

Dusk Peterson

🦇 The Eternal Dungeon 🦇

THE *BREAKING*



Turn-of-the-Century Toughs **The Eternal Dungeon**

THE BREAKING
Dusk Peterson

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The Breaking. The prisoner knew that the Eternal Dungeon was a place where suspected criminals were broken by torture, and he was prepared to hold out against any methods used against him – except the method he could not anticipate.

Turn-of-the-Century Toughs. An introduction to the alternate history series cycle that “The Breaking” lies within, along with online resources and excerpts from all the series in the cycle: *The Eternal Dungeon* (with major spoilers for “The Breaking”), *Dungeon Guards*, *Life Prison*, *Michael’s House*, *Waterman*, and *Dark Light*.

Chronicles of the Great Peninsula. An introduction to the mythic fantasy series cycle, along with online resources and excerpts from the series in the cycle: *The Three Lands* and *The Thousand Nations* (upcoming).

Author information, credits, and final comment.

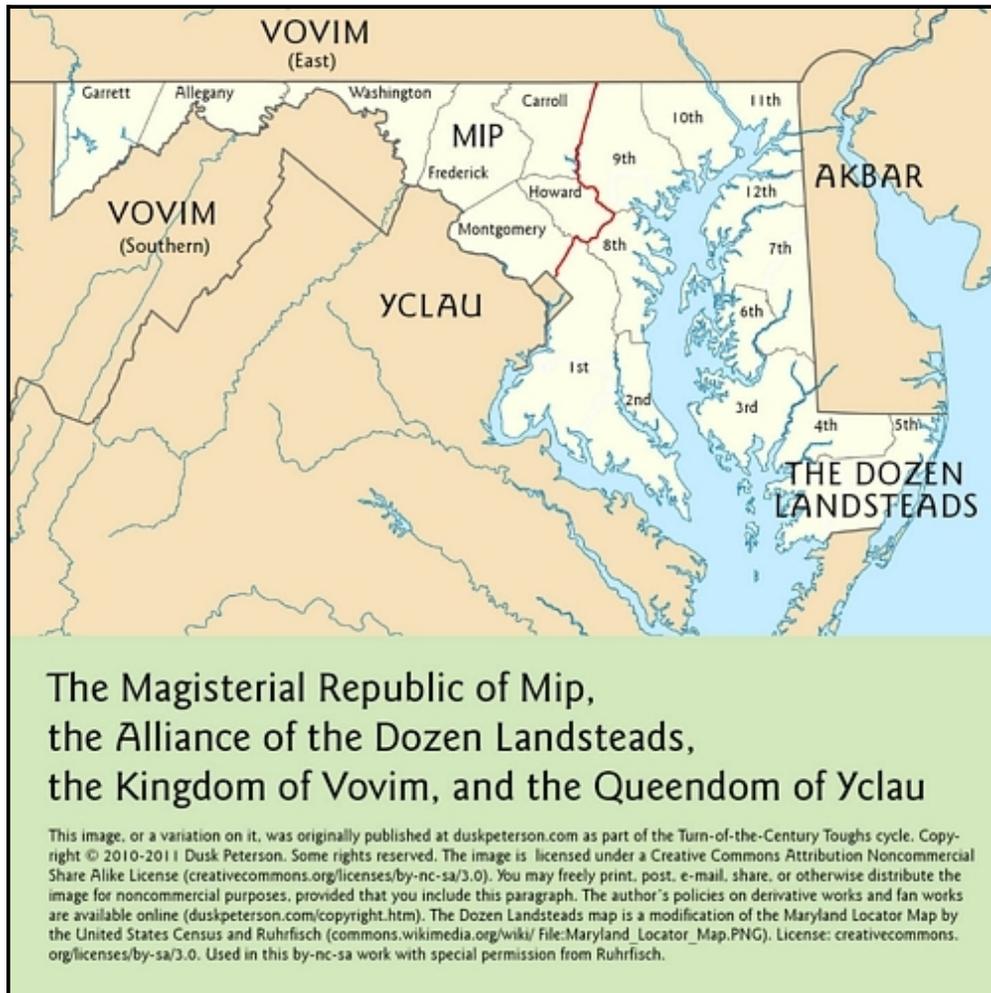
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Map

A larger version of this map is available at:
duskpeter.com/toughs/maps.htm



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The Breaking

The year 355, the fourth month. (The year 1880 Barley by the Old Calendar.)

More than one student of psychology has been shocked to learn that the origin of our nation's superb system of counselling and "transformation therapy" lies in the whips and racks once used in a dark chamber of torture.

Of course, no psychologist today would countenance some of the methods that were used in the Eternal Dungeon. But modern-day psychologists who react with horror at the idea that their profession's roots lie in this place have not taken into account the historical context of the Eternal Dungeon. For what occurred in places like this during the preceding centuries was indeed beyond any measure of defense: a heartless system designed to destroy prisoners and satisfy the basest desires of the men who tortured them.

The Eternal Dungeon represented a step forward in the progress of civilization, largely because of its code book, a product of several generations of foresightful torturers who saw that the application of pain might not be the only means used to bring about a change in the criminal's character. The introduction of the *Code of Seeking* marks the birth of the Eternal Dungeon, whose emphasis was on transformation rather than destruction, for the Code's carefully delineated rules required the torturers to place the best interests of the prisoners first. However often this principle may have lapsed, the principle did at least exist, and from this strange birthplace sprang, in due time, the modern psychological movement.

The Eternal Dungeon's Golden Age – a phrase I use with no intention of irony – came at the time that the torturers first adopted the term "Seeker" to refer to themselves. Their leader – always the most skilled torturer of his generation – was in turn called the High Seeker.

The first of the Eternal Dungeon's High Seekers was also its most famous . . .

—Psychologists with Whips: A History of the Eternal Dungeon.

CHAPTER ONE

They had passed through three checkpoints to reach this far. Even the

guards serving as escort were beginning to look nervous, staring back at the lengthy, narrow passage they had travelled down, from the cavern's mouth. The prisoner they held in their grasp had turned so pale that observers might have wondered whether the young man would pitch head-forward down the remainder of the steep passage.

