. But Tristan was surprised, and slightly troubled, to find not fear, despair or panic in the pools of hazel-brown that were his eyes, but firmness, determination, and, unmistakably, a little courage.  
 When they reengaged in their duel with the all too familiar sound of steel, they were on equal footing. Both not willing to give any ground. Knowing he would only have to hit one more blow, Tristan tried to push through with all the strength he had left. Too late he realized his mistake.  
 Using his own power against him, the young Javin redirected Tristan's blow, throwing him of balance and opening up his right side. The impact of the hit that followed was enough to knock Tristan to the ground, making him taste the cold, hard, dirt. In an attempt to recover from his error, he rolled over to create just enough distance to intercept the next swing of sharp steel.   
 The instant the two swords met with an ear-splitting chime, Tristan thought of perhaps the only way he could still acquire the victory. In the hope of giving the spoiled brat a taste of that splendid piece of earth, he made another roll, forward this time. By the sudden disappearance of the counterweight Tristan's sword had provided, it was Javen's turn to be caught off guard and stumble forward. But he re found his balance just that split second too late, because Tristan, still on one knee, swung his small, round shield, making it spin right into his knee pits. And with a cry of surprise, Javen fell with his knees on the ground.  
 Tristan walked up from behind him, laying his cold sword to Javen’s neck. “You yield?”  
 “Haven’t got much of a choice, do I?”  
 Javen dropped his head in defeat. Tristan, reminded by sir Brontos’ broad grin, stepped in front of the young smith, and offered his hand to help him up. “You better get up and dust off your knees, this is no look for such a skilled fighter.” After a short hesitation, he accepted his hand and got up, managing a modest smile. “Look who’s talking, you’re as dusty as a termadillo.” Now they both grinned, as the audience had decided to impersonate a thunderstorm once more.  
 When Tristan had returned beneath the still rousing crowd of people, he realized how exhausted he was. He missed most of the following duels, but he assumed they must have been spectacular, given the regular outburst of the crowd he heard as he strolled of, absentmindedly, towards the distant smell of dindleberry’s.  
 “You look like you could use a tasty pastry” Bernard the baker could have been a poet in another life.   
 “I haven't got any chylon on me.” Tristan said, not feeling much like talking.  
 “That will be quite all right.” A shadowy figure emerged, seemingly out of thin air.  
“I’ll buy two pieces, if you would be so good” Sir Brontos Melferyo looked amused as he came to a halt next to Tristan. “I believe we could both use a quick bite, but don't allow me to buy any more.” He shoved one engraved silver coin towards the baker. “Too much dindleberry is a bad plan for a multitude of reasons.  
 “Aahg, those are just some old folktales to keep children from stuffing everything in their little mouths, good sir.”  
 “You would be surprised to find the many truths there are to be found in old foketales, good sir.” The knight bounced back.  
 Tristan tried to think of something amusing remark, but to no result. So, they enjoyed their delicacies in silence.  
 After chewing away his last mouthful, sir Brontos spoke at last. “You would make a fine First Sword, I think.”  
 “Yeah, well, I should not be getting ahead of things.” Tristan answered. “Even if I win this tournament, I would have to win two more in order to enter the Tourney of Atholytar. He nibbeled his pastry, thinking about it all.  
 “Then you should do that.” The knight responded bluntly. “If that is what your heart tells you.”  
 Tristan frowned. “That's not how we are supposed to make decisions, everybody knows that." He sighed. “Don't let your emotions control your actions, you know, the Gods, complete chaos, weird cults and all.  
 Sir Brontos rolled his eyes. “Everybody always gets that part wrong, you know...” -   
 “Sir!” The young boy from earlier came running up towards the bakers stand.  
 Both Tristan and ser Brontos looked around curiously to face him.  
 The young lad came to halt in front of them, panting heavily. “Mister Black...” He had to catch his breath for a second. “Mister Black you are supposed to be in the arena.” Tristans eyes widened as the boy added. “For the final round”  
 Tristan looked to the dark knight next to him, who gave a little nod of encouragement. "May the Stars guide you in the night.”  
