



JANDEN HALE

LEGION OF LIBERTY

By
Janden Hale

EVERWIND: SUBCHAPTER TWO



PUBLISHED BY:
Janden Hale

Legion of Liberty
Copyright © 2012 by Janden Hale

This ebook is licensed for your personal enjoyment only. This ebook may not be re-sold or given away to other people. If you would like to share this book with another person, please purchase an additional copy for each recipient. If you're reading this book and did not purchase it, or it was not purchased for your use only, then please return and purchase your own copy. Thank you for respecting the hard work of this author.

Your support and respect for the property of this author is appreciated.

This book is a work of fiction and any resemblance to persons, living or dead, or places, events or locales is purely coincidental. The characters are productions of the author's imagination and used fictitiously.

Adult Reading Material



CONTENTS

[Contents](#)
[Start Reading](#)
[Appendix](#)
[About the Author](#)
[Everwind Links](#)
[More Everwind Books](#)

»

EVERWIND

EXPRESS

Please visit the [Everwind Series Facebook Page](#) to learn more about the series and find out when new material comes out!

Previously in the Everwind Series:

[The Facility](#) – Subchapter One

»

LEGION OF LIBERTY

»

*1336.6 // sometime in Jolanus of the year 11,336 in the Age of Influence
Blightwater District, Herensel Cityship, Western Gruenormark*

A stream of hot piss dashing onto the wall, Kes standing there aiming it, embraced in the privacy of shadows. Behind him stands the other candidate, Sap, who's shifting his weight from one leg to the other like he's got to piss, too, only he's shivering, rubbing his hands together like he's trying to set them on fire.

Somewhen between 2800 and 3000 at night, they have several more hours of shit getting colder before the sun arrives. This is only one of the reasons Sap is pissed about being out here.

"This is a load of shit, I'm tellin you, we're always the ones out here handin these things out. Puttin *our* asses out in the wind. Don't see *them* out here, 'bout to get caught by the Greenies¹, I'm tellin you."

Kes sniffs. "Greenies got no business comin out here."

"Oh, they do. Trust me, they do."

Kes shakes it out, finishes his encounter with the wall, then joins Sap overlooking a giant pile of metal and wood and cloth and mudbrick. They can barely make it out in the dark, only that it's there, a mass in the dark of night that Sap would later describe as "darker dark." A monster of a complex in the slums of Herensel's Blightwater District, this building is held together by a weave of scraps and hope. It's parked smack in the middle of a swarm of shipping containers, tents, huts, and lean-tos. Like a toddler sitting atop an ant pile. Some of the containers are stacked neatly, everything else appears to have been randomly dropped from the sky. Each one of the containers is occupied, the whole place like a nest of a thousand eggs, each with desperate, starving, unpredictable yolks inside.

Kes snorts and spits a glob of snot out onto the ground. "The reason *they* don't do this is because it's what *we* do. You volunteered for this when you said you wanted in. I don't know about you, but I want my fucking pin. So I do whatever they tell me to do." Kes breathes some hot air into cupped palms. "Now you done being a girl or do I need to find one to replace you?"

"Replace away. Good luck getting them to let a girl in. His Majesty King Jogan 6 couldn't *command* them to let a girl in," Sap says.

"You get your pin that's exactly what they'll be doin."

"This the part where I laugh?"

"I'm not laughin," Kes says, plucking a sack up off the ground, "now shut yer face hole and let's get this done so we can coin ourselves up some ale."

"Keep your eyes out for them Greenies."

"In't gonna be no Greenies."

Kes smacks him across the back to get him going and they cross the slim alleyway, catch a few sets of eyes on them from a handful of slum squatters huddled next to a trash fire in the dirt. This fire is mostly made of paper and rare chunks of wood and all the shits they took that day. Very few things scavenged are left over for burning, everything being of value in some way or another. And this isn't just a hallmark of the slums; it is common everywhere except for among the very affluent. In cities, corpses are burned to inhibit the spread of disease, especially since the Black Sam epidemic that tore a swath of death through the world several years prior.

"Them?"

Kes says no, not them.

Sap inches closer to Kes so he doesn't have to talk as loud. He doesn't want to attract the wrong kind of attention. Blightwater District is the densest sector in Herensel; it would be easy for them to be overrun. Which is the reason they're out here in the first place. As Legion of Liberty candidates, their loyalty and ability to handle danger are constantly being tested, to ensure they deserve the honor of being members.

It's dark enough outside to mask the sight of their breath leaking out into the cold. "Some of these is liable to think we got a sack full with food, I'm tellin you. Probably chew your hand off just to get at it," Sap says.

"And you still have to ask why we's the ones out here?"

They cautiously approach the door of the compound, which is strapped onto the jamb with repurposed lanyards in place of hinges. Kes presses the door in a hand-width but can't see anything but black on the other side. Sap is keeping an eye on the ones back by the fire, also throwing his gaze around for sleepers on the ground. And Greenies, of course of course.

"I hate this sector. Everything. It smells, you know. And it's dangerous, I'm tellin you. Never know whatall is waiting here for you in the black. I been here before, that's how I know the Greenies sometimes come through. Lookin for things to confiscate." He shivers and stifles a cough. "Not so much worried about gettin myself kilt as I am catchin something. Comin away with some parasite."

Kes looks at Sap then back at the door and exhales. "I don't think you need to worry. No parasite's gonna want to latch onto the likes of you." Then he pushes his way through the door into the black beyond. Sap, realizes he's alone and slides in after him.

"Kes?"

"Here. A few steps in, it's a hallw - "

"Shit. Found you."

"Watch where you're goin," Kes says.

"Sure. Let me just activate my dark seeing eyes."

Kes doesn't respond, but Sap hears him rummaging through the sack. "Too dark in here. I was hoping someone'd be running a fire or something." A few seconds later Kes is backtracking past Sap. "Come back out with me."

They exit the building and Sap follows Kes as he accosts the group by the fire, and they scatter like seech spiders, scurrying away from him until they see he's only leaning over to torch up a

lamp wick.

"My thanks," he says to them and turns back towards the building before anyone can utter any grievance. He bypasses Sap, smiling.

"Genius," Sap whispers, following. Kes hands the sack over to Sap so he can cup the flame with his free hand. Then they're back through the building's door and into the long hallway.

They can spit farther than they can see down the hall, but the parts illuminated by the lamp are all clear, no sleepers, no trash, nothing. The poorer sectors like this are always trash-free, everything being utilized for something, nothing wasted. They stay clear of the walls, as if by leaning or nudging one will somehow bring the whole building down on top of them.

They inch along the corridor and come to where the hall opens up onto a large room. Peeking in they can make out a few sleepers on mats or blankets, but otherwise the room is free of furniture or anything else. Just personal effects of the occupants.

"Let's just wake wunna these and get on out," Sap says. "Exit's right behind us, anything turns to venom."

"Good thinkin, emp²."

They pick the closest sleeper. Kes gestures for Sap to open the sack. "Hand me one and mind the rest, yes?" Sap pulls a smooth, flat rectangle out of the sack and hands it over. Then he unsheathes a long, wide dagger - a special edition Straser Fatstag - and takes up a position off to the side of the doorway so he doesn't get taken by surprise by someone stealing in from behind.



Straser blades are easily identified by the Straser logo etched onto the hilt

Kes nudges the sleeper awake with his foot and leans back out of reach. The sleeper twitches awake and gasps as he sits up and screams for help.

Kes takes a step back with his hands out, "Easy, hey, hey, hey, emp, easy." The sleeper suddenly has all this energy and he can't take his eyes off the imposing look of the Fatstag. Kes tries to diffuse the situation, "We're not tryin to hurt nobody," as the heaps of blankets come to life with murmurs and shuffling and cursing.

The perimeter edge of the light suddenly fills with new bodies, each one pissed and wielding a stick or a blade or a rock. "Everybody be still," Kes is saying, but the first guy, the one he woke, is yelling about getting robbed and raped and taken and ate, but then Sap steps forward, preceded by his giant slab of sharp metal.

"Halt! Stand where you are," Sap says, pointing the dagger at them, and his voice, it's loud, powerful, and the whole room goes still. Kes is even surprised. "Stand down," Sap says, posturing with his feet wide and that knife, that fucking knife commands a high degree of respect, amplifying his presence and he's instantly king of the room.

Not a single emblem on any of them and the two Candidates instantly deduce that they're dealing with nobody special.

Kes holds up the rectangular device so they can all see it in the candlelight. "We came to give you this. That's all we want. We want to give you this and we'll be on the outs."

One of them says through a mouth where teeth only make an occasional appearance, "If I can't eat it, fuck it, or sell it, I don't want it." Another one asks what is it, what is it, while a third says for them to close it up so he can see if he wants it for himself.

"It's knowledge," Kes says, and what little interest they had dissipates.

"We don't need no knowledge," one says, and another one says to the first that that's kind of a stupid thing to say, and the one who doesn't need no knowledge says, "we ought kill these two and make sausages," and the other says again for them to close it up.

Kes takes a deep breath. The problem is that most of the people who need their help are illiterate, and constantly make decisions against their own interests due to their unbridled ignorance. Easily manipulated by the establishment into submission, into accepting whatever fate the authorities choose for them. When every stimulus around them reinforces the status quo, anything that goes against that is automatically suspect to them. The cards are, therefore, stacked against anyone who attempts to awaken the sleeping populace.

But that is why the information contained within the devices is of particular use. In fact, the first sentence of the book contained within the device captures the essence of the situation perfectly: *It is a mark of a great social philosopher whose words can be understood by those he would hope to save. For such a man to petition only his peers with lofty eloquence is contrary, as these are not the ones who need awakening.*

"Do you like the way things are?" asks Kes. "Or would you like to live this way for the rest of your days?" The one thing common among all who are economically outclassed by an unfair system is the desire for affluence. "How would you like to be able to get anything your heart desires?"

They seem to think about this for a few moments, looking around at the others for social confirmation for some idea on how to decide. Kes only needs to sell the idea on the de facto leader, who the others would defer to. The one who keeps telling them all to shut up, he steps forward, curious. "What kinda knowledge?"

Kes smiles on the inside. He and Sap could take this cabal of slicks³ with little effort, but he'd

rather just do what they'd come here to do. "The kind that sets you free."

¹ a *Greenie* is a Gruenor soldier, called thus because of the explicit shade of green on the uniforms

² *emp* is colloquial slang, short for *emperor*, similar in use to man, dude, guy, etc.