Several observers indeed stood below, though they could not be easily seen: they were half-hidden in the shadows at the bottom of the cavern that the prisoner and his escorts had been walking down. It was hard to tell how far the cavern reached, for where the passage stopped, the cavern widened. All that could be seen, within the narrow confines of the passage, was an entry hall that ended abruptly in a man-made wall. Against that wall, reaching up toward the ceiling, was an enormous tablet of slate with words scribbled upon it in chalk. In front of this formidable display of secretarial work was a desk occupied by a balding man with spectacles.

He was looking up at someone standing next to the desk, but the walls of the passage hid his companion. Only as the visitors reached the bottom of the passage did the other man come into view: he was dressed in a dark shirt, trousers, boots, and an old-fashioned belt, clothing little different from those worn by a thousand workmen in the world above. Only his face was different: a black hood covered everything but his eyes.

Seeing this, the prisoner came to an abrupt halt, then stumbled forward, pushed on by his escort. The movement caught the attention of the hooded man, and he looked over at the new arrivals. His eyes were a deep green, the color of the algae clinging to the rock walls.

The man at the desk took no notice of the interruption. He pushed a paper toward the hooded man and raised his voice slightly over the sound of dripping water. "Look at this, sir – why do these requests always arrive at the same time? Four rack rooms we have, and five Seekers have requested use of them."

The hooded man picked up the paper, glanced at it, and said, "Let me see the prisoners' records, please."

His voice was quiet, as were his movements as he reached out to take from the balding man a pile of bound documents that had been sitting on the desk. He leafed through them slowly, while the guards escorting the new prisoner, who had come to a halt before the desk, shuffled their feet impatiently. Finally he said, without looking up from the documents, "I deny Mr. Chapman's request. He can break his prisoner using the whip alone."

The balding man nodded, took back the documents, and finally acknowledged the existence of the new arrivals. "Well?" he said sharply.

"Sir, this is a prisoner transfer." The taller guard was the speaker; the

shorter guard looked as though he was endeavoring to hide behind the prisoner.

The balding man ran his eye up and down the young prisoner, who had his hands clenched together in an effort to keep them from shaking. “I didn’t think you were delivering to me our Queen,” the Record-keeper said dryly. “Do you have the transfer papers?”

The shorter guard handed the papers over to the Record-keeper as the taller guard said, “It’s a death-sentence case.”

“You don’t say,” replied the Record-keeper, beginning to finger through the papers. “And here I thought our job was to question prisoners who stole children’s slingshots.”

The taller guard flushed; the shorter guard came perilously close to smiling. Then he looked over at the hooded man, and his expression sobered rapidly.

The prisoner barely noticed this exchange. His gaze was locked with that of the hooded man, who seemed content to allow the Record-keeper to handle this matter. After a moment, though, the hooded man broke his gaze from the young man and leaned over to take the records being proffered to him.

“You haven’t submitted the previous prison’s searching record,” observed the Record-keeper.

The older guard cleared his throat and said, “No searching was done at our prison, sir. The victim’s father—”

The Record-keeper sighed heavily. “Don’t you people living in the lighted world ever learn your jobs? There must be a searching record, even if it only says why the searching failed to take place. . . . Oh, very well, I’ll make one out myself.”

He pulled forward a piece of paper, lifted a pen from where it stood in the inkwell, and looked up expectantly. “Name?”

“I’m Raol Merritt.”

The Record-keeper sighed again. “Not your name, the prisoner’s. I need the official spelling.”

The taller guard flushed once more and spelled out the name. The Record-keeper wrote down the words so quickly that, by the time the guard had finished, the Record-keeper was already asking, “Who made the decision to proceed without a search?”

“The keeper of Parkside Prison, sir. The victim’s father—” He stopped abruptly as the Record-keeper put up his hand. The guard waited as the balding man finished writing and looked up again.

“Go on,” the latter said. “The victim’s father did what?”

“Requested the prisoner’s transfer here, sir. Based on his knowledge of

the prisoner, he believed that a searching by lesser means would be unsuccessful.”

The hooded man, who had been examining the transfer papers all this while, looked up now, but said nothing.

“The victim’s father is acquainted with the prisoner, then?” said the Record-keeper, leaning over to take the records back from the hooded man.

“Yes, sir. He’s also the prisoner’s father.”

The Record-keeper paused in the midst of taking hold of the papers and raised his eyebrows.

The shorter guard, eager to take part in this exciting revelation, said, “You see, this vermin murdered his younger sister in cold blood—”

“Sir.” It was the hooded man; his voice was as quiet as before. “You are in the Eternal Dungeon, and in the Eternal Dungeon, prisoners are treated with respect. They are not referred to as vermin.”

The shorter guard swallowed. “Yes, sir. If you say so, sir. I mean, you’re in charge—”

He stopped as the older guard reached over and punched him in the ribs. The hooded man looked at the Record-keeper, who had turned to stare at the ceiling-high tablet. This, on close inspection, could be seen to be covered with names and numbers. “Assign the prisoner to me, Mr. Aaron,” the hooded man said.

The Record-keeper turned back in surprise. “You, sir? But you’ve just completed four days in a rack room. You’re entitled to a day off. ”

“This prisoner deserves special treatment.” The hooded man looked over at the young man again.

Elsdon had already begun to shiver. He told himself that it was because of the coldness of the cavern, but in fact the dungeon was not nearly as cold as he had thought it would be. It seemed that the tales about the iciness of the dungeon were false. Beneath his feet was not the cave ground but an artificial floor that kept away the chill of the rock. The place looked less like a cave than a house of business, built to house the latest machinery.

Machinery of all sorts. Elsdon looked again at the giant tablet with its names. Nearly all of the names had been neatly crossed out.

“Right, we have the information we need now. You can leave him with us. Just be sure you bring the proper transfer records next time you deliver a prisoner.” The Record-keeper’s expression suggested that, if his advice was ignored, the consequences for the guards would be dire.