“Now there is some good stuff for a poem.” Tristan heard the baker say, as he walked towards the arena with in a fast pace, stuffing his last chunk of the pastry in his mouth. But as he looked backwards, before disappearing behind the canvas, the figure that had been ser Brontos Melferyo, was no longer there.  
 As it turned out, Tristan would have to face down the warrior with the freezing eyes and his devastating battle axe, which somehow did not surprise him at all. He didn't have any time to think any further about it, or about a strategy for that matter. Which might have been a positive since he didn't have any time to become madly nervous either.  
 He rushed onto the circular field, perhaps not as gallant and noble as he could have. The broad-shouldered mister Greddor was already standing in place, swinging his heavy axe nonchalantly through the chilly air. Pulling his shield from his back and his sword from his scabbard, Tristan took his position as the landlord finished the announcements and counted down from three.  
 Even though defence was not Tristans preferable strategy, he felt not entirely confident going full out assault on the massive battle axe. He could not let the man get too much distance, because that would give the swings of the axe an unstoppable impact. But getting too close would lead to certain loss as well, because of Greddor's raw strength.  
 Not being able to ponder over his dilemma properly in the heat of battle, Tristan was slowly driven backward. Although the battle had just begun, Tristan was already getting desperate, no opportunity of opening had arisen for a counterattack, and he was nearly at the edge of the arena.  
 - “*That’s it!”* Tristan moved until he was practically standing against the wooden barrier at the edge of the field. “*One chance.”*   
 After blocking one blow with his shield, he jumped aside, dodging a second, whistling swing, which landed with a crunching crack in the wooden beam. Greddor gave a jerk on the axe, but it was stuck and he did not have time, because Tristan grabbed this opportunity and approached his opponent, sword ready.   
 Just for a second, he thought victory was near. But when he saw those frigid, blue eyes - he would have sworn they glowed for an instant - he knew all hope was lost.  
 The man deflected Tristan's sword with the plate of armour on his left wrist, grabbed his arm and twisted it, forcing Tristan to drop to his knees and drop his sword. All with no expression whatsoever, and quicker than Tristan could have said “ice.” Next, Greddor grabbed his axe, and tore it loose, splintering the wood beneath. Tristan could only just catch the blow with his shield, still in shock, Tristan tried to crawl backward, away from the cold. sharp edge. Another blow. Tristan's shield splintered, probably breaking his wrist.  
 “Surrender?”  
 Tristan, frustrated, with himself, Greddor, and the world. Angry, sad and desperate, flung the shard of wood that was left of his shield towards the brute’s face.  
 An inch from his sparkling eyes, his caught and crunched the wood in his gloved fist. “Bad loser” He growled, and kicked Tristan in the face, making him see the stars that were supposed to guide him.   
 He could see vague shapes, and disturbed voices. Unable to distinguish what any of them said, he became aware his head felt like a boulder, but more heavy, and more dizzy. And then everything went black.

**Chapter 2**

When Tristan returned to conscience, it took a while before he convinced himself to open his eyes. And when he did, his heavy eyelids protested heavily. He blinked a couple of times before he lifted his heavy head, to recognize the semi-lit space, with the wooden skeleton of the arena, covered in canvas, around him.  
 After rubbing his eyes, he noticed his hand was red as a freshly forged sword. He felt his forehead and became aware that his head burned like the fire that heated the steel. The wound was still bleeding. although not deep, he felt the scrape was quite large above his left eyebrow.  
 Footsteps and voices where rumbling in the background, but one set of muffled sounds weren't so distant. Forgetting his injury, Tristan quickly turned his head to look around him. Making his head throb even harder than before. The same young boy who had regulated all the participants during the tournament approached. “Oh. You are already awake.” He was holding a bunch of bandages clumsily in his arms.  
 “That's all right, I don't need those.” Tristan said.  
 “But sir, your wound-”  
 “No, no really. I can-” Tristan tried to say as he attempted to get up from the wooden bench he was on. Both of his efforts failed however as he tumbled to the ground, groaning, while the room started to spin. He gave in, and let the boy clean and bandage his wound.  