³ *slick* - slang for anyone who doesn't bear an emblem

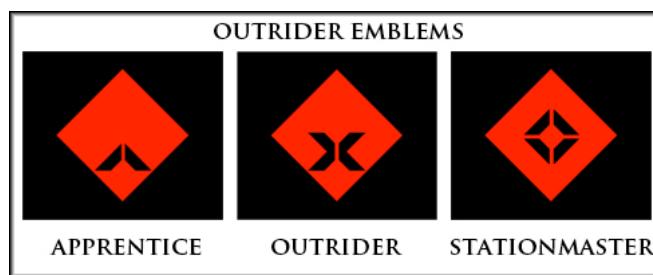


Legion House of the Herensel Charter, Eastwan Downs District

Rinden Dane's temple-greyed head sags heavy in his hands, eyes closed. He is still as stone, the curled letter on the table in front of him full of ill news scrawled in an unsteady hand. The only sound in the room is the crackle of the fire behind him, the sporadic hiss of vapor being freed from the prison of the wood chips. Neither Tracks nor Splash says anything to him, both also sitting at the table, watching him, waiting. Rin is older than both by nearly a decade, yet they all look sun-worn and tired, like they've had a century's worth of life crammed into a third the time.

Rinden Dane opens his eyes and rises to his feet, slowly lifts the letter, walks it over and drops it onto the brazier. He watches the flames slowly eat it as if savoring every morsel. The other two stay in their seats, watching his backside as he stands there starkly framed in the shifting light.

He'd picked the letter up at the Outrider station⁴ earlier that evening, which meant that it was important enough to be escorted by the professionals. Any one of his crew could have signed for it with their pinned emblem as identification, but he did the job himself. His brother was an Outrider back home, so he liked being in their company, even if it was just long enough to accept a parcel. The entire Outrider outfit was one of the few remaining entities with a respectable emblem.





GRUENMARK

Legion of Liberty pin emblem with Gruenmark territory identifier

When the letter is reduced to ash and memory, Rin says, "The New Elid charter has fallen."

Splash slackens in his chair and glances at Tracks, whose jaw is hard at work clenching, clenching. Rin spends a few more moments watching the fire, as if the letter will somehow recover and piece itself back together, then he spins and reoccupies the seat at the head of the table so he can look them in the eyes. He bears no expression, no anger, no rage, but he still has the air of a man who is troubled.

Rin tells them they were captured by the Terisian Guard.

"Cold of cunt, they'll be executed!" Splash says, turning in his chair towards Rin. "We don't have much time."

"We don't have any time," shaking his head. "They were executed on site. Official order of Sorren⁵ himself." Rin looks away from them. "All are dead save one."

"Hatch?" Splash asks. Tracks is trying to contain his own emotions, his jaw still hard at work.

Rin shakes his head. "Dead. Dirty was the only one got away. He's the one posted the letter."

Tracks stares down at the table, still unable to will his jaw to stop clenching. He twists one of his rings around and around and around.

"Dirty's asking for our help," Rin tells them. "Find Shiner and Clink. Full quorum meeting." Without a word Tracks and Splash stand and exit the chamber, likely off to audit the Onion Hole Ale House for the other two. All the officers would convene back here to discuss the issue, every full member having an equal say in the outcome. Rin, founder of the Legion and Commander of Gruenmark's Herensel charter, remains in his seat, staring at the shifting shadows on the walls from the firelight.

⁴ Outrider Station 229, Herensel, south Eastwan Downs just off Gallowsgate Way

⁵ Svir Sorren, Speaker of the Terisian Assembly and Head of State of the Terisian Preceptocracy

»

The Legion of Liberty. Non-profit organization first, partisans of vigilantism second. Its primary function to champion the cause of liberty for the common man.

Men who stand ready to do harm on another's behalf are in short supply in this world. This world. It lays rotting, infected. Chaos reigns and the monarchies fight fervently for every strand of control they have left. They look after themselves first and there's no energy or resources left to look after their subjects.

Like the world, the subjects are left to rot.

The ruling elite senses their impending demise and compensates by ruling with a heavy hand. The Curella outbreak, known collectively as Black Sam, snuffed out over sixty percent of the population over a period of six years, along with the hereditary monarchical system. From 1322.2 until the mass Turmocet vaccinations of 1328.6. With most of the royal houses in the grave and those remaining having suffered the kiss of infertility⁶, every dynasty must adapt or die.

It is widely accepted that the seven remaining of the once great royal houses are reluctant to adapt.

The Black Sam seems to have ushered in a new age, forcing the hand of fate into a state of widespread panic and chaos and the unassailable desire for survival. The new age leaves the individual at a sharp disadvantage, makes banding together a necessity. *The stronger the league, the stronger the man*, it is said.

It's all a part of a new set of social protocols and strategies, a New Way, the old conventions under mutiny by these natural side effects. Powerful forces of change. Yet, by far, the most powerful impetus for change lies in a new paradigm called Influism. Contained within its concepts are the seeds to free nations and the common man, one and all.

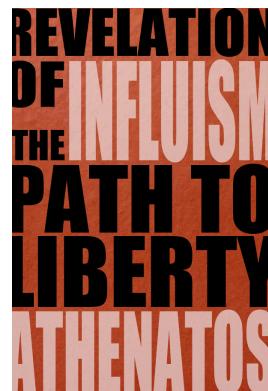
The world has long been thrust into an every man for himself mindset and the Black Sam reinforced that. In the month of Senalus of the year 1328, Rinden Dane created the Legion of Liberty to fight against any institution or entity that would infringe upon the rights and wellbeing of the citizenry.

Not long after he discovered Influism, as if by fate.

He soon learned that the most powerful force in the world is not knowledge or love or money. It

is influence.

Rinden Dane became the unofficial spokesman and advocate for the spread of Influism, a movement sparked by an essay called *Revelation of Influism: The Path to Liberty*, by an anonymous scholar under the alias of Athenatos⁷. The mystery surrounding the identity of Athenatos has been the source of much controversy and commotion, almost as much as the ideas themselves. Many have come forward to claim authorship, but none of the claims has ever been substantiated. The true identity of Athenatos remains a mystery.



paperback cover of *Revelation of Influism*

The Legion's primary tactic is to distribute this book. It is a costly endeavor; the largest percentage of the books they hand out are in the form of repurposed MAVTODs⁸, standard military hardware used for the dissemination of orders and technical instruction, which have been hacked and hard-coded with custom security software so no one else can overwrite the data. The Legion's recycled versions are all audio, accompanied by holographic animation; this is because only a small number of the population can actually read. That, and nearly every physical book either gets eaten or used as kindling.

Few people have the skill to hack the MAVTODs, which are of no use to anyone otherwise, so the Legion pretty much has the market cornered. Nearly every Legion charter has access to a guy with such expertise in one way or another.

On occasion the Legion is known to pass out physical copies of the book that they've had printed, but this practice is rare.

Kes and Sap, the only two Candidates of the Herensel charter, dropped the last of the devices into the hands of what they took to be the leader of a brood of gypsies, playing to their independent nature and the lie that they might possibly fetch a fair price for the machines somewhere.

By now the nightcold is considerably augmented; it is closer to 0200 in the early morning and the two trace a line through the random passageways in the leftover space between slum shacks. They use the smokestack silhouettes of the Twopenny Crematory as a rough navigation guide. Otherwise they might never escape this maze of destitution. The crematory is infamous not only for its size and prominence, but for the rumors of bodies intended for cremation - as is mandatory

by city statute - being sold to slum butchers who then pass the meat off as other fare. So the two keep a close eye on the place, not just for guidance in the darkness, but also because it creeps the shit out of them.

They are also counting on the majority of the residents being tucked away in sleep. At this hour almost anyone they encounter is most likely someone unsavory.

"I say we skirt the south wall until we get back to the Downs. I'd prefer getting clear of this hole of a district, but there's also Greenies out patrolling the main road down there."

"What is it with you and the Greenies?" Kes asks.

"Nothin. I just don't feel like meetin up with any."

"We got rid of all the wares, so we're not likely to get caught subversing. Do you not have your papers?"

"I got my papers."

"Then what's the problem? We're clean."

Sap slams his hands deeper into his pockets. "Clean or no. We got other stuff they could take. They're like to clean us out."

"You mean the Straser?"

"Yes. Among other things."

"Where'd you get that thing anyhow? Them things is few and far."

"It don't matter where I come up with it."

"You sure do know a lot about them soldiers."

"No I don't. I know just enough."

Kes puts his hand on Sap's chest, stops him, puts his face inches from Sap's. "I seen how you took control of that room back there. The way you used your voice." He laughs, mockingly: "The way you yelt out for them to *halt*. Don't nobody talk like that but the soldierly. You sure are...*soldierly*."

Sap brushes his hand away. "You don't know shit."

Kes starts walking again. "Don't worry, you and I's on the same team. Don't matter to me what you done before. You're a little young, though, to be havin your soldierly days behind you."

Sap follows along, thinking. They walk a hundred paces or so in silence, then Sap speaks up again. "What's that supposed to mean?"

Kes doesn't slow or turn around. "I think you know what it means." He cuts a corner into a side alley that's graced with less starlight than the passageway he's leaving behind. He slows just inside the shadows and waits for Sap to catch up. They're face to face again. "You can't risk a run-in with the Greenies because they're like to take and kill you." He feels Sap's breath on his face, warm and fast. Then he puts a hand on his shoulder. "I won't tell the others."

They linger there for a while until Sap is satisfied that Kes indeed won't tell on him. Then they work deeper into the alley until they hit the wall. Kes gestures that he'll hoist Sap up and over first. Sap steps into Kes's hands and he goes up to grip the ledge, pulls himself on top and straddles it.

"You boys is out past your bedtime, looks like."

Both sets of eyes fire back behind them, looking for the source, Sap's hand finding the reassuring handle of the Fatstag. A moment later a cloak and cowl come into view out from under the overhang of an edifice, a quick flash of reflected light off the end of an outstretched arm. Just enough for them to know that a wrist rack is in their presence.

"We got nothin for you," Kes says, hands raising on their own, "no coin, no food."

A stuttered laugh from beneath the cowl. "Maybe so. Don't go drawing conclusions. I trust you seen the rack?"

"We seen it," Sap says, still straddling the wall. "So you got a rack. I'll wager you got no power cells."

"You willing to wager your life?"

"That you got a cell in that thing? Yes. That you'll waste the juice on some broke nobody like me? Absolutely."

"Look, emp," Kes says softly, "we'll just be on the outs. Don't make my friend call your bluff. No need for anyone to get hisself kilt for nothin."

The stranger lifts the wrist rack up a bit and sighs. "Ya see this little light here?" He puts a finger to it. "This'n. That says I got power." He wags his finger up and down. "But you might also be thinkin I might not have no ammo in this here piece." Then he taps the wrist rack with his palm, strokes it for a second. "An Anderman T44K. I bet you heard of this make before." He takes a deep breath, keeping the rack on the level with Kes. "I call it Little Skulf."

The stranger waits for them to respond, but they don't.

"You know. Skulf. Ancient god of chaos?"

They remain silent, but Sap is still grazing the handle of his blade, mentally analyzing the distance and angle for a possible throw. He'd only get one shot at it, though.