The guards were already sliding away, eager to be gone. They came to an abrupt halt, though, as the hooded man said, “Before you go . . . Why is

the prisoner unbound?”

The taller guard appeared distinctly uncomfortable. It was clear that he expected to be arrested at any moment for dereliction of duty. “The keeper of Parkside Prison made that decision, sir. We had some difficulty binding the prisoner, and as the prisoner had been otherwise cooperative, our keeper believed it would be safe to escort him here unbound.”

The hooded man nodded. He turned away from the Parkside Prison guards and said, “Mr. Sobel, there is no need to bind the prisoner unless he causes trouble.”

Elsdon, who had been glorying momentarily in the feeling of being unrestrained by guards or cells for the first time in two days, twisted to look behind him. Out of the shadows stepped two new guards.

They were not hooded like the man nearby. They looked very much like the guards who were hurrying back up the steps, already far enough away to be challenged at the lowest of the three checkpoints. The new guards wore grey uniforms and had sheathed daggers at their right hips; each also had a whip curled into a circle at the left hip. One of the guards was holding something black in his hands. As he reached Elsdon, he brought the object down over Elsdon’s head without preliminary.

Elsdon screamed. He reached up with his hands to tear off the cloth blinding him, only to have his hands caught and held – he began to struggle frantically against the guard who was holding his hands. After his initial scream, he struggled in silence. He heard the hooded man behind him say something in an unperturbed voice, and then his hands were released and the cloth lifted from his head.

He could see, now that the cloth was removed, that it was a hood very much like the one worn by the man nearby, except that it had no eye-holes. He closed his eyes, trying to regain his breath. Beside him, the younger of the two guards took hold of his arm. He shuddered then but did not pull away; he was bracing himself for the return of the hood.

The hooded man spoke again, and the guard’s hand dropped away. Elsdon opened his eyes to see that the hooded man was watching him with a steady gaze.

“Mr. Taylor,” he said, “will you obey the guards?”

Elsdon had to resist the impulse to turn and look for his father. It was the first time anyone had addressed him by his adult title. Always he had been “Elsdon” or, to his father, “son.” He had not expected such formality in this place, but perhaps it was one of the methods used to cut prisoners off from their ordinary lives.

“Yes, sir,” he replied breathlessly. “I just— I mean, yes.” He tensed, biting his lip to keep himself from screaming this time.

The hooded man nodded and turned to the older guard, saying, "Mr. Sobel."

The older guard, who could apparently be trusted to assess the situation without need for instruction, folded the cloth and placed it in his jacket side-pocket. "I would ask that you keep your eyes shut, sir," he told Elsdon.

Elsdon did so. He remembered, now that the crisis was over, that prisoners to be hanged were hooded first. He tried to decide whether it would be better or worse to be hanged now rather than be taken away to the cell awaiting him.

It seemed, though, that he had no choice. "Breaking Cell 4," the Record-keeper said briskly. "And for love of the Code, Mr. Sobel, turn in a complete report this time!"

"Will do," said the older guard in a light manner. Then his voice took on another tone as he leaned over to Elsdon. "You are not to speak until we arrive at the cell. If you speak, you will be punished. Do you understand?"

Elsdon hoped that his face did not reveal what the rapid beating of his heart did. Nodding, he felt a hand push his back. He began stumbling forward. Behind him, the Record-keeper was addressing the hooded man again.

A door creaked on its hinges in front of Elsdon; then, as he continued to walk forward, he heard the same door creaking behind him. The air had changed. Before, it had held the scent of wet rocks; now it had a closed, musty smell. The sound of dripping water had disappeared as well, and he could no longer hear the echo of footsteps against the cavern wall. The place he was travelling through was chilly and as silent as death, but for the distant sound of a man sobbing. He shuddered again but he did not pause in his step, fearing that, if he did, the younger guard would take hold of him once more. Then he felt a hand hold him indeed, but it touched him only lightly; he guessed that it must belong to the older guard, Mr. Sobel. Feeling the instruction that the touch conveyed, he halted.

Metal jingled nearby, then scraped. He heard the screech of another pair of door-hinges. Without waiting to be pushed, he walked into the destiny that awaited him.

The room was small. He was not sure how he knew this, for his eyes were still shut. Perhaps it had to do with the way his footsteps sounded upon the floor. The room was warm as well, warmer than the dungeon's entry hall had been, and light danced against his eyelids. He tried not to think what the purpose of the fire might be.

Next to him, Mr. Sobel said, "You may open your eyes, Mr. Taylor."

He had no desire to do so; it would be easier to face what came next if

he did not have to see it. But he guessed that the words were not an invitation but an instruction, so he let his eyelids rise.

The instruments of torture he had expected were not there. All that he could see was an ordinary prison cell, a better one than he had left. Whereas his old cell had housed two dozen prisoners, whom he had feared more than the guards, this cell was designed for a single man. The floor of his old cell had been made of dirt and straw that attracted vermin; this one was of flagstones. In his old cell, he had slept on the floor; here a low, body-length shelf graced the left wall, and it even had blankets, a pillow, and a thin mattress. His old cell had chains. He remembered that most of all, and so, no doubt, did all of the inhabitants of Parkside Prison, for he had kept the prisoners awake until midnight his first night, screaming his throat raw. His guards, who had been frustrated from taking action against him by the knowledge that his transfer to the Eternal Dungeon had already been arranged, had finally released him from his bonds. Thereafter, the keeper of Parkside Prison had commented dryly when he came to speak to Elsdon of his transfer, Elsdon had acted as a model prisoner.

He doubted he would be able to remain quiet here for long. He looked more closely at the cell, seeking some small sign of what would happen in the hours to come. A flash of metal caught his attention, but he quickly saw that the metal was no more than a collection of implements for his toiletry: a covered chamber-pot, a pitcher and bowl, and a set of cloths. It was far more than he had known at Parkside Prison. As for the fire . . . that was the oddest part of all. There was no fire in this place, not even a lamp. Instead, at the far end of the long, rectangular cell, the wall seemed translucent, like thick ice upon a pond, and beyond it was the dancing light he had seen behind his eyelids when he entered the cell. He stared at it, trying to ascertain the cause of the fire.