 “Thanks.” He said a bit more grudgingly than he had meant. “What's your name anyway?”  
 “Uh, Dalos, sir.”  
 “I am no sir and you know it.” Tristan said, now embracing is grumpiness.  
 Tristan saw Dalos shift his eyes nervously, not knowing how to respond except for a faltering “S-s-sorry sir.”  
 Tristan sighed and grumbled a goodbye as he marched through the canvas flaps, still a little wonky.  
 Outside, the sun was already starting to go to sleep. Which troubled Tristan. He wondered how long he had been out, and concluded it had been too long. He quickened his pace through emptying streets, in the hope of getting home before the moon awoke.  
 He was almost running by the time he turned the corner that led him onto Hammerslane. His sword and shield rattling a different tune from the smiths working their last hours of the day in their forges. His head still throbbing, he made his way between the dark-grey walls toward the familiar faded blue roof. The combined aroma of smouldering fire, heated iron and well-seasoned food meant Tristan was home.   
 He tried to enter quietly through the workplace to drop of his weapons and enter the house in the hope of preventing too much of a hassle. Well, that went wrong.  
 Just after putting of his doublet, he heard a faint click. A lantern went on in the corner of the dark forgery, revealing the face of his aunt. Her eyes, normally warm, brown and welcome, where angry slits. Her mouth was a colourless line as she pressed lips together.  
 “Well how wonderful that you found your way home after all.” She looked as if she could burst into flames at any moment.  
 “Aunt Eleanor, I..” He began without really having a clue about what to say. But his aunt finished for him.  
 “You don't have to explain yourself! “I understand perfectly fine.” “The craft of forging his below the grand sir Tristan!” “You don't care about your old, crazy aunt.”  
 Tristan didn’t dare to answer. He didn't even dare to look. He was so ashamed, he wished he was still laying on the cold ground in the arena, so he could dig himself a hole, and never come out.  
 After a never-ending silence Tristan dared to glimpse up, and instead of angry, his aunt looked sad, and worried, but most of all exhausted.  
 “Oke, Listen.” Tristan sighed at last. “I am sorry.” “I really am.” “But I can't stay a smith forever, I am just not made for that, the day's last forever in that boiling prison you call a forge.”  
 “So, you are just gonna leave me.” Just like your parents did.” Or did you go to that tournament to die, just like your uncle did?”  
 Tristan had to contain his anger now, he couldn't stand it when she tried to make him feel guilty. “I still have a chance, in two moons there is another tournament in Oblelykar. I can win, I know I can.  
 “You can also get an axe to your head, I know you can, in fact, maybe it'll wake you up from your stupid dreams.”  
 Tristan was tired and hungry and felt his temper rising, he stalked past his aunt into the kitchen, ignored her last protests. He scooped up a bowl of the spicupog stew that smelled so good, it lightened his mood immediately.   
 He climbed the ladder that led to the elevated platform where his pile of blankets laid messed up just as he had left them. There he settled to eat his stew eagerly, thinking over everything that had happened that day.  
 When he finished, he felt all warm inside, but slightly troubled at the same time. He curled up in his blankets, brooding over all his dilemmas, until finally falling in a deep, but restless sleep.   
 Dreams flashed by; his aunt turned into an enormous brown beoran, that embraced him tight, to never let him go.  
 Next, he was forging a set of armour. But he had to hurry. Time was running out. Time for what? He did not know. When it was finally ready, he saw it looked like the armour ser Brontos Melferyo had worn, but far less formidable, and not nearly as strong. As he started to strap the plates to his body, the iron started to tear apart, and what remained of the armour fell on the floor with a faint chime.  
 The metallic chime still echoed in the background as he ran through a forest. From what exactly he did not know, but he knew he had no time to lose. Behind him trees were shattering and the ground made a deep grumble as it shook beneath his feet.  
 In the distance he saw a wobbly suspension bridge, made of time-worn ropes and rotting planks. The other side was not visible except for a thick bank of eerie white mist. He would have to cross it, his intuition told him. But when he reached the ravine, gasping for air, Tristan's heart skipped a beat.  