"I think you gents got the wrong impression of me. I'm no petty thief."

"What are you, then?" Kes offers.

"My colleagues call me Germ. Because I spread my influence like a disease. I'm real good at what I do." He waits again, to see if they're sufficiently intrigued. They are not. Germ sighs. "Dox⁹. I'm a poker, you fools."

Kes yells for Sap to run for it and sidesteps an angle forward out of the line of fire, but the wrist rack clicks loud and Kes feels a pinch in his neck. He drops to his knees and sees Sap's giant blade slide into view, but the poker is already gone, vaulted up onto a metal housebox in a tornado of cloak and cowardice.

Sap turns to attend to Kes. "Did he get you?"

Kes pulls a vialled barb out from his neck and holds it out in the palm of his hand. Then he looks up at Sap, his eyes loaded with more fear than Sap had seen their whole night combined. He clutches at Sap's sleeve, dropping the dox vial to the ground.

⁶ Nearly the entire remaining population fell victim to infertility as a result of the Curella vaccine, Turmocet.

⁷ also sometimes spelled Aethenatos

⁸ Military Audio/Video Transmission Order Devices

⁹ dox is the street name for the new drug Adoxipham



Rin, Tracks, Splash, Clink, and Shiner. All present at the table, the only remaining members of the mother charter. Over the years several of their brothers had died and they just didn't feel like swelling their ranks again. They preferred to keep things small, more exclusive. It meant they could be more choosy with who they let in. These five, their names are known among every charter from Norgurn down to Sonn Dathri and Hoelera.

All four of them are looking at Rin, waiting for him to start, him thinking how to begin. He looks up at Splash, Deputy Commander of their charter. "Any word on the two Candidates?"

Splash shakes his head. "Still out. Did you want them in on this?" It is against custom for Candidates to sit in on meetings, but Splash thinks maybe Rin might be thinking to put it to a vote to have them sit in, which is unprecedented. But considering the circumstances...

"No. Just keeping track," Rin answers. "I'm assuming they filled you in?" he asks the other two

who had not been there as he read the letter. They nod.

"They did," Clink says.

Rin's eyebrows raise and then sink back down. He looks at Shiner, the charter Secretary. "No minutes until the end. This'n's off the books." Shiner nods and shoves his quill and papers aside. Rin looks around at the rest of them. "So Dirty is the only one left of the New Elid boys. He's asking for our help. No specific requests were mentioned. What you all think?"

"We don't really have anybody to spare," says Clink. "Unless you want to give up them other two."

Shiner, who got his namesake from his uncontrollable habit of smiling, is not smiling now, a rare occurrence. "I got no problem with it," he says.

Rin looks again at Splash, his second in command. "Well they're not full members. I'd prefer giving up someone who knows the ins of everything."

Shiner: "How far along are they? Kes has got to be close."

"Eight months," Splash replies. "I think he's about proved himself worthy. No question Sap is too new."

"Sap is too untested," says Clink. "Kes, he's still a few months shy of consideration. Give or take."

Rin takes a deep breath and taps his knuckles a few times on the table. "Even if we pinned him early, he's still only one man. That would give New Elid one plus the Candidate."

"What if we take up an offering from some of the other charters? Jovos Aera. Elidel. Ovaka. Surely they've got guys to spare?" Shiner smiles for the first time since the meeting got under way.

Rin nods. "It's a possibility. Put the word out. Hit up every charter in Aeryl, the Mark¹⁰, and Averia. Use the Outriders, they're the most secure. Can't risk having any externals intercepting the letters." Shiner nods and smiles.

"Might I offer up a suggestion?" Tracks says. As Sergeant-at-Arms, his suggestions typically involved action of a physical nature. Even his nickname, Tracks, lends credibility to this trend, as he is known to leave bootprints on people he encounters.

Rin prompts him to continue. "By all means."

"Asking for help from the other charters is all well and good, brother, but there's no telling how long it will be before anyone gets up there. Dirty's going to need protection. The Terisian Guard is probably sparing no expense to ferret him out. No doubt they want him at the bottom of the

noose. I recommend we all go. To better demonstrate our support. We can help him find and start training suitable Candidates until the other reinforcements arrive."

Clink answers, "And what of our business here?"

"In my opinion it can wait," Tracks says, "nothing supersedes loyalty. And there is no better way to show it."

Clink shakes his head. "I don't think it's wise. For one, seven of us all together might draw attention, especially since the Guard will likely be expecting some recourse. We'd be taken into custody at the slightest suspicion."

Tracks doesn't take his eyes off Clink. "The risk of us getting caught isn't any greater now than it's ever been. I'm not one to shy away from risk."

"Are you calling me a coward?"

Tracks shrugs. "Simply making an observation. Risk can be minimized with meticulous planning."

Clink shrugs. "That may be, but let's not let such *planning* be hasty and clouded with rage. We are accustomed to our surroundings here. It's easier to evade the eyes of Jerinsen's troops. Every agency, regiment, and mercenary would love to stumble upon some of us unawares. Seven in number we may be, but they're no fools. They know we pose a significant threat to the status quo. We must exercise prudence. Not to mention we'll be leaving all our avenues of income to dry out while we're away. We'll be spreading ourselves too thin. We cannot be in two places at once, not with so few of us."

Splash takes a turn to speak. "We need to figure out what our priorities are - "

"Our priorities have always been with loyalty," Tracks intercepts.

Shiner nods. "Put yourself in *his* position. Up there. What would you have us do?"

"If I was him I would understand if we didn't run roughshod all across the damn countryside on some half-assed scheme of heroics," Clink adds. "The facts is we'll be losing a passel of coin if we neglect our obligations here."

Rin regards Clink¹¹ blankly. He always had valid points, but Rin had known him far too long not to know that every point he made was underscored with the theme of money. That's why he was the charter's Treasurer. There was no one better suited for keeper of the books. Clink's favorite sound in the world has always been that of coins clinking together. Rin lifts a finger to signify that it's his turn to speak.

"Assuming this is something we agree upon, we'll need to arrange for transit papers. The Terisians will likely be expecting something, and they'll have a keen eye on the ports. The

Greenies are likely to have heard what happened to the New Elid boys, and it might have kindled a new interest in finding our kind in their own backyard. We can't have the slightest suspicion, not here, not there. Nor anywhere in between. This, and we'll also need enough coin to cover all expenses. Clink?"

Clink shrugs. "It's a rough estimate, but yes, I think we have enough. I'll have to work up some more exacting figures. But just know that I think this will bankrupt us."

Splash curls his lip and shakes his head. "You've made your point. If no one else has anything valuable to add, let's put this to vote."

Shiner and Tracks nod their agreement as Clink bites his lip. Rin takes control of the proceedings again. "First things first. All in favor of pinning the Kestrinali?"

The vote is unanimous. Rin points to Shiner. "Go ahead and make a record of that." Then he thinks for a second and rubs his own pin. The first pin. He'd had it for eight years. They'd have to travel slick if they went, something he didn't like to do, but it had to be done. The Legion of Liberty pin was too infamous. They would still have them on hand in case they had a good reason to use them, stowed away hidden in their gear. "We'll do the pinning when they return. Now. Who wants to take a trip to New Elid?"

¹⁰ Several countries' names take the *mark* suffix - Gruenormark, Clavermark, Andermark, Linmark, Terismark, Goldenmark - though residents of Gruenormark typically refer to their own country as just "the Mark."

¹¹ *clink* is also a popular slang term for money; others include *peck* and *flash*



"You got to help me."

Kes, clutching Sap's sleeve like that, Sap not knowing what to do. He's used to just following orders. And he'd never seen someone descend into the Slow Burn before.

Dox. The latest street drug, the most potent substance in existence. Impossible to kick, impossible to overdose. Just one vial - one pitch - is all it takes to get hooked for life. That's why it's spread by force. The pokers. Guaranteed success. Street pushers tainting slums and sour boroughs, purging rough-run neighborhoods for victims, fresh meat into which they can shove their needles. This was the first they'd heard of a poker using a retrofitted wrist rack. Projectile delivery, less risk of accidental self-injection. No wonder Germ was good at his job.

"You got to help me. They say it's made from magic, that's why you can't get off it, what the shit am I s'posed to do, what am I going to do, emp?"

"I know what they say. It's all talk. There's no such thing as magic. It's just stories, I'm tellin ya."

"Like as not, it's no lie that you can't kick it once they get you. Why do you think they spread it by force?" His lips quiver and he slackens, no hope left to hold him up.

Sap thinks, puts the Fatstag to bed in its sheath. He hoists Kes to his feet by the armpit. "Come on. We got to get ourselves out of here." He leads Kes over to the wall. "I'll go up first and make sure there's no one can see us from the other side." He positions himself for a run at the wall, then, on second thought, whips out his Straser. "Take this. Just in case." He hands it over and dashes, kicks off the wall and hauls himself up to the top. No movement that he can see, no patrols on the road.

He extends a hand down. "Hand up the knife." Kes passes it up and Sap sheaths it. Then he reaches down and pulls Kes up until they're both on the ledge. Then they drop down to the other side, finally clear of the Blightwater District.

Before they begin working their way across into Eastwan Downs, Sap turns to Kes.

"What do you need me to do?"

Kes's eyes are still full of terror. He shakes his head. "Don't tell nobody."

Sap's hands fall limp at his side. "Whatever you say. I don't know how we're gonna keep this quiet."

"Well we have to. You know well as I do what happens to doxies." He inhales deep, in staccato, exhales out the same. "I'll fight it as long as I can. At some point I'm going to need another pitch. I'm not worried about how I'll be when I'm on it. My only concern is how I'll be when I need more."

"Anyone finds out I have to deny knowing."

"As well you should. I may need you to keep the stash. To keep me from going through it too fast."

Sap shakes his head. "Kinda makes it hard for me to deny knowing if I'm the one with the stash."

"I'll pay you."

"I can't do it, emp."

"I'll pay you."

Sap sighs. "This is insane. They're going to find out, and you know what they'll do."

"I have to at least try. Do you blame me?" Kes says.

"I suppose not. Let me think about it. How much time do you have?"

"I don't know."

"Well I don't even know where to get it from."

"I'll handle that."

"I still think this is madness. How do you feel?"

"Numb."

"Any of the burn?"

"Not yet."

"Well come on then. Best we get back to the house."

»

"What's wrong with him?" Splash asks.

Sap looks at Kes, who's slumped in a chair staring into the ether. "I think he's just tired. Been a long night."

"Well get him up. Bring your asses into the boardroom. Got something we need to discuss." Splash exits what they call the reading room, which in reality comes a lot closer to being a party room, which they try to keep stocked with grog at all times, and Sap gets up to retrieve Kes from his stupor. He approaches the pile of meat and hair and finds that Kes is awake but distant. He shakes Kes until Kes looks up at him, smiling.