Behind him, Mr. Sobel said, "Now, then . . ." His hand fell upon Elsdon's shoulder.

Elsdon spun with the desperate haste of a man who has felt a dagger touch his back, and thrust away with his hands, propelling the guard into the left-hand corner against the wall that held the open cell door. Mr. Sobel's head met the wall with a crack, and his eyes turned up in his head.

Elsdon saw no more than this, for he was backing away, as hastily as he could, seeking refuge from what he had done. None was to be found; the cell was too small for a hiding place. He ended up in the right-hand corner next to the door, and it was there that the younger guard's whip reached him.

His breath gasped in at the bite of the lash, but his mind was scarcely on the burning line across his forearm. He had turned his head, half

expecting to see another corpse lying motionless upon the ground. Vomit filled his mouth.

The whiplash came a second time, harder. He closed his eyes against the pain and waited for the remainder. He could not tell whether the younger guard wanted him on his knees or crying for mercy or sobbing out apologies.

He could never tell. That was the trouble.

“Mr. Urman!” Mr. Sobel’s voice was reassuringly sharp. Elsdon opened his eyes and looked over to the corner opposite of him, where Mr. Sobel had pushed himself away from the wall and was rubbing the back of his head. The older guard said to his companion, “There is no need to continue once the prisoner is subdued, Mr. Urman. You would be better off closing the door you left agape.”

The younger guard looked over at the doorway, within easy reach of Elsdon, and his face went pink. Trailing his whip behind him, he moved hastily toward the door, which opened outwards.

“You may wait outside,” Mr. Sobel told him. He was still rubbing the back of his head, and his face was paler than it had been before. As the door closed, he turned to Elsdon. With a rueful expression, he said, “He’s in training. May I see your arm?”

Elsdon stared at him, but the guard did not move from where he stood, so Elsdon nodded and held out the arm that had two neat lines of blood across it. He was beginning to shake now, and he had to swallow the foulness that still filled his mouth.

Mr. Sobel misconstrued the cause of his strain, saying, “Those are nasty cuts. You may need to see the healer.”

The guard’s face remained pale, though he had let go of the back of his head in order to examine Elsdon’s arm. Elsdon said hesitantly, unsure whether he would be believed, “I’m sorry.”

Mr. Sobel, who had taken out a clean handkerchief from his pocket and was dabbing at Elsdon’s wound, looked up. After the briefest of moments, a smile crept into the corners of his mouth. “It’s my fault,” the guard replied. “Unnecessary touching of a prisoner – the High Seeker would give me a hard beating if he’d witnessed that. Now, as I was saying before I became so careless . . . Water’s in the corner there and will be replenished at mealtimes. If you run short, just knock on the cell door. Mr. Urman and I, or the guards who take the day shift, will be standing outside the cell at all times.”

“Watching?” Elsdon blurted out. It seemed unlikely, given the solid nature of the door, but Mr. Sobel nodded and pointed to an eye-level hole in the door, barely more than a pinprick.

“Watching at intervals,” he said. “Or full-time, if we should be ordered to do so. You won’t know when we’re watching, so I suggest that you not try anything creative in here.”

Elsdon looked back at the cell, wondering what creative activities the previous prisoners had attempted. He could see no way to escape, even if such an idea had been on his mind. Aside from the watch-hole and the tiny gap between the door and the floor, the cell was completely enclosed, in a manner that began to make him feel uneasy. It was like being chained. . . . Thrusting the idea away hastily, before it should take effect upon him, he made himself think about the thick glass wall. There was something beyond it, some fire that was bringing light and warmth into this room. The feeling of imprisonment here was just an illusion, he told himself, knowing that he lied.

“Do you have any questions?” Mr. Sobel asked.

He had many questions, but he could not clear his throat to speak, for he had finally found what he was looking for. Almost invisible against the translucent wall hung a metal ring, at about the level his hands would be if he held them above his head. He had seen rings like that at Parkside Prison, and had seen them put to use.

Behind him, as quiet as a schoolmaster murmuring approval, a voice said, “Thank you, Mr. Sobel. I will answer any questions the prisoner has.”

Elsdon turned slowly. The hooded man stood in the doorway. He was dressed as he had been before, unarmed but for the look in his eyes. He stepped away from the doorway as Mr. Sobel made his exit. Then, as the door shut behind the guard, he said, “Good evening, Mr. Taylor. I am your Seeker, Mr. Smith.”

Elsdon made no reply. His eyes were searching the Seeker’s belt, looking for a rope or a chain or any other sign of what was to take place here. His gaze jerked up, though, as the Seeker said, “Mr. Taylor, do you enjoy pain?”

Elsdon swallowed. He shook his head.

“Then I advise you to listen carefully to what I have to say next,” continued Mr. Smith. “You will be given few rules that you need to follow during your time here, but we treat violations of those rules seriously. The first rule is that you must show proper respect toward me, your Seeker. You must rise to your feet whenever I am present, and where necessary you should address me as ‘Mr. Smith’ or ‘sir.’ If you fail to show the same sort of respect toward me that you would toward a schoolmaster or a workmaster, then I fear that your visit here will shortly become quite unpleasant. Is that clear, Mr. Taylor?”

“Yes,” he said faintly. Then, as his heart thudded within him: “I mean,

Yes, sir.”

The Seeker did not respond for a moment. His posture was stiff, as though he were a guard on ceremonial duty, and his eyes in the dancing light looked alternately dark and glittering cold. He continued, “The second rule – and this is by far the most important rule for prisoners – is that you must at all times answer my questions truthfully. If, for some reason, you do not feel ready to discuss a particular subject, you may say so, or you may remain silent. But under no circumstances may you lie to me. The consequences for such lying would be severe. And I should warn you ahead of time, Mr. Taylor: I have been working in this profession for twenty years. It is not easy for a prisoner to pass off to me a lie as the truth.”