 As if emerged out of nothingness, a figure appeared, standing halfway across the creaky bridge. He was easily recognizable, not only by his bulky shoulders and broad battle axe, but by his soul freezing eyes. Tristan paralyzed as fear got hold of him. The bridge swayed softly as the wind whistled a tune of terror.  
 In the distant fog, a small green light approached the edge of the ravine. As it neared the cliff, a silhouette of a cloaked figure leaning on a cane, took shape. Tristan saw now the green light radiated from the walking cane. Tristan’s gaze shifted to the bearded face, veiled in shadows, and could barely make out a large nose, hooked like a beak, and a set of dark, stern eyes. Tristan could have sworn he saw a short flicker of dark blue light in them before the mysterious figure gave a short nod, turned around, and became one with the mist once more.  
 Tristan’s muscles loosened up; he did not know what was across the bridge, but he knew he was going to find out. The earth quacked. He leapt onto the bridge with almost weightless agility. A gust of wind, the squeaking of wood, everything manifested clearly for Tristan in that very moment. It was as if he saw for the very first time. Greddor still stood there; an immovable object. But Tristan was not planning on moving him. He jumped up, a leap of fate. He felt like the wind itself as he hurtled, dodging the axe that chanted the song of metal through the air.   
 He landed with a roll on the wobbling planks. But when he turned his head to look back, he saw the bridge had somehow erupted into bright flames. Greddor was already burning along with the shrieking bridge, but Tristan made a run for the end, toward the mist. He could feel the wood break beneath his feet as he ran, closely pursued by the flaming tongues. The very moment he landed on the hard stone, the wooden bridge, with Greddor on it, plunged down into the darkness, consumed by the fire and the earth.   
 Tristan turned to face the mysterious veil of mist, but before he could step forward, an invisible force started to pull him away. The world around him began to fade as he realized he was waking up. He blinked a couple of times to come to grips with the shift of reality, and it took a few minutes of staring at the ceiling above him to fully land in the physical world.  
 When he forced himself to sit up at last, the heavy lump of pain that was his head protested fiercely. The first rays of light fell in from the small, round window in the roof, with small dust particles floating in the light. He unwrapped himself from the layers of blankets, and glided down to land on the stone floor with a muffled thud. He splashed some cold water in his face, and attempted to tame his hair with a second splash.  
 Aunt Eleanor had fallen asleep on her trusty old chair, with her shapeless knitwork on her lap, snoring faintly, while Tristan quietly grabbed a piece of bread and some of the leftover stew. While eating his breakfast, he noticed an odd bundle of cloths laying on the table, labelled with a note. *Delivery for ser Joreal Hillard, Nobornal Street, Second Saturday of the Eleventh Moon.* It read in aunt Eleanors handwriting. It turned out to be the beautifully decorated dagger he and his aunt had worked on for the past two weeks.  
 Even though Tristan was still a bit angry with his aunt, he understood very well why she responded the way she did. And although she sometimes had difficulty expressing it, he also knew she cared about him a lot. So, when the idea of the delivery arose, he decided it would be a thoughtful gesture of peace from his side to run this errand, since it had to be taken care of today anyway.   
 So, after giving himself an imaginary pat on the back for his matureness, he put on his jacked and went on his way toward the centre of the city. Where the wealthy and noble-born lived.  
 The Erongow forgery where he and his aunt worked got very few commissions from the Silver Hills, and Tristan's visits to that area of the town were even less frequent. As he moved nearer to the raised centre of Florindell, the buildings got taller and more colourful. Baskets and pots of flowers of every possible colour and scent were hanging from windows and balconies. And although all roofs in Florindell were coloured with all the shades of the rainbow, the manors of the Silver Hills were covered in colours so bright, and so vibrant, that a rainbow paled in comparison.  
 Tristan was in a state of awe, he was absorbed by the beauty, so that he almost didn't notice the stuck-up inhabitants looking at him in the same way they might look at a particularly filthy rat. What he also almost didn't notice was the mysterious figure in a long white cloak, accentuated with scarlet red lines and symbols. But even more peculiar was who was walking next to him, talking indistinctly to the shadows under the white hood. Tristan ducked behind an exceptionally colourful bush to avoid the piercing blue eyes of mister Greddor.  