"You got to pull your shit in line," Sap says. "They want to talk to us. Try to act normal, yes?" He helps him to his feet and they shuffle into the boardroom, where the rest of them are waiting around the giant table.

Tracks instructs Sap to take a seat in the corner. A seat that's not at the table. Kes stands there limply, a half grin and a peaceful look on his face.

"Anything to report?" Rin asks.

It takes Kes a while, and he gets around to saying, "Negative."

"You get all the 'TODs passed out?"

Kes nods thrice in the time it would take to do ten. "Yes. Sir. Yessir." He looks around at everyone else, who are all staring at him like they want to kill him. His grin fades away and his

forehead creases.

"You sure 'bout that?" asks Splash.

Kes's eyes move from person to person, end on Sap, who looks just as confused as he does.

"Yes. We handed out all of them."

Rin snaps his fingers at Clink, who tosses him a sack. Rin stands and dumps the sack out onto the table. "What do you call this then?" Kes and Sap stare, Kes open-mouthed, at a pile of MAVTODs strewn across the woodtop.

"Answer me."

Kes looks to Sap for help, but neither of them knows what to say.

"How long have you been a Candidate?"

Kes shakes his head. "I, I," more head shaking, "I don't know. Almost a year."

"Almost a year. You been trying out for this brotherhood for almost a year." Rin points at the pile on the table. "Everything we ask you to do, all the shit we heap on you, every agonizing, frustrating, humiliating bit of it is to demonstrate your loyalty. To show us whether or not you're worthy of our ranks. After all this time you two gutmaggots go and do something like this. Did you think we wouldn't find out?"

Kes's mouth can't decide if it wants to stay open or closed. "I...don't...know what you're talking about. We shifted all of them, to the last."

Rin tears across the room and shoves Kes against the wall. "Are you accusing me of lying?"

"No. No."

"He can't be trusted," Tracks says. "Neither one of them." He yanks the midsword out from its scabbard and stands.

"Kill the both of them," Clink says, standing. He rounds the table and takes Kes by the arm. Sap stands then, saying for them to wait, wait, but Shiner and Splash grab him and hold him down in his chair and before Kes can even think to try shaking free, Rin and Clink lift him into the air and slam him down onto the table. Tracks is right there with the midsword a fingerwidth away from his eyeball.

"Clink," Rin says, and Tracks holds Rin's face still so he can't move his head. Clink hands something over to Rin, but Kes can't see what it is.

"Do it quick," Clink says. "This rotten derg deserves it."

In the next second, Kes only has time to see the broadness of Tracks's teeth, his smile, the scar on his nose dancing. Rin brings his hand up and flash flash, something in his hand, and a lightning whip of pain as he brings it down and stabs it into Kes's chest.

Sap screams and goes limp in Shiner and Splash's arms, and then Clink and Tracks back away from Kes. Kes lays still for a while, waiting for everything to go black, for death, for anything, and when it doesn't come, he brings his hand up to the metal object that's embedded into his torso, just outside where his heart beats furiously beneath his ribs. Kes feels for a knife handle, something, but it's smooth, flat.

He braves a look at it and there, on the table, he sees that he's been pinned with a Legion of Liberty emblem. He finally looks up at the group, every face behind smiles and then a roar of laughter fills every throat.

"You thought you was gonna die," Splash says, approaching the table to pound his hand down on Kes's shoulder. "Welcome, brother. Welcome to the Legion."

¤

Norport docks, Shundra Cityship, Northern coast of Gruenormark
Several Days Later

Rin had appointed Tracks to converse with the quartermaster of the *Redsquall Slut*, as his intimidating features and spirited disposition made it less likely that there would be any haershit coming their way. The other six had broken up into two groups and lounged near the bottom of the gangway with the other passengers.

The first three had let their beards grow to the utmost to aid in the concealing of their identities, and wore thin, tightly woven cloaks with close-fitting cowls, face wraps, and eyeshields, all of which was standard fare in the lands of The Verges to the south, where the wind never stops blowing.

"Just the three of ye then?"

Tracks nods.

"Papers."

Tracks hands over three sets of transit papers, which the quartermaster checks against the manifest. Then he walks down amongst the group to pit faces against their corresponding images on the papers. Once he is satisfied, the quartermaster hands them back.

"Cargo?"

"Just personal effects."

"Take it all over to get checked," he says, pointing at a couple of Greenies on port control duty. "They's checkin everything, so if any one of you's gets popped for somethin they dunt like, your fare's forfeit. No refunds. When you get the clear, go on up and get with Bidge right there," he points at a scrawny deck hand who's checking the rigging, "he'll show you's to yer quarters where you's can stow yer shit. Next."

The quartermaster waits impatiently for the next passenger while Tracks waves Rin and Shiner over to get their packs inspected.

Splash approaches the quartermaster and hands over the remaining four sets of transit papers. Kes rubs the spot on his chest where he got pinned, never taking his eyes off the transaction. The remaining members, who are posing as a separate crew, had gone clean-shaven, since they normally wear their facial hair ragged. Any authorities who might have seen images of them would be less likely to recognize them.

"Will you relax?" Sap says to him. "If you keep looking like a derg that's got caught in the trash it'll raise an alarm."

Kes glances over at Clink, who's well out of earshot, rolling himself a stick to smoke. "Do you see that? The Greenies are *checking* everybody. They're going to find the shit."

"I see it. Just let me think. Quit shakin. Pull your shit in line."

"You got to hide it." He reaches over and clutches Sap's lapel and yanks him in close so Sap can smell his breath. "You better not ditch it or I won't make it. I can't hold it off that long."

Sap pries the fingers off his jacket. "Relax. Let me figure this out."

"What's he lookin at? Shit on a sleeve, he *knows*."

Sap glances back at Clink, who's eyeing them from behind the smoke stick. "Forget him. He doesn't know."

"He knows."

"He doesn't know."

"You've got to hide them." Kes grips Sap on the arm. "You've got to put the pitches in your ass."

Sap shakes him off. "Get your hands off me." Sap smoothes out his jacket and turns around.

"Where you goin? We're about to board," Clink says, blowing a puff of smoke out the side of his face.

"I need to leave a shit," says Sap.

"Better hurry. They're like to leave your ass ashore." He looks down at Kes. "What's yer problem?" Kes twitches and his eyes flit up at Clink for a fraction of a second before fixing on a crate.

Sap leans in, throws a thumb in Kes's direction. "Would you believe it he's afraid of the water? Ha. Says he gets sicker than the ass end of a wedding party." He looks down at Kes. "Cunt," he says, smiles, then walks off in a hurry.

Clink drops the smoke stick onto the ground and snuffs it out under his boot. "Lucky for you we ain't going none too far."

Splash whistles and waves for them to grab their things and head over to get inspected. They meet up with Splash, who drops his pack in front of the two Greenies. "Where's the new guy?"

"Ran off to leave a shit," Clink says.

"Well. He better hurry or he's gettin left."

"You missin someone?"

Splash offers the soldier a nonchalant shrug. "Don't know yet." The guard checks Splash's papers while the other guard rifles through his effects. Name and number."

"Jass Burlen. 13722-341." The guard watches Splash's face as he says it, then scrutinizes the picture.

"What is the nature of your business in New Elid?"

"Work."

"What kind of work?"

"My uncle owns a fish hatchery there."

"And these are your brothers? They don't look like you."

"No, sir. They are my friends. I told them I would try to get them work as well." Splash makes a show of glancing down at the soldier's rank insignia on his sleeve and back up at him, so as to appear intimidated. Just a lowly Dragoon First Class, but Splash made it look like he couldn't tell.



Gruenor Dragoon 1st Class rank insignia

"Heh. Some friend." He tells Splash to grab his stuff and board.

Clink steps up and fires off the information from his transit papers correctly. After a considerably less invasive series of questions, he is cleared for passage. Kes timidly hands over his papers and the guard's eyes bear down on him.

"You're sweating."

Kes stands there, doesn't want to say anything unless prompted.

"Name and number."

"Halius," Kes swallows hard, "Halius Dryhem."

"Number."

He swallows again. "73645..."

The guard stands waiting. After a second, he repeats his request. "Num-ber."

"73645..."

"73645 what?"

"371."

The guard consults the transit document and raises an eyebrow. For a moment Kes thinks he may have messed it up.

"What was the name of the one before you?"

"I'm sorry?"

"The name. Of the one before you."

"I...I don't know."

"What do you mean you don't know? I was told you were all friends."

Kes struggles hard to stop himself from wiping his palms across his trousers. "I," swallow, "I don't know him, sir. Just the first one. Jass." Kes's entire body is shaking. "He, he told me to be here, that I could find work. This is the first time I saw the other."

Sap approaches finally with his pack and the guard tells him to step back and wait his turn. The guard turns back to Kes.

"Why are you shaking? Something to hide?"

Kes shakes his head. "No, sir. I just - I get seasick. I don't like the water."

The guard taps Kes's transit papers against his palm a few times and looks to the other guard, who's finished with Kes's pack. The second guard looks at Kes and shrugs. The first hands over the papers and waves him aboard.

"Enjoy the ride," the guard says, then waves Sap forward. Sap approaches stiffly and hands over his papers, dropping his bag in front of the other guard.

The guard cocks his head to the side and says, "I know you from somewhere."

Sap raises his eyebrows and turns his palms up. "I don't think so."

"No, no I've *seen* you before." He turns to the second guard, who's not paying attention. "What's your name?"

"Coery Ambergard."

The guard checks the transit papers and shakes his head.

"Don't remember no Ambergard." He looks at Sap more closely. "You look just like somebody. A new recruit a while back, just got to our unit. Son of a whore deserted."

"Wasn't me, sir. I never been recruited for nothin in my life."

The guard eyes him suspiciously, then looks back down at the transit papers as if the information might have changed. From behind him, the other guard says without taking his eyes from his inspection of the pack, "No recruit I know would ever make the mistake of calling a dragoon *sir*."

The first guard thinks about it and says, "I guess not." He pauses, looks at Sap again and says, "Best get your ass aboard before you get left."

Sap smiles and grabs his things, throws up an incorrect salute on purpose, and hastens up the gangway.

The guard looks back at his partner and snaps his fingers. "Saprovis. That was the ass-tunnel's name. The one who deserted. His name was Saprovis. That guy looked just like him."

✖

Redsquall Slut, Gravish Channel, somewhere between Gruenormark and Terismark

"What'd you do with the pitches?"

Sap tells Kes to calm down and lower his voice. "I hid them in my ass like you suggested."

Kes twitches and looks aggressively around the cabin to see if he can spot anyone trying to eavesdrop. "Well let me get one. I'm dying here."

"Not yet."

"No, now."

"No, not now. You asked me to keep these so you didn't go through them too quick. That's what I'm doing. Also you need to keep up the ruse that you get sick on ships, I'm tellin you."