He waited. Elsdon said, even more faintly than before, “I understand, sir.”

The eyes remained cold. Elsdon wondered whether the Seeker had noticed that Elsdon had made no promises. After a while, Mr. Smith said, “Those are the bindings placed upon you as a prisoner. I should add that the same bindings are placed upon me as your Seeker. I must treat you with respect in the manner indicated before, and I must speak truth to you. If at any time you believe that I have violated my duties toward you or that you have been ill-used by one of your guards, you have the right to ask to speak to the Eternal Dungeon’s Codifier, who oversees the inhabitants of the dungeon. In the extremely unlikely event that your request should be ignored, you may bring the matter to the attention of whichever magistrate judges your case, so that he may investigate this violation of your rights. Is that clear?”

Elsdon’s heart was beating faster than before. It took him some time before he was able to repeat, “I understand, sir.”

“Do you have any questions?” the Seeker asked. “About the routine of the dungeon? The times you will be fed? The questions you will be asked? The instruments of torture I use?”

The faintness went beyond Elsdon’s voice this time and entered his body. He could feel the sweat upon his skin; he wondered whether he had turned white. He blurted out, “What if I’m innocent?”

The Seeker’s green gaze did not waver. “If you are innocent, then I trust that our time together will be short. I would far rather find a prisoner innocent than guilty; too many prisoners are sent to us, and the quicker that we can release them from here, the better. If your release is to the lighted world rather than to the executioner, it is likely to come more quickly. But we are commissioned by the Queen to ascertain the truth of accusations of death-sentence crimes, and we are committed to fulfill that

commission. Please don't waste my time with false pleas of innocence, Mr. Taylor. It will only make our time together more difficult."

Elsdon did not reply. He was still standing where he had been since the younger guard's whip touched him, squeezed into the corner near the door. Mr. Smith had chosen to stand in the opposite corner, out of arm's reach. Half-turned as the Seeker was from the light flickering through the far wall, Elsdon could see Mr. Smith's eyes only because he had a habit of letting his head turn away briefly whenever Elsdon finished speaking, as though entering into contemplation of the information provided. Now, as Elsdon's silence continued, Mr. Smith's gaze remained unwavering upon him.

"Are you ready, Mr. Taylor?" the Seeker asked softly.

Elsdon found that he was hugging himself, gripping his arms so tightly that his lashed arm burned. He could not breathe, much less speak. He gave his head a single jerk of acknowledgment, then looked, involuntarily, toward the ring on the wall.

Mr. Smith made no move toward the ring, however. He said, "Tell me about your mother."

Elsdon stared at him, convinced that he had misheard. "Sir?"

"Your mother. She is no longer living, I understand."

"No, sir," replied Elsdon. Then, realizing the possible reason for the enquiry, he added hastily, "She died of an accident. When I was quite young. I was only four when she fell down the stairs in our house."

The Seeker nodded. "And did you love her?"

"I suppose I must have. I don't really remember her well."

"Your sister was how old when this happened?"

He felt his throat tighten. "Less than a year old."

"Then she did not take charge of the household after your mother's death."

"No, I did. That is, when I grew a few years older, I became the one who cared for Sara and gave orders to the servants who ran the household. My father was too busy with his business for that."

"And did your sister resent that? It must have been hard for her, being forced to take orders from an older brother rather than a parent."

The Seeker's voice was bleached clean of all emotion, but Elsdon felt his muscles tighten. "I don't think so. She said I was better qualified to run the household than she was – she was nice that way, forever giving people praise they didn't deserve. Actually, I always muddle the household accounts and make all the wrong decisions about what food to buy and give the servants the wrong orders."

"Your sister told you this?"

“No, my father explains afterwards, when he’s clearing up my messes. He’s very patient with me.”

The Seeker’s gaze wandered away momentarily. The hood hid his face so effectively that Elsdon could not begin to guess what his expression might be; thus his body started as the Seeker asked suddenly, “And did you love your sister?”

“Yes,” he said swiftly. Then, when the Seeker did not respond, “I did! Truly. We had the usual quarrels that brothers and sisters have, but nothing more than that. . . .” His words trailed off.

The Seeker said, in the same cool voice he had used from the beginning, “I believe you.”

Elsdon stared at him. “You do?”

His face half-hidden by the hood, the Seeker raised his eyebrows. “I told you I had experience at this work, Mr. Taylor. What of your father?”

“My father?”

“Do you love him?”

“Yes, of course.”

This time the Seeker’s gaze did not move from Elsdon’s face. After a long moment he said, with the quietness of a hunting cat, “Mr. Taylor, in light of what I told you earlier, would you like to withdraw that reply?”

“Sir?”

“You may remain silent, Mr. Taylor. You do not need to respond to the question I asked you if you would not feel comfortable doing so at this time. That is preferable to speaking falsely.”

“I don’t understand.” Elsdon’s brow puckered with puzzlement. “Of course I love my father. Why shouldn’t I?”

Another patch of stillness occurred, broken only by the continuing faint sound of the man elsewhere in the dungeon; his sobs had turned to screams. The Seeker’s expression remained hidden. Then Mr. Smith said, very softly, “Mr. Taylor, please go to the other end of the cell and remove your shirt.”

Even as he spoke, the Seeker was turning away, knocking lightly upon the door. The door opened immediately, and the guards, apparently needing no instruction, walked into the cell. The younger guard was already lifting the whip from his belt.

Mr. Sobel closed the door behind them, turning the key in the lock and dropping the key into a pocket within his jacket. His gaze was upon the Seeker rather than Elsdon. Mr. Smith looked back at Elsdon, still standing in the corner. He waited.

Elsdon’s limbs felt like rocks, too heavy to move. He managed somehow to reach the other end of the cell, though his hands were shaking by the

time he untied the fastenings of his shirt. The Seeker said nothing. He had not moved to take the whip from the hand of Mr. Urman. He simply watched Elsdon, as a cat might watch a cornered mouse: unblinking, body poised in readiness. The stiffness that had been in his posture before had melted away, as though he had reached his natural element.