 The two men were moving towards Tristan’s bush though, so he quietly snuck around it, out of their line of sight.  
 “....exchange would be saver in the hotel I am staying.” He heard Greddor say. “You never know what little bird might be listening.”  
 “Yes, Yes, I suppose so.” A high-pitched voice from beneath the hood confirmed. “My order finds discretion of the utmost importance.”  
 The answer Greddor gave didn't reach Tristan, since they were quickly out of hearing range thanks to their fast pace. But he had heard enough to make his mind race.  
 *“So that Greddor is up to some shady business.”* He couldn't say he had expected it, although he couldn't say he was surprised either. He looked at the bundle with the dagger in it, and considered his options. “*I really should not get involved in this.”* He remembered thinking, before his curiosity took the better of him. “*The morning is still young, plenty of time to do a little investigation.”* He decided as he started his pursue of the two figures, who were just turning a corner at the end of the street.  
 Keeping a safe distance, Tristan followed them through half of the Silver Hills, until they finally walked up to a broad building at the edge, that had to be the hotel. Tristan was just cursing his own stupidity for not thinking this through, when an idea hit him in the head. It would require a whole lot of bluff, but he had bluffed himself out of situations most of his life, so he persuaded himself he could pull it off.  
 He walked into the hotel after waiting what felt like an hour, but in reality approximated a minute. He walked into the tavern part with caution until he was sure the men had gone upstairs. Then he breathed in deep, rolled his shoulders, and walked up to the innkeeper as if he had nothing to be worried about. “*If only that were true.”*   
 *“*Hi.”  
 “Hello, can I help you?” The innkeeper was a broad, balding man, with a thick brown beard, and knowing eyes.  
 “I have got a delivery.” Tristan held up the bundle, furiously hoping the innkeeper wouldn't care to investigate the note that was still attached. “For a mister Greddor.” He added, biting his lip.  
 “Ah yes, well he just returned to his room, I will see to it that he receives it right away.”  
 “Uhg.. Well, I was supposed to.. Well, see to it myself.” Tristan almost bit his lip of now.  
 The innkeeper paused for a moment, scratched his heavy eyebrow, and at last said. “Well, I suppose that's allright, I can only have respect for someone who takes their job seriously.” He nodded approvingly and added: “Third floor, last door, on your right, goodluck.  
 The hotel might have been on the edge of the Silver Hills, Tristan still got a good number of glances from people who looked as though they were thinking of what the most effective way to contaminate him would be. Nevertheless, he managed to arrive on the third floor. But instead of walking to the last door to the right, he snuck into the room just adjacent to it. Luckily the door was open, so he quickly crossed the room to the balcony. There he carefully manoeuvred over the decorative buds and ridges, to quietly climb onto the stone balcony of Greddors room.  
 “*Whatever he has to hide, I will find out.”* He thought vindictively, as he knelt just around the corner behind a tall plant.  
 “...Glad to know one suspected you in any case.” Tristan heard the high-pitched voice say.  
 “Yeah, well, they are all so cocky they wouldn't notice it you blast a fireball to their face.” Greddor responded in a lazy voice. “Especially those Myrmadinions, the thought of anyone but them using magic doesn't even cross their mind.”  
 *“Magic?” “Myrmadinions?” “What in the names of the Gods have I gotten myself into.”*   
 *“*Enough chitchat, now, I would like to wrap up our exchange.” Greddors tone was clear enough.  
 “Most certainly, this particular artifact is capable of performing extraordinary feeds in the areas of earth magic, and will be an excellent addition to your collection.” The voice sounded more like a snake than a human, but before it could continue, mister Greddor interrupted.  
 "Cut to the point, magician, what do you want for it?”  
 “For the humble prize of five hundred Chilon, the belt is yours.”  
 Tristan couldn't resist the urge to peek around the corner to get a look at what belt could be worth the money to buy three good horses.  
 The white cloaked figure had now taken of his hood to reveal his long, sharp, bald head. He was holding a broad, brown leather belt, with an even bigger belt buckle. The large, bronze clasp was inlaid with small, orange amber stones.   