"I'm burning, everything, everything burns. It's like having too much sun after not seeing any for a while, but worse. It goes deep. I heard about this but never imagined. And I'll chance a guess that this what I got happening is only the mild part of it."

"Just," Sap combs his finger through his hair and thinks for a moment, "just tough it out for a little while longer. I've got to go check on something and then maybe...maybe we can try half a pitch. See if it works."

"No. No, I need it *now*. Where are you going? Don't leave me like this. My nerves are on *fire*."

Sap waves his pleas away, walking off, and says: "Just sit patient. I'll only be a blink."

Kes destroys the room with his eyes while he thinks what to do, sitting on the cot just below Sap's, which is hanging above his with yet another hammock floating above that one. Everything in the crew's cabin, located below deck in the forecastle, is swaying in the scarce light coming in from the hatch leading topside. The burn consumes him, every nerve is an inferno, slowly building as he goes without the drug he's now forever beholden to. He lies down on the cot, puts his hands behind his head, but before long he's tossing, twisting his body into unnatural positions. Every thought is on Sap, the three pitches he's withholding. He can't take it any longer.

Kes vaults up off the cot and speeds off in the direction of the hatch past one of the *Redsquall's* crew scooping grain into a basket from a crate. He scrambles up the wooden ladder that goes topside and searches the faces of the crew for Sap, who is nowhere to be seen. Clink is standing aft at the railing puffing on a smoke stick and he catches sight of Kes, who's frantic. Clink eyes Kes as he sifts nervously through all the people on deck.

Frantic, his breath now rapid, shallow. He leans back against the foremast, gritting his teeth against the pain of what they call the Slow Burn. It's supposed to constantly grow. The only thing that could extinguish the flames was more dox. People have been known to stay awake for weeks because of the burn.

He clamps his eyes shut and tries to focus on the breeze and the cold spray. It doesn't help.

Then there's a hand on his shoulder and he can smell cinnamon and ingerus¹² smoke over the salty breeze. He opens his eyes. The only thing between him and Clink's serious expression is the sweet-smelling smoke stick. The puffs of white seeping out through Clink's teeth are quickly torn away by the wind.

Kes's nose flares and his hair throws itself across his face, but he does nothing to move it. He just starts twitching, waiting for Clink to say something, ask something. Toss him overboard.

"There you are," says Sap, prying himself between Clink and Kes. He presses a wooden cup to Kes's lips. "Drink this. Cook says it'll make you feel better." Sap tosses a smile in Clink's direction. Kes takes a swallow, his face curls in onto itself, and he dashes to the rail just in time for his stomach to capsize its contents out into the sea.

"Guess he wasn't lying," Clink says. Then he looks at Sap, says, "When he's done wasting his breakfast, get down below. Need you to roll out the rest of my smokers. Before you forget your place in this family of ours." Then he tosses the nub of his current smoke stick overboard and starts heading toward the hatch. He backtracks and says, "Hey, you got any Arcanum cards?"

Sap shrugs. "A few. Nothing worth bragging about."

"Good. I'm going to need them." He looks over his shoulder at some of the crew. "Can't pass up a good chance to come into some easy clink." He waits for Sap to acknowledge his request, but waits a little too long. "You'll get your cards back, I swear."

"Throw in a little of the coin you come away with and you got a deal."

"Don't push it. And hurry up with those. I want to get in on some of these hands. And say, one o' your cards wouldn't happen to be the Miser, would it? No? You got an Architect in your deck?"

"Sorry, no."

"You weren't lying. Your deck is probably shit." Then he turns and walks away.

Sap strolls over next to Kes, who's still puking. "Sorry about that." He holds up the cup. "Broth of aradela. It's an herb supposed to induce stomach sick. Had to make it look real. Come with me." He leads Kes a ways down the railing to an unoccupied section of the deck and leans in close. He pulls out a metal syringe and plunges it into Kes's arm right through the leather.

"You owe me. I gave out a little bit of my own flash for a dose of turalin extract from the medic. To help you sleep."

Within seconds Kes can feel the nerve burn start to subside. "That wasn't turalin," he says.

"No. But come under with me and I'll make a show of giving you the other." Then Sap unloads the pitch of dox from the syringe and slyly drops it overboard, replaces it with the vial of turalin extract.

¹² *ingerus* is a sweet spice, more commonly used in smoke sticks than in food; being that it is native to Scurn, it is illegal in the kingdom of Gruenormark due to the Scurnish embargoes



Boson's Bay, Helsport, New Elid Cityship, capitol city of Terismark
2 Days Later

Kes stands on the pier shifting his weight between legs, waiting for a free moment when he can get the last of the dox from Sap. The burn returned and it wouldn't be long before it consumed him completely. He fidgets as Sap brings the last of the gear down the gangway. Splash is nearby consulting with Clink.

The other three - Rin, Tracks, and Shiner - were already heading toward Helsport Market to meet up with a contact. Sap takes up guard over the gear and sits down, has no problem waiting. Even though they were here on official Legion business, he'd never been to New Elid, so he was excited to see things. Which is why he gets excited upon seeing Splash start walking back with the others in tow. Kes is still fidgeting and casting desperate glances at Sap.

"Get all this shit to the Tornail Boarding House. Get a room there and keep an eye on everything. We'll be by when we're done."

Kes nods and starts to grab the gear.

"Not you. You're coming with us."

Kes stands there gaping at Splash. After a moment he looks to Sap, eyes imploring him to ask for help with the gear.

"So you want me to take all this by myself?" Sap asks.

"That's what I'm tellin you."

Sap rubs his lips with his fingers. "Eh. If you say so. I don't know - "

"I'm sure you can figure it out. You got clink?"

Sap thinks, shakes his pockets. "Little bit."

"Good. Cover the room. I'll get you reimbursed later."

The three of them walk off leaving Sap there wondering how he's going to get all the gear to the boarding house by himself. Such is the way for Legion Candidates.

¤

Checkpoint 3F, Helsport, New Elid, Terismark

Rin, Tracks, Shiner. All three wait for their contact near the one of the old monorail stations that have long since been turned into military checkpoints. There haven't been any working monorails, anywhere in the world, for at least two hundred years. This one is not far from Helsport Market. Under normal circumstances they would avoid the checkpoints, but this time they employ the age-old strategy of hiding in plain sight. The trick to avoiding suspicion is to act like you belong. It also doesn't hurt that their contact is a colleague of the Scurnish Ambassador to Terismark.

They wait nearly half an hour watching the Terisian Guard perform their thorough shakedowns, doing their damnedest to hassle every citizen coming in, all of them most likely en route to the market. When the guards gloss over the diplomatic paperwork of a tall, olive-skinned man draped in a tumbling orange robe, along with his selection of similar-toned bodyguards, they know it is time.

The man steps through the checkpoint without being violated by the Guard. He smiles as he holds his hands out wide and embraces Rin, then turns and grips hands with the other two.

"Gentlemen, welcome. Welcome to the New Preceptive State of Terismark." He looks over their exotic accouterments and nods. "A far throw from the ceaseless drone of the Everwind. I hope you had a swift, uneventful journey?"

Rin nods. "We did." Rin and the others look at the man slightly askance. The man sees this and claps his hands together.

"Well and good. My apologies, I note your confusion. I am Santra Fauro, Scurnish Ambassador to Terismark. Our mutual acquaintance is delayed a bit. I volunteered to greet you in his stead. I only hope my company is as welcome as his would be."

Rin quickly picks up the thread of conversation, bowing slightly. "It is a pleasure to meet you, your Excellency. I have no doubt your company will be more than adequate, and your hospitality is appreciated. We are in your service."

Santra smiles. "It would honor me if you would join me for my midday meal. I should be

famously pleased to be the one to introduce you to the fine cuisine of the Terisians." He waves forward one of his escorts. "Gionvera's." The escort nods and goes ahead with another of the guards to recon and secure their destination. Then the Ambassador begins walking after them at a slower pace. "I have assured Saer Tranton that I will not leave your side until he can relieve me."

They are not sure yet whether or not that will be a good thing. Tracks smiles, knowing it will be mostly up to Rin to kiss this man's ass. Shiner smiles, too, but he is always smiling. Rin decides to fill time by appealing to the man's sense of superiority of station. "You appear in good spirits, am I to understand things are well between Scurn and Terismark?"

They pick a winding path through the busy street, ignoring these satellite vendors that position themselves on every capillary leading up to the main market.

"You assume correctly. I am blessed with an easy task in that regard. The Preceptocracy demands little from the High Ministry. Unfortunately, I cannot say the same of relations between Terismark and the Averians."

"What business is that of yours? Surely you need not concern yourself with matters outside your jurisdiction?"

"The world is an ever living thing, friend, everything connected. A headache does not always stay in the head, but can provoke a twinge in an otherwise healthy neck." Santra slips his hands inside the wide and tumbling openings of his sleeves. "My country has offered to act in the interim for Averia, since they have no embassy here. You can imagine my *delight* at such news, though I embrace my duties with pride."

"It is easy to see why they chose you."

"You are too kind."

"I presume that is the nature of your business with Saer Briddick Tranton?" Rin asks.

"Indeed, it is. He is my Averian liaison. He is one of the few people capable of holding Queen Caliana's fickle respect, and for that he has mine tenfold." His arms resurface from his sleeves and he stops in front of a shoddy single-story structure that's cloying with the scent of fresh fish.

"Not much to look at, and quite honestly the last place one would think to find a man of elevated culture such as myself, but I secretly fancy the grittier cuisines in here over this country's more refined fare." He leans in closer to Rin and whispers, "The Terisian chefs at Parliament leave something to be desired."



Splash, Clink, Kes. They had taken the long way around the Triangle District to bypass all the checkpoints. They took the ass end of Elidel Road to get to Deadwall where they could poke around the safe house where Dirty might be holed up. It is standard operating procedure to have something to fall back on in instances like this where the primary Legion House has been compromised. They dared not go near the original house in the Wornwood District, as there would likely be an outbreak of Terisian Guard, slinking around in hopes of capturing any Legion members dumb enough to drop in.

The walk had taken about an hour. And every one of Kes's nerves is ablaze. He walks behind the other two, cascades of sweat poring down his face and back, his legs. Every person that comes into sight causes his skin to lurch, and what's worse, Clink keeps glancing back at him with those tiny eyes that almost seem to be too close together.

They finally stop in the midst of a stand of crumbling complexes strung together with a web of wires from which clings row upon row of tattered laundry and starving birds. Not far down the street a group of four guys loiters outside an open doorway. Only occasionally will someone surface to tend to their laundry, or a scavenging rover will pop into view far down the street, oblivious to everything but the ground.

"Over there," says Splash, referring to the building across from the men down the street. "Keep your eyes sharp. We don't know if it's been compromised also."

Clink sifts a smoke stick from some pocket and licks the end of it, twists it tighter. "I don't suppose any o' you has a match?" He looks at Splash, who ignores him, then turns to Kes, who jumps. "No? Well, fuck," he says, returning the smoke back from where it came. "What the shit is wrong with you?"