When the shirt was in Elsdon's hand, he stood uncertainly, clutching at the cloth like a child clutching at its doll. Without a word, Mr. Sobel took the shirt from him, carefully laying it upon the hard bed-shelf, then turned back and looked at Mr. Smith. The Seeker nodded slightly, without removing his gaze from Elsdon, and Mr. Sobel pulled from his side-pocket a leather strap.

A sound escaped Elsdon then. He found that he was pressing back against the flame-warmed wall, directly below the iron ring. His throat made sound after sound as the older guard stepped forward. The whip was forgotten; the Seeker was forgotten. Elsdon's vision had narrowed to a rough strip of cowhide, no longer than a forearm's length.

Mr. Sobel stopped suddenly in his tracks, and Elsdon, turning his head to follow the older guard's gaze, saw that Mr. Smith was scrutinizing him with narrowed gaze. "Mr. Taylor," the Seeker said quietly, "do you prefer not to be bound?"

It was the trap Elsdon had been expecting since his arrival. Nothing in his life had trained him for the experiences of this week; he was like an untutored babe thrown into the water to drown. The only conclusion he had been able to reach on his own, as he struggled to stay on the surface, was that he must not let his Seeker guess about this. It would be like placing the perfect instrument of torture in the man's hands, and inviting him to make use of it.

What he had not taken into account was the Seeker's ability to find the answers to questions without need for his prisoner's words. After a moment more of scrutiny, Mr. Smith nodded, and he gestured to Mr. Sobel. The leather strap disappeared into the guard's pocket.

Mr. Smith turned his gaze back to his disconcerted prisoner. "The binding is not a necessary part of the procedure," he told Elsdon in as matter-of-fact a manner as if he had been discussing which spices should be used in a dish. "Its primary purpose is to assist the prisoner in remaining still during the beating; if you move at the wrong moment, the possibility exists of severe injury. If you believe that you can stay still on your own, then you may remain unbound."

"Yes," said Elsdon before he could think better of it. "Please don't bind me."

He caught his breath then, sensing the trap close upon him like a vise.

Bindings for his hands would come now, and bindings for his feet, and for his legs and his arms and his eyes . . .

The Seeker, though, seemed in no hurry to follow up on his advantage. He made a circling gesture with his hand. Elsdon, after a moment of incomprehension, turned to face the wall, placing his forearms upon the wall and burying his face within their refuge. His body was beginning to sweat from the heat pressing through the wall, but the translucent blocks were not so fiery as to burn him. He kept his eyes closed, tense in anticipation.

The sound of a step next to him caused him to jerk his head up and open his eyes. The Seeker was only an arm's span from him now, and his hand was still empty of any whip or binding or other instrument. His body looked as relaxed as that of a man in bed with his beloved.

"Your records show that you were not beaten by your schoolmasters," he said in the same matter-of-fact tone as before, "and your back tells the same tale. This being the case, I will give you the minimum punishment: five light lashes. You may find them difficult to bear, since you have not experienced a beating before. Please hold in mind that any further lies you tell me will be treated more severely."

Elsdon bit his lip and began to bury his face again, only to be frozen into inaction as Mr. Smith said, "Please keep your face turned toward me, Mr. Taylor. Even at a low level such as this, torture has its dangers. One of the ways in which I judge whether the punishment is proceeding properly is by watching your face."

The Seeker turned his head to look behind Elsdon. Apparently matters were in readiness there, for Mr. Smith turned back and said, "Please count the lashes for Mr. Urman."

"Count them?" Elsdon's voice emerged faint, as though from a far distance.

"You will find this easier if you space the lashes in accordance with your readiness to receive them. Begin now."

Elsdon stared at the Seeker for a moment more, but no further instruction was forthcoming. So, with breath squeezed tight, Elsdon spoke the word.

He was barely aware of what followed, as far as the beating was concerned. His thoughts were focussed upon the Seeker's green eyes, which were flecked with bits of gold, and upon the eyelids that did not blink. By the third lash, Elsdon had almost forgotten that he was staring at something human, so still was the Seeker. Thus he was startled when Mr. Smith said, "Wait."

His gaze remained unwavering upon Elsdon, but the fourth lash, for

which Elsdon had just spoken the number, did not fall. Elsdon, suddenly uneasy, turned his head to see that Mr. Sobel was standing at his right side, his gaze fixed upon the Seeker. The guard looked puzzled.

Elsdon slowly turned his head back toward Mr. Smith. His heart was throbbing in his throat. The Seeker could not know; he could not possibly know . . .

“Mr. Taylor,” the Seeker said in his quiet voice, “when were you last beaten, and what were the circumstances of that beating?”

“I’ve never been—”

Elsdon’s rapid response was instinctive; he shut his mouth only because the Seeker’s gaze had narrowed. The cell was utterly silent. The tortured man elsewhere in the dungeon had fallen silent. Perhaps the man had received mercy. Perhaps he had entered into death.

“Do you wish to retract that answer?” the Seeker asked softly.

Elsdon’s throat hurt more than his back; he could not swallow, much less speak. He nodded slightly.

The Seeker looked at him a while longer, then stepped away. He picked up Elsdon’s shirt, and handed it, not to Elsdon, but to Mr. Sobel, who had come over to stand near him.

“We will speak again later,” Mr. Smith said, his eyes inscrutable in the flickering light. “Mr. Sobel, Mr. Urman . . . I wish a word with you.”

CHAPTER TWO

“Seekers!” grumbled Mr. Bergsen. “They should all be hamstrung and thrown to the Vovimians.”

Elsdon, startled, craned his head to look back at the healer, who was rubbing ointment onto his back. “Excuse me?” he said tentatively.

“Cruelty is bad enough. Cruelty that covers itself as kindness is beyond bearing. Look at that!” He pointed at Elsdon’s back.

Elsdon tried to look and failed. He said, yet more hesitantly, “It doesn’t hurt very much, actually.”