 “What about two hundred and this.” Mister Greddor held up a golden amulet the size of his large hand. Tristan's heart made a backflip as he recognized the reward for the winner of a Landolar tournament. Yesterday’s tournament.  
 *“He doesn't care about becoming Prime Landolar at all.”* Tristan thought completely baffled “*He just wants to buy some magic belt.”*   
 “I fear our order isnot interested in souvenirs; however nice they might well be.” “Nonetheless, my offer still stands.”  
 Greddor muttered something indistinct in his beard that was anything but friendly. He walked out of Tristan's sight to return shortly after with a large, jingling bag.   
 Tristan tried to extend his head to get a better view of the room. But just as he did, Greddor paused his movements as if something had just occurred to him. Tristan retracted his head instantly, but his heart pounded so hard, he feared it might give him away. Greddor proceeded however.  
 “Whatever, I can find plenty of people who will pay a fortune for the medal.” He dropped the bag on the table between them with a loud clang, and took the belt bluntly from the bald man's hands. “I’ll walk you out.”  
 “It was a great pleasure doing business with you, and if you ever need anyth...”   
The sound of died away as the door closed behind them.   
 Tristan took about five seconds to think everything over. “*That Greddor must have used magic somehow to win the tournament.”* He snuck into the room, and saw the golden amulet laying on the table. “*So technically.. I won the tournament.”* He took the amulet in his hand and was taken by surprise by its heaviness. But he was completely taken by terror when the door flung open to reveal Greddor. If eyes could kill, Tristan's heart would not have been beating as rapidly as it did.  
 Tristan wanted to move, he really did, but his muscles might as well have been solid wood, and not the flexible kind. It took the broad, grey menace about half a second to reach him and seize Tristan's neck with his large, rough hands.   
 Tristan's was shoved against the wall with a crushing sound, gasping for air, he was lifted a foot of the ground.  
 “Steeling when we can’t win, are we?” Greddor growled.  
 At last, the adrenaline took over Tristans whole body. He started kicking wildly, like cornered cat, but the only result was losing more air. He suddenly noticed he still held the amulet in one hand, and the bundle in the other. “*The dagger.”*  
 He felt for the handle, and started stabbing desperately at the thick arms, the knife still covered in cloths. The point finally sunk in the muscled forearm, through the, now red, rag it was wrapped in. The iron grip became only tighter however, and Tristan's vision started to fade. He stabbed a second time. And a third. Each with less strength in his arm.  
 At last Tristan felt the grip loosen, and he somehow gathered enough force to thrust himself free. He gasped for air, and stumbled back towards the balcony. Meanwhile Greddor was growling like a wild animal, clawing the hand of his wounded arm. Tristan felt it was about time to get himself straight out of there. He pocketed the golden medallion, and swung himself over the balcony to start climbing downward. But he wasn’t even halfway, when the bloody figure of Greddor appeared on the balcony, and started calling out loudly, like a wounded beoran. “THIEF.” “THAT THIEF ATTACKED ME!” “HE IS ESCAPING.”   
 Down the street, people started looking up and started pointing and gasping. Naturally, at that exact moment a small host of half a dozen patrimor came marching down the street.   
 Tristan cursed under his breath, he doubted they would be considerate listeners to his side of the story, so he started his climb upwards. After nearly slipping two times, and having a fair number of rocks thrown his way, he at last pulled himself up the emerald green roof.  
 The opportunity to enjoy the excellent view was rudely interrupted however, when from a pointed tower on his left, the cluster of city guards emerged. Each one holding a short staff, extended with a sharp blade. Tristan had forged quite a few of the lightning bolt shaped spears himself, and was familiar enough with them to know his small dagger stood no chance against one of them, let alone six.  
 So, Tristan went for the only viable solution. He ran. Over the colourful ridges, past thin turrets and smoking chimneys. He slid down steep roofs, jumped over alleys and climbed over walls. He had long left the Silver Hills, and was nearing the city wall, when he dared a glance back to see that at least four of the patrimor had persevered headstrong in their pursuit, and where two roofs behind him. He gathered up his strength once more and jumped another gap, heading for a small clock tower four houses removed.   