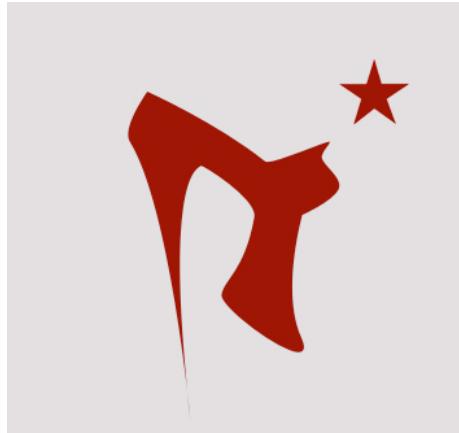
Kes stiffens. "I...I don't know. Must have ate something bad off the ship maybe."

Clink's face tightens and he looks at Splash. "Can you believe this guy?" And back to Kes: "You sure you didn't pick up some parasite from fartin around in the Blightwater?"

Kes shrugs and he clenches his teeth.

"Stay focused," Splash says. "Let's get this over with." He points down the street. "Them guys. See the emblems?" The other two look closer and barely make out arm bands on each left forearm, a red glyph prominently on a swath of grey.

"The Crimson. Fuck," says Clink. "There's probably a lot more of them. Be ready."



emblem of The Crimson gang, mostly worn on armbands around the left forearm

In this world, emblems are everything. They mark a man like a searing brand, reputation on display for all others to respect, fear, admire. That's what the saying *the stronger the league, the stronger the man* sums is all about - a man is only as good as the faction he lays claim to, the faction that lays claim to him. The emblem of the Crimson, the largest, most notorious gang in all the kingdoms, was a symbol of fear. The Crimson was the most ruthless, way more than other collections out outlaws like the Gangrene Disciples. The Crimson dealt in all manners of roguery, from thieving to drugs to slavery, smuggling proto-cells, weaponry. The works.

Having all left their Legion pins hidden with their gear, they would be taken as slicks. Still, it was probably better that they did. The Crimson would sell them out to the authorities for a reward in a heartbeat if they knew they were Legion, especially the founding charter. Splash would have to contrive a good reason for them not to.

The three of them stride down the street and approach the men. A closer inspection doesn't reveal anything worth eliciting fear - they don't appear to be too warriorly - yet Splash still finds himself wishing Tracks was here. He could use Tracks's intimidating presence. And his face scar. That always helped.

Yet with men like these odds were high that there were lots more somewhere.

The four men regard the newcomers without saying anything. Splash thinks about how to proceed. He has to give them a reason to cooperate. If there's one incentive that speaks all languages, it's money.

Splash nods at the four and steps forward. "Which one of you is in charge?" He needs to assert himself or they will roll right through him. He can show no weakness. If anything, they'll respect his nerve.

They look amongst each other and one of them, a wiry man with only one long sleeve, the sleeve with his emblem, crosses his arms, which look to be carved from wood. "Me," he says, opening and closing one of his hands into a crackling fist.

"My colleagues and I are not from around here - "

"I see that."

Splash pauses with a serious look on his face. "Are you finished? Because what I'm about to tell you will surely be of interest."

"You got a mouth on you, slick."

"Just because I'm not wearing an emblem doesn't mean I don't have one."

The one-sleeved leader cocks his head to the side slightly. "What is the point of having an emblem if you're too afraid to show it?"

Another of them adds, "Fuck these idiots. Do you know who you're talking to?" he says, holding up his arm with the band on it. He points at Kes. "And look at that'n there. He's dyin for a fix. You see it?"

Clink clenches his jaw tight but Splash ignores everything and continues without even half a glance at Kes. "I represent a very wealthy organization, so if you are not interested in hearing our offer, I'm certain I can find someone who is."

The leader takes a breath and motions for his crew to be quiet. "Continue."

"We arrived here just today only to find our business associates have...fallen prey to the noose. I will assume you know of whom I am referring." The leader gives no indication that he doesn't follow. He knows Splash is talking about the local Legion of Liberty charter. "This turn of events, as you can imagine, has left us in somewhat of a predicament."

"But why are you *here*? Seems to me you mighta wandered a bit for some folk looking for business. You coulda thrown a rock and hit somebody from the pier who fits what you want. Why come all the way out here?"

"A fair question. We are looking for someone. We needed to be sure we could trust him. Your presence here confirms there are no authorities lurking about. It's very simple."

The leader looks satisfied with the answer. He nods in the direction of Kes, who's trying his best to be invisible. "What's with him?" Clink shoots Kes a glance that makes his nerves flare. "He's far into the Slow Burn."

"He got ahold of some bad meat on the way over."

"Do you think I'm a fool? He's a pitch short of having all his troubles...melt away." He laughs at his own joke. Kes looks at Clink and then wipes his face on his sleeve. Clink does not think any of this is funny. His spirits rise a bit when one of the Crimson scorches the end of a smoke. He takes out his own and rushes over to catch the flame before it's out.

"Never mind him," Splash says, leaning towards Kes. "Let's get to it. Our client wants weapons. Racks, shields, military hardware. Proto-cells. Anything you can get your hands on."

The leader smacks his lips. "Assume this is something I can get - "

"Can you get it or not? I don't have time to negotiate with maybes."

"There is nothing the Crimson cannot do. Short notice will cost you street value plus eighty percent." He opens and closes his fist, eliciting another round of crackling knuckles.

"Street value plus fifty. Or we find another supplier. You already made it clear there are others."

"Street plus seventy. A deposit of half up front."

"Half up front on some blind inventory? You are seconds away from giving the deal of a lifetime to a competitor. I'm going to give you one last chance to remove your head from your ass-tunnel. Also, we'd be fools to carry around that kind of coin anyway. Set up a meeting so I can inspect the wares."

"One day. That's all I need." Another knuckle crack. "Meet tomorrow night, thirty hundred. Fisherly docks, pier twelve. It's near checkpoint five blood¹³. Don't worry about the guards there, we'll entice them to look the other way. Their fee will be added to your total. Meet us there and we'll show the wares."

"Well and good. I look forward to it. Gentlemen," he nods at the other three Crimson goons. "Lastly - Jass. Jass Burlen." He extends his hand. The leader takes it.

"Fade." He cracks his knuckles again. "I like to strangle people. I like to watch their eyes slow out." Like the Legion, Crimson members go by street names, which they are all too eager to explain. Fade straightens up and waves off Splash and co, absconds away inside the apartment complex, followed by his cabal. Splash, knowing they are probably watching, turns and starts down the roadway, waiting to get out of earshot before saying anything. Before he does, Clink springs on Kes, pressing him into a wall.

"I knew something was up with you. How long did you think you could go on hiding it from us?"

"I... I don't know what you're talking about," Kes says.

"So now you're lying to me? You little cunt, after we just pinned you. This is the loyalty you show?"

Splash steps in and gently pushes Clink's hand away from Kes's throat. "First of all, we both know it's not his fault. No one chooses to fall slave to the dox. We'll handle him later. We still need to scout that building, now that we know there's none of the Guard around. We'll circle around back and find a way in."

Clink spits and shakes his anger off, giving Kes one last venomous look.

"Come on," Splash says. "Come on." He pushes Clink off in the direction they need to go. They circumnavigate the building where the safe house is and gather near a back entrance. Splash performs a quick check of their surroundings and turns to Kes. "Stay here. Keep watch. Clink and I are going in to check the spot. In and out, easy like. Worst case scenario, second floor, north end. Number 235. You know what to do." Splash claps Clink on the shoulder and goes in.

When they reach the stairs, Clink says, "We have to kill him. It's the only way to end the dox's hold. Plus, we have the rules to consider."

"I know our rules. And we will. Right now we need him, though. Soon," Splash says.

¹³ checkpoint five blood = CP5B. "blood" stands for the letter B in the Ildorian Military Alphabet, which was universally accepted as the standard for phonetic spelling



Kes stands shifting restlessly just outside the back entrance to the complex. He takes a step away from the door then reconsiders, resuming his post. The burn has never been this bad and he can't think straight knowing the Crimson is right around the corner. They are notorious for dealing, so he knows they'll have a supply on hand. If he's quick, he can get a pitch from them, cool the burn, be back before Splash and Clink even know he left.

If he even comes back.

He knows they are planning to kill him, now that the secret is out. It is common practice to put doxers out of their misery. That's why pokers target the poorer districts, because they are less likely have people around who care about one another. Destitutes are also the most likely to keep coming back for more.

The longer he stands there the more he realizes his chance of survival decreases the longer he waits for the other two. If he stays he is surely dead. They may even cut his throat on the spot. If he goes he at least has a chance.

He goes.

He runs, his nerves taking control of his body. It's as if they know relief is near, like they're homing in on the poison that's just seconds away. He runs, his head now whipping back and forth between the door Fade and his comrades had gone through and the building behind him, expecting Splash and Clink and their blades to be tailing right behind.

He makes it to the door and explodes inside.

There are seven Crimson, two of them ones he had seen before, the rest extras. Three are standing in a circle like pillars around a young girl on the floor, her staring blankly at the sole candle flickering in the sconce on the wall while two men grip her legs, another with her hands pinned back over her head. All of them but the girl look in Kes's direction, the last man, the one taking his turn between her legs, he doesn't stop thrusting.

One of the spectators yells, "Fade!" as the other two flank him, one of them slamming the door closed. "Fade, the burner is here."

Kes bounces his eyes between every man in there until Fade enters from another room with a following of several more guys.

"Well hello," he says to Kes. "Come for a pitch?"

"Yes. Yes, please. I need it."

"All is right, take it easy. Might be we can help you out." He waves off one of the men, who disappears back into the adjoining room. "Five. And that's a steal. Consider it a discount, what with our forthcoming business transaction t'mawrey night."

The man reappears with a vial and a silver syringe. Kes can't stop looking at it there, winking at him in the candlelight, a wonderful mechanism of delivery for the sweetest thing he could imagine right about now.

"Uh, I, I don't have any coin. I can get some. Please. Just please." He steps forward and reaches out for the man with the vial, but one of them holds him back. Fade ambles closer.

"No, no that won't do. We don't give this shit out for free. We'd be put out of business."

"I'm good for it. I swear."

"Sorry, kid." Fade holds his hand back and the man fills it with the vial. Fade holds the vial up to Kes's face, taunting him with it, rubbing it on his skin. Kes can smell the sour cream inside the vial. "Nothing in this world is free. Unless you *take* it." Fade looks down at the girl pinned to the floor. "Like this one. We took this one. Giving her a try before we put her up for sale to everyone else. What's that old saying? It is a fool who eats the chicken that gives the eggs. This chicken is going to attract a lot of flash."

"Come on. What do you want? Please."