“Ah, they have you mind-twisted already. ‘Just a light whipping, Mr. Taylor. It won’t hurt you in the least.’ That’s what you were told, wasn’t it?”

“No,” Elsdon replied truthfully. “Mr. Smith told me it would hurt.”

“In the very moment that he told you he was showing you mercy, no doubt. Humph.” The healer reached over and scooped up a gob of ointment. “Bad enough that they should tear apart the bodies of prisoners, but they insist on finding justifications for what they do. ‘The Code allows us to punish prisoners if they break the rules placed upon them.’ I wish I could find every copy of their *Code of Seeking* and burn them all to cinders. Turn a bit, please; the lash marks carry round to your side.”

Turning and raising his arms out of the way, Elsdon said, “If you hate the Seekers so much, why do you work for them?”

“You don’t think I work for *those* bloodletters, do you? I work for the Codifier – not that that’s much of an improvement, I’ll admit. But at least I can prevent the Seekers from torturing prisoners whose health won’t stand for that sort of treatment. When those deaf-and-dumb Seekers listen to me, that is.” He swept the ointment on with broad strokes of the hand as Elsdon bit his lip against the sting.

“Take your case,” said Mr. Bergsen, his eyes attentive on his work. “I received your medical records late last night, with a polite note from Mr. Smith requesting immediate approval of you for possible torture. Note how he phrased that: ‘approval,’ as though the idea of my disapproving of torture wouldn’t cross his mind. So I sent him back a message saying that, as far as your body’s health was concerned, you weren’t likely to die of heart failure if you were tortured, but that if he had any concern for your mind’s health, he should take a more careful look at your records.” The healer snorted. “I should have spelled matters out at a level a two-year-old could understand. —Right, strip off the remainder of your clothes, please.”

Elsdon stared at the healer, his heart suddenly painful in its throbbing.

“Don’t look at me like that,” the healer said with irritability. “You don’t have anything underneath that I haven’t seen before. Do you think I’ve

practiced the healing arts for thirty years without encountering the wicked ways of the world?”

Elsdon whispered, “Mr. Smith . . .”

“You insult me. You insult the entire Guild of Healers. Do you really think I would pass on to a third person what I learn from a medical inspection? Come, I don’t have much time. I have to check on the progress of a prisoner who was racked yesterday.”

Elsdon glanced at the door. The first thing the healer had done upon his entrance was cover the door’s watch-hole with a bit of chewing-gum, apparently undisturbed by the prospect that the guards would object. Slowly Elsdon stripped himself; then, at the healer’s gesture, he lay stomach-down upon the cool mattress of the bed-shelf. His face was blazing hot as he buried it in his arms.

“Hmm.” The healer touched him lightly, causing Elsdon to flinch. Then Mr. Bergsen said, “Nasty, nasty. As bad as I’ve ever seen. No marks across the kidney, though. Someone’s been careful of your life, if not your health. . . . Very well, you may clothe yourself again.”

Elsdon did so; he was shaking by the time he finished fumbling his fingers around the knots in his shirt. The healer was busy packing up his bag. He left the ointment on the bed-shelf, saying, “Spread that on when it hurts again. Your upper back will be healed within a day or two; Mr. Smith does at least know how to order his guards to keep a beating light.”

“If I’m beaten harder . . .” Elsdon ventured to say.

“Won’t happen. When I heard what a fool the High Seeker had made of himself, I went into his office and tore up every torture request the Record-keeper had sent me. Then I flung the scraps of paper into Mr. Smith’s face.”

Elsdon found that, unexpectedly, he was having to bite his lip to keep from laughing. There was a suggestion of a twitch at the healer’s lips as he added, “After he’d apologized to me, I grudgingly agreed to approve the torture of the other prisoners. But not in your case. Let the High Seeker go practice his sadistic pleasures on other young men.” He stood up, strode over to the door, and rapped on it, waiting for it to open.

Elsdon, standing next to the bed-shelf, looked down at the ointment. He picked it up and was contemplating it when he heard Mr. Bergsen cough from the open doorway.

“It’s not poisonous,” the healer said as he peeled the gum off the watch-hole, “so it won’t do you any good to eat it. I’m sorry; there are limits to what I can do for prisoners.” And then he swept away, his voice high in indignation at the guards who helped the Seekers in their bloody work.

“Hoi!”

Elsdon had been screwing and unscrewing the ointment jar as though he were a schoolmaster demonstrating the principle of eternal rebirth. Startled out of his thoughts, he looked up from where he sat, at the far end of the cell, with his back warmed by the fiery wall. Mr. Sobel was standing in the cell, with the door closed behind him. He held up a yellow ball for Elsdon’s view.

“Would you like this?” he asked.

Elsdon stared at the apple before saying hesitantly, “I’ve already been fed.”

“Yes, I know, but I was given two in my dinner by mistake, and I thought you’d like the other one.” He pulled a second apple from his pocket, tossing the first to Elsdon.

Elsdon caught it in an automatic manner, staring past the fruit to the guard. Mr. Sobel was as old as Elsdon’s father, in his forties, but in manner of speech and gesture he seemed much the same as Elsdon’s age-mates. He was tossing the other apple up and down in his hand now, saying, “May I sit?”

Too late, Elsdon wondered whether the rules he had been given earlier applied to guards as well. He nodded mutely, and Mr. Sobel came forward and sat down in front of him, within arm’s reach. In an easy manner, he slid his dagger from its sheath and began using it to cut his apple.

After a moment, Elsdon said, “Are you allowed to be in here like this?”

“Not when I’m on duty,” the guard replied, stretching his legs out to the side. “Bloody blades, it’s good to be sitting again. I don’t know what kind of madness muddled me into taking up work that requires me to stand for half the clock-hours of the day.”

“Mr. Bergsen doesn’t seem to like his work here either,” Elsdon commented. “I always thought of the Eternal Dungeon as being a place whose gates were clogged with thousands of prison workers, demanding to be let in.”