 Balancing his way toward the tower, Tristan risked another glance to see his pursuers had gained even more ground, *“or roof technically.”* He thought cynically. He was running out of breath, as well as ideas. He swung around the corner of the clock tower, that extended above the sea of roofs, and almost rushed into a broad, dark stone chimney. No smoke emerged from it.  
“*My escape.”*  
 He took the seconds he had to tear off his jacked, wind it around the dagger, and cast it in the broad shaft in the hope it would create the desired effect. He had no time to check however, since the soldiers iron rattling was drawing nearer. He slid down the purple slope, and grabbed hold of the ledge at the end just in time not to experience crushing consequences of gravity.  
 While he hung at the edge of the roof, dangling further above the ground than he dared to acknowledge, he heard the rattling partimor come.  
 “Well, would you look at that, he’s gone.” A nagging voice said. “Let's just go back, it's just a thief. Tristan heard multiple footsteps pacing across the roof.  
 “And you are just a lazy bastard.” A deep, unforgiving voice replied.   
 One pair of rattling steps was headed toward the edge Tristan was dangling under. He slowly swayed himself under the overhanging roof, to hide himself out of sight. He heard the soldier walk until he stood right above where Tristan clung his hands to a ledge, with only the purple roof tiles separating his cramped hands, and the heavy boots.  
 “Look at this chimney.” A younger sounding partimor suddenly said. “Dust is coming out of it, but no smoke.” Tristan couldn't supress a small grin.  
 “He must have jumped in it.” The man who had just stood above Tristan said in a hoarse voice as he walked away from the edge.  
 “Oh great.” The complaining partimor groaned.” I guess we will continue this wild moose chase.”  
 “Shut up, we got to get down there now.” The heavy voice snapped.  
 “You know it's *goose* chase, right?...” The voices faded away as the soldiers rattled of.  
 Tristan heaved himself back up the roof, with a loud sigh, both of exhaustion as relief. The feeling of relief was overwhelmed however, when he realised the dilemma he was facing. “*Home.. Aunt Eleanor.*” Eventually, the partimor would find out who he was and where he lived. “*I screwed up.”* If he went home, it would be only a matter of time before he would be put to ‘justice.’ And he doubted his word stood only the slightest chance against Greddors. “*I screwed up badly.”*  
 *“I could leave.”* His own thoughts surprised himself. “*Disappear for a few months, live in the forest, eat of the land.”* It sounded more appealing the longer he thought about it. “*And with a bit of luck, today’s incident will be long forgotten when I return.”*   
 Exhilarated by his new sense of direction Tristan headed towards the city wall. “*Hopefully aunt Eleanor will make it on her own.”* He thought as he made his way over the fading colours of the outer district. “*And hopefully she won't kill me when I return.”* Somehow, he had more worries on the second matter.  
 He easily found a roof from which he could leap onto the outer wall. The defences might be decent against outside assaults, but the wall was not designed to keep people in the city. Nonetheless, getting of the thirty feet wall was something Tristan hadn't really thought through.  
 The solution came in the form of the guard tower fifty yards away. He snuck towards it, staying low enough to keep himself covered by the five feet crenulations. Luckily, the door wasn't locked and the only guard present, was an old, grey-bearded sleeping one. After some rummaging, he found what he was looking for, a thick, coiled up rope laid on a heavy wooden chest in the corner. On his way out, Tristan could not help himself and strapped on the sword belt he presumed belonged to the snoring partimor. The short, broad sword was nothing like he was used to, but he had a feeling it would come in handy later.  
 Back on the wall, Tristan swung the rope over one of the stone battlements, and started descending down towards the ground below. After pulling down the heavy rope, he decided it would be best to leave it, since it would be more a burden than an aid. He easily crossed the frozen moat, and made his way onto the wide plains that surrounded Florindell.  
 Tristan took a deep breath, and then he rushed of. He sprinted across the fields, ran over the hills. In the distance he heard voices from the wall calling indistinguishable. But that was all behind him. He was free now. HIs flight had begun.