Fade presses his finger to his lips and thinks. Then he says, "All right," holding the vial out. Kes reaches for it and Fade snatches it back just out of Kes's reach. "Damn you're stupid." The room is swarming now with laughter. He turns away from Kes and says, "Get him outta here. Come back, boy, when you have sufficient tender."

One of them opens the door and the other two escort him towards it, but his hands are suddenly like talons tearing hold of the jamb like it's the last mouse alive. "Wait. They lied. They lied. There's no deal, they were using you."

Fade turns back and holds up his hand and the two men release Kes.

"Tell me."

"I'll tell you more if you give me the pitch."

Fade nods and says, "Deal. Tell."

"We're Legion. We came to find the one that got away. They made that story up about the client and everything. To make sure you wouldn't turn us over. Please. The pitch. Please."

Fade shakes his head. "I got a better idea." He turns to the others in the room. "Take him to the meat house. Now. May as well get the other two as well."

"No. No, you promised."

He looks back to Kes. "I didn't promise anything. And don't worry, by the time they get to you the burn will be so bad the pain won't matter. See? I'm not so bad a guy after all."



Moments earlier

Splash and Clink emerge from the building to find the back door curiously missing one Kestrinali.

"I knew it. The son of a whore ran off to get himself a dose," Clink says. "Let's just leave him."

"No. We have a reputation to uphold. If word gets out that we let him live..."

"You're right. We should wait for him."

Splash looks around at the surrounding buildings. "Up there," he says, pointing to one positioned diagonally across from the Crimson hideout. "We'll post up so we can see when he comes out. They won't think to check up there if it ends up they're looking for us."

"They'll just think we've gone without him," Clink adds.

They skirt the buildings, doing their best to keep out of sight, and work their way to the side with the most laundry dangling from the lines. The grout between the bricks had disintegrated enough that they can clamber up to the roof, using the drying rags as cover. Once atop they find a spot

with a clear view of the door where they'll still be out of sight.

After a few moments, Clink whispers, "You know this means we have to take care of the candidate. He knew. He collaborated to keep it from us."

Splash nods, never taking his eyes off the door. The only sounds they hear are their own breathing and the sporadic chirp of the skeletal birds who, like them, were also looking down from on high, only they are in search of food. Splash pulls his thick black hair back and ties it with a lace from his pocket.

Clink lets out a slow fart, then wags a finger and lifts his eyebrows as though the fart gave him a glorious epiphany, says, "There is good news from all of this."

Splash leans away from him slightly, looks over at him. "What's that?"

"I get to keep the little shit's cards."

Splash shakes his head. "Just like you to only be thinking about money."

"Anything can be got with coin."

"True enough, but it's too much work for me. All I need is a warm, wet plick¹⁴ to fall into and I'm happy as a derg in sunlight."

"Just like you to only be thinking about fucking."

They share a pair of grins. They had been brothers in arms long before the Legion was founded by Rinden Dane eight years prior. All three were infantry veterans in the Wuer army, 5th Corps. Not long after their discharge, every member of the ruling House Glengard fell victim to the invading Clavic forces and Wuerlan was conquered in short order. The guilt of not being able to fight for their country caused them to relocate to Gruenormark, shame rendering them unable to face their countrymen. Thus, the Legion was created to atone for that guilt by defending people of the world from tyranny and injustice. Splash and Clink's bond was like the etherwood tree. It could never be uprooted.

The door of the hideout opens and spits out eight Crimson along with Kes, whose hands are bound at the wrists, a sack popped over his head. They swing east down the street, the whole lot of them. Moments later several more Crimson emerge with blades in hand and split off into two parties, one group entering the building Splash and Clink had searched earlier, the other group searching the area.

"Well this is unexpected," Clink says.

"I'll say. We need to shadow them and see where they take him."

"Why? Just let them have him."

"Like it or not, he is still a member of our charter."

"We were going to kill him anyway - "

"True, but let us not forget our purpose. Yes, he undermined our trust. Yes, he must be put to death, but that out of *mercy* and *necessity*. It is an interesting dichotomy, this. He is one of our own, yet he must die. Whatever fate befalls him by their hands, well, let's just say I would feel better if we rescued him."

"Huh. Rescue him so we can kill him. This is a first. Even for us, brother."

¹⁴ *plick* is slang for pussy, named so for the sound it makes when it's fucked



Gionvera's Fishhouse, Helsport, New Elid, Terismark

Rin, Tracks, and Shiner had long since devoured their dishes of flidfish fillets, which Santra had said were best prepared here at Gionvera's due to the incorporation of the spice irrinth, which was acquired from the exocrine glands of the torrinas firebeetle, native to Goldenmark, making it a very rare spice. In addition to this they drank endless goblets of fine Scurnish Manthem wine. All while Santra regaled them with tales of debauchery from his time in Lingsingram College at Letania City, where he had mastered philosophyship and became versed in the intricacies of politics.

Santra is about to force some exotic dessert upon them when Saer Briddick Tranton finally makes an appearance.

"My apologies," he says first, then to Santra, "your Excellency. Thank you for attending to my guests. Am I correct in stating they have been enlivened by your legendary tongue of silver?"

"It was an honor," replies Santra. "And I suspect they have quite had enough of my blathering. I relinquish them to your care, Saer, which they will no doubt prefer over mine." He stands and smooths out his flowing robe of orange and supplies them with a subtle bow. "I hope you will indulge me with your company again soon."

Rin stands and bows, and seeing this the other two do likewise. "We shall," Rin says, and they watch as Santra Flauro takes his leave. Tranton replaces him at the table and tells his two guards to stand watch outside the door. They are blessed with an entire solarium to themselves, a benefit of being in the company of an official envoy, so the room is secure enough for them to conduct any business without worry.

"Sorry I'm late, it could not be avoided," Tranton says. "And I'm saddened to hear about your

brothers. As soon as I got your letter I contrived some pressing reason to meet with the Ambassador. The Queen was reluctant to release me from court on such short notice, but I persuaded her nonetheless."

"We are certainly in your debt, Saer," says Rin. "We have only just arrived. The rest are trying to locate Dirty at the fallback spot."

"They won't find him there. I have already had him located and taken to a secure location. He is safe and his wellbeing is intact."

"Can we get some more of this wine?" Tracks asks, holding up his goblet. Tranton goes and says something to the guards outside. Tracks sees the incredulous look on Rin's face and says, "What? It's good. And free." Tranton resumes his seat at the table.

"Thank you," Rin says, "for everything. You are a good man. The world is in short supply."

"You humble me, Rinden Dane. Good men help other good men. It is the only way the world is stayed from falling into chaos. Now. About your predicament. I want to help you recover from this setback."

A young girl enters with a large ceramic jar and proceeds to fill their goblets with more of the Scurnish wine.



Tornail Boarding House, Helsport, New Elid, Terismark
Several Hours Later

Splash and Clink had already inquired with the innkeeper as to which room was theirs, and they make their way down the hallway towards it.

"Hold off on questioning or harming the candidate, will you?" asks Splash. "We are going to need him and that giant knife of his and we can't risk having him know that we know. Understood?"

"Yes, I got it."

"Excellent. Here we are." Clink pounds the door three times, pause, and then one more time so the candidate will know it's them. A few seconds later they hear the click of the bolt sliding and the door cracks open. Sap is on the other side and he ushers them in. Clink forces himself not to even look at him.

Sap's face goes white and he asks where Kes is.

"Never mind that," Splash says. "They back yet?"

"The others took a room down the hall," Sap says.

"Good, get them in here."

Sap leaves and returns a few moments later with the others.

"The item has been found," Rin says, knowing they would know he's talking about Dirty. He has to speak in pseudo code, as the inn is far from secure. He takes note of Kes's absence. "Where's the other one?"

"He got himself hauled off by the Crimson. We know where he is, though, so arm up. Good news about the item, by the way."



Deadwall District, East New Elid, Terismark

The seven of them crouch in heavy shadow from a spot about fifty paces from a giant warehouse. The upper level hangs out past the lower level on the three sides they can see, propped up by posts, the perimeter walls occupied by three Crimson sentries, two at the front and one alone off on the west side. There is little light from inside the building leaking out from the windows near the back, but otherwise they are blessed with an abundance of darkness.

They see no other activity besides the three watchmen.

Rin signals for Clink and Sap to take the front two and for Tracks to take the loner, but Tracks shakes his head vigorously. Tracks wants the pair. The scar on his nose dances as he smiles wide. The thing about Tracks is that he enjoys violence. He is good at it, which is why he is the Sergeant-at-Arms. It's his job to enforce shit and to protect the Commander.

Rin shrugs and gives the signal to go. Tracks lurches forward, crawling towards the warehouse on his belly while the other two skirt the shadows and slink their way around to the side. Rin, Splash, and Shiner hold their position and wait for the others to clear the way.

The two sentries in front carry midswords at the hip, possibly boot knives as well. One of them passes a jug to the other, who takes a healthy swag. Tracks positions himself in a low crouch on the other side of a pole where he can see both sets of guards and waits for Clink and Sap, who have allowed themselves to be swallowed up by the darkness. Tracks can hear the two sentries bullshitting.

The lone one's face lights up as he starts a smoke stick, and that's when his eyes widen as Sap's hand comes into view and clamps hard over the sentry's mouth, smoke stick and all. The wide tip of the Fatstag emerges from the guard's stomach, coming in from the back, and Clink springs into view to help Sap ease him to the ground and finish him off.

With that one out of the way, Tracks launches to his feet and bounds along the wall straight at the two in front, who have no time to draw their midswords or even call out. He crashes his fist into the throats of both of them and in one smooth motion squats and brandishes a boot knife, on the way up, slashing the hamstring tendons on both of them. They can't run and they can't scream. He sheaths the knife and sweeps one to the ground, jumps up and brings both boot heels down onto his temple.

Seeing his friend's head collapse in a mess of blood and eyeballs, the remaining guard starts scurrying backwards across the ground, whimpering, clutching at his destroyed throat. Tracks takes three strides and cracks him on the chin with the toe of his boot. Then he stomps at least a dozen times on this one's head, *thrick, thrick, thrick*, until Rin and the others arrive and pry him away.

Shiner smiles and whispers, "I think you got him."

When all are present and accounted for Rin divides them into two groups using only hand signals. He would take Tracks and Shiner, Splash would take the rest. Then Rin runs his open palm perpendicular along his forearm, letting them know to clear every room, taps his hand against his lips to signify silent kills, then circles his hand and points at where they stand so they know where to rally afterwards. He leans against the building just to the left side of the door and waits. Tracks squeezes in right behind him, followed by Shiner, all three of them packed together tight, or as they say, "class to ass." The others do the same on the other side of the door. Rin's team would enter first and go left, start clearing the room, the other team would go right.

Rin eases back into Tracks, who eases back into Shiner. When Shiner returns the lean, Rin eases the door open and storms inside.

They are prepared for any number of enemies, but they are not prepared for the stench. This first room is lacking in bodies to kill, yet they are assaulted by a thick surge of fetor rushing in from a passageway in the far left corner. It's as if a pack of wolvina had taken up residence and dragged a whole farm of cattle in and let them all go to rot. Rin stops and stifles a cough, gags, pulls his face wrap from a pocket and ties it on. His team does the same. He waves Splash's group off and they proceed down the other passageway on the right.

When his team is ready, he leads the way down the pitch black corridor on the left.

Having no visibility, he traces his fingertips along the wall, feeling for breaks, doorways. Rin can hear Tracks doing the same thing on the left side. Tracks keeps contact with Rin's shoulder with his other hand the whole way. Shiner does likewise on Tracks. Rin continues slowly down the passage until Tracks squeezes his shoulder and they all halt. He feels Tracks run his hand along his shoulder from right to left and tap twice.

A door to the left. He taps Tracks's hand once to acknowledge the message, then they enter the room, which also offers them no light. They stop just inside and wait for Tracks to pull out a handlight. Each team is equipped with only one. With proto-cells to power them being so expensive, they can't afford to use more. This one doesn't have much power left, but that isn't

why they aren't using it.

They need to remain invisible and retain the element of surprise.

When Tracks is ready, he will signal to them just prior to flicking it on so they can close one eye. This way they don't lose their night vision. He'll flick it on for a split second so they can instantly survey the room. If anyone is in there they won't have time to get a grip on the team's location because the light will flash on and then go dark right away. But the team will be able to clear the room in the darkness, having committed the room to memory.

Tracks gives them the signal and waits one, two, *flash*. The room is clear. They backtrack and proceed down the hall. They encounter several more such rooms before they reach the end of the corridor. The hall makes a right-hand turn and for the first time they see a dim light coming from a room at the far end. The stench is more potent here and they have to stop and stifle more gags. Shiner lifts his face wrap and quietly spits. Tracks imagines that Shiner isn't smiling at the moment.

Faint shuffling and dragging from the far room. They retain their setup, tracing the walls as they make their approach. They come across two more empty rooms on the way. They get to the last door and when it's obvious they're done checking dark rooms, Tracks tucks the handlight away.

They are stacked against the left wall now, just outside the lighted room. The dragging and shuffling sounds are loud now, somewhat wet sounding. Rin holds up his hand so they know to get ready. Then he leans and waits for Shiner's return nudge, his hand gripping his Rutlig Vicera midsword tightly.

The nudge sends him dashing into the room straight at two men in blood-soaked aprons and masks and the blood, the blood is everywhere. The two are backlit by a bright light on a stand next to a reddened table dotted with thick leather straps. Rin steps, steps, glides in, carving a sharp path of steel through the stench at the closest man's neck level. An arc of bright red swings out and dives onto the wet stone floor, joining the rest of the blood. Tracks is already at the other one, smashing his boot solid into the last one's balls so hard it lifts him into the air. Before he lands Tracks has his knife sliding through the mask and out the back of his head.

He pauses, holding the body upright with just the knife, waits for it to stop twitching. Then he yanks back and the body slumps to the stone floor.

Shiner pukes.

The other two turn towards him and see that he's standing next to a large metal cart on casters that's piled high with arms, legs, torsos, heads. All human. Male. Female. Old. Young. All streaked with red.

"Fucking fuck, this is a slaughterhouse," says Tracks. Rin coughs behind his face wrap.

Tracks turns in a circle. "There's got to be a holding area somewhere."

Rin coughs again and clamps his hand tight against his face wrap, clears his throat, swallows. "We need to check the bodies on the cart," cough, "and make sure he's not one of them."

Shiner is still doubled over his own puke, shaking his head. "I ain't doin it. No way."

Tracks steps up and pokes Shiner out of the way. "I'll do it, damn. You're like a little girl." Then he starts shoving appendages off the cart onto the floor, holding up heads in the light, tossing them aside after saying, "No. No. No. Not him. No." When he's finished he turns to Rin. "Not here."

Rin wipes his Vicera off on the pants of the corpse he is responsible for creating. Then he reaches into his pocket and pulls out his Legion pin, tacking it onto his chest. "There may be others here who are still alive. They should know who their liberators are."

The other two tack their pins on and they gather their wits. "Stay sharp, there are likely more of these sons of whores lurking about."

They check an adjoining room in the back and then gather at the entryway, not wanting to just burst out into the corridor again in case anyone is there. Before checking if it's clear, Tracks taps Rin on the shoulder and points to the floor.

A trail of blood leads out and curls down the hall into the darkness. Rin nods and scrutinizes the hall. It's barren, so he enters it with caution and crouches along, following the blood trail by touch. It flows around another corner and down a thin, winding stairwell that descends into black. They can hear a pair of muffled voices coming from far below.

Rin stands and wipes his fingers off on the wall. They start down the stairs. It makes a few turns and another dim light comes into view, the voices swelling. Rin pauses at the last turn and peeks out from the safety of shadow. He turns back and holds up two fingers, as they can now barely see, then he flashes all five fingers twice, which tells Tracks to bring out the handlight. Tracks relinquishes the light to Shiner and pulls out a second, larger knife from a sheath on his hip. Then he backs up against the far wall of the stairwell so he can get a running start.

Shiner leans out just enough to aim the handlight. Tracks taps him and he flicks it on and gives it to the two sentries full force in the face. All four of their hands come up to shield their eyes from the brightness and Tracks is on them like a wildcat, unleashing a flurry of carnage. His knives fly in precise arcs, criss-crossing the arteries of their inner biceps, slicing through the femoral arteries on their legs and finally completing the trifecta on their throats.

They fall by the wayside and Tracks is joined by the other two. Shiner clicks the handlight off, a single lamp giving off ample light. There is screaming and moaning from beyond the door.

"This is it," Rin says. "This is why we're here." He helps Tracks drag the bodies out of the way and prepares himself at the door for what lies beyond. Tracks picks up the lamp. "Keep that handlight ready, too. I think we're going to need it."

He reaches up and unlocks the bolt, then pushes the heavy door open onto a wall of black and they are blasted by the most pungent smell they've ever been in contact with. Shiner pukes again and they reel back from the moans, the screams, the stink.

Rin reaches out and takes the handlight from Shiner and powers it on.

At least a dozen starving, festering bodies scramble, slinking in retreat from the harsh new light, and they all start shrieking at Rin not to take them, to pick somebody else. One of them is chewing on a rat, unhindered by the matted fur of the thing.

They slowly walk through the cellar, unhindered by the captives within who clear a path for them, terrified.

"Kes? Are you here?" Rin bounces the light from one to the next.

"I'm here." They find him on the ground with his hands obstructing the force of the light. "I'm here."

They help him up and check him over. All his appendages intact, unlike some of the others, who appear to have been harvested and brought back down here. The girl nearest him, a young girl, twig-thin, she has half an arm left on one side, the nub appearing to be fresh, oozing and filthy and dark red, black.

Rin circles the room again with the light. "We are not here to harm you. We are here to rescue you," he says. "We have killed your captors." He turns to the others. "We have to get these people to a clinic."

¤

Rin stands outside the entrance, at the previously assigned rally point, as Shiner and Sap lift out the last of the captives. Splash is with Tracks and Kes overseeing them all, pulling security, most of them lying on the ground too weak to stand. Rin watches Splash call Clink over and say something to him, then he says something to Tracks. Clink ambushes Kes and grabs hold of him, escorting him over to where Rin is posted, Tracks accompanying them.

"What are you doing, no, no, no, no," Kes is saying, struggling against Clink's grip, but Clink overpowers him and shoves him up in front of Rin.

Clink claps him across the face and tells him to close it up, to stop talking. He turns to Rin. "This one. He's on the dox. He ran. That's how he ended up here. Splash wants me to take him inside, where we won't be seen."

"No, wait, stop - "

"Shut your hole!" Tracks cuffs him across the back of the head.

Rin looks at Splash, who nods. Rin then nods at Clink, who drags Kes inside. Tracks follows and slams the door shut behind them, then trains the handlight's beam on Kes.

"You know why we have to do this," Clinks says.

"No. No, please. I can keep it under control. I can, you saw. You didn't even know when I had a supply. Don't. Please."

"Do it or I will," Tracks says to clink. Then he says to Kes, "You won't like how I do it, kid."

"Wait. Wait. The candidate. He's a deserter. He was a Greenie. I know because he told me. See? See? I'm true. I'm loyal. I was going to tell you once we was done here. I figured we would need his help, that's why I never said nothing."

Clink sighs and looks at Tracks, who nods. Clink turns back and thrusts his blade through Kes's heart to the hilt. Kes jerks a couple times and goes limp in a heap on the floor. Clink pulls the sword free and shakes the blood off it. He pats the body down and retrieves the coveted Legion of Liberty emblem and stands.

He turns to Tracks and says for him to bring the candidate in.

"With pleasure. I claim the bastard's Fatstag, though."



APPENDIX

Legion of Liberty, Herensel Charter:

Rin - Commander

Splash - Deputy Commander

Tracks - Sergeant-at-Arms

Clink - Treasurer

Shiner - Secretary

Kes - member

Sap - candidate

Legion of Liberty, New Elid Charter:

Hatch - Commander, deceased

Brick - Deputy Commander, deceased

Shade - Sergeant-at-Arms, deceased

Flip - Treasurer, deceased

Dirty - Secretary/new Commander

Stray - member, deceased

Tooth - member, deceased
Bo - member, deceased
Nails - candidate, deceased

Ildorian Military Alphabet

A - Atlica
B - Blood
C - Clover
D - Dagger
E - Espitris
F - Fatback
G - Gallop
H - Hatch
I - Icecap
J - Juniper
K - Kestrinal
L - Luto
M - Mercury
N - Nucleus
O - Ovaka
P - Plink
R - Rolg
S - Sceratus
T - Tekira
U - Umbrella
V - Victurus
W - Willow
Y - Yurba



Flag of the New Preceptive State of Terismark



Flag of the country of Scurrn, featuring the constellation Yurba

EVERWIND



Copyright © 2023. All rights reserved. This material may not be published, reproduced, or otherwise used without the express written permission of the author.



1

About Janden Hale:



Turned 5 in 1984. Not born on the bayou. Used to teach choir at the Northampton School of the Deaf.

Connect Online to Everwind:

Facebook: <http://facebook.com/everwindseries>

Twitter: <http://twitter.com/everwindseries>

More Everwind Ebooks:

[Everwind - Subchapter 1: The Facility](#)

All Everwind Books: <http://janden Hale.com>

Connect Online to Janden Hale:

Official Website: <https://www.janden Hale.com>

Facebook: <http://facebook.com/danieldonche>

Twitter: <http://twitter.com/janden Hale>

Stay tuned for Subchapter 3: Snowleaf