Mr. Sobel snorted as the juice from the cut apple trickled over his fingers. “That’s an apt image. We get scores of requests for employment here every year. Every guard and torturer in the world seems to have made it his aim to work here, for at least a short while.”

“So it’s hard to choose among them?”

“Oh, it’s easy to choose among them. Almost none of them would be able to withstand the weight placed upon them here. —Look, do you need this to cut that?” He held out his dagger, hilt-first, to Elsdon.

Eldson felt his breath freeze in his chest as he stared down at the blade. After a moment he shook his head quickly and took a bite of his apple. He nearly choked on the bile that was rising to fill his throat.

The guard appeared uninterested in the aftermath of whatever test he had set. He was concentrating on wiping his dagger clean of juice with a handkerchief he had pulled from his pocket. “We had a foreign torturer come to demonstrate his skills here last year,” he said. “A man who was the most famed torturer in his land; it was said that no prisoner could hold out against him. After seeing his technique, everyone here agreed that he was virtually matchless in his skills. He was nearly as skilled as the High Seeker.”

Eldson managed to swallow the apple and the bile. “So you hired him?”

“No, we sent him on his way. He could break a prisoner, but he was willing to do so for any reason. The goal of the breaking was of no interest to him. He wasn’t the sort of man who would ever be able to understand the reasons why we do the work here that we do.”

Eldson slowly stroked the smooth skin of the apple, barely aware that the fruit was in his lap. “So why *do* you do this work?”

For a moment it seemed that Mr. Sobel would not reply. His gaze had drifted away, as though he were seeing something beyond the cell. Then he said, “Do you believe in eternal rebirth?”

“Of course,” responded Eldson with surprise. “Who doesn’t?”

Mr. Sobel shrugged. “The Vovimians don’t.”

“They’re barbarians.”

“Well, then. If a person commits a terrible crime, and no one ever requires him to confess his crime and pay his debt in whatever manner he can . . . When he finally dies, do you believe that he’ll be reborn?”

The silence extended for a long time. From where he sat, Eldson could hear the faint rumble of flames behind him. He pulled away from the wall, feeling the bond of sweat joining back and shirt. “That’s why this is called the Eternal Dungeon? Because you help prisoners to continue in eternal rebirth?”

The guard nodded without speaking.

Eldson said, “I thought— I’d thought it was named that because no one who is imprisoned here ever leaves here.”

Without warning, the guard gave a short laugh. “Well, there’s a dust-speck of truth to that, I suppose. But for the most part, this isn’t a dungeon for long-term imprisonment. It’s a dungeon for searching men and women who have been accused of death-sentence crimes.”

“No, I meant . . .” His voice trailed off.

“Oh.” The guard’s expression turned grave. “You tell that rumor to any

Seeker, and he'll be hard pressed to hide his fury. Seekers consider it a terrible failure if a prisoner dies while being searched. Our job is to ascertain whether the prisoner has committed a crime, and then to hand him over to the magistrates afterwards."

"So most of the dungeon's prisoners go free?"

He tried to hide the eagerness in his voice, but must not have succeeded, for the look of pity on Mr. Sobel's face was plain. "No," the guard said quietly. "Most prisoners are executed on the magistrates' orders for their crimes."

Metal squeaked at the other end of the cell. The door opened a short space, and the day guard who had brought Elsdon his dinner poked his head inside. "Mr. Aaron wants to see you," he told Mr. Sobel. "He sent a message about a report you haven't submitted yet."

Mr. Sobel groaned as he rose to his feet. "Sometimes," he said, "I think we would break more prisoners by handing them over to the Record-keeper and having him badger them to submit their confessions." He tossed his half-finished apple into Elsdon's lap, saying, "I'll see you this evening. Don't worry; you'll find that matters have changed with the High Seeker." Then he was gone, before Elsdon could ask him what he meant.

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But he was right. Late that evening, as Elsdon stood in front of his black-hooded Seeker, unable to hide the wave of trembling that racked his body, he heard Mr. Smith say, "I wish to apologize, Mr. Taylor."

"Sir?" His voice came out no louder than a mouse's.

"I made a grave error yesterday – two errors, in fact, but the first was the gravest. When you told me that you loved your father, I believed that you were deliberately lying to me."

Elsdon waited, but the High Seeker said no more, so finally Elsdon replied in a low voice, "I do love him. I don't know why you think I don't."

"You did not deliberately lie to me, Mr. Taylor; I can see that now. I am sorry for my misjudgment of you. I assure you I will take care that I do not misjudge you again."

Elsdon found that he was having a hard time keeping his gaze focussed upon the High Seeker's intense eyes. He waited with taut muscles for the searching to begin again.

"Tell me about your school, Mr. Taylor."

"Sir?" He supposed that, by this time, he should stop sounding startled at every remark the hooded man made.

"I would like to know about your school. Tell me what it looks like."

And though his posture did not relax, Mr. Smith steadied himself with his hand against the wall, as though he had come to the cell for no purpose other than to hear how architects designed school-halls these days.

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“He doesn’t ask me anything that might have to do with me committing a crime,” Elsdon said. “All he talks about is my schooldays: what my schoolwork was like, whether I had good times with my age-mates, and so on.”

“He hasn’t asked you about your family at all?” said Mr. Sobel, leaning over to scoop up the gravy from his dinner plate.

“Only indirectly. He asked me why, when I left school, I didn’t go looking for work.”

Carefully licking gravy from his spoon, Mr. Sobel said, “I’d wondered that too. When I came of age, I couldn’t have been more eager to leave home. I wanted to prove my worth among other men.”

“Oh.” Elsdon’s face grew warm. He leaned forward and stared at the remains of his own dinner. “Well, you’ve seen what I’m like.”

“Yes?” The guard’s voice held nothing more than mild curiosity.

“I’m not— That is, I couldn’t hope to compete among other men. Not the way I am. I was grateful that my father was willing to pay me for taking care of his household. He was more generous than I deserved.”

Ironware scraped against pottery as Mr. Sobel made another searching for any remaining gravy. “I don’t understand,” the guard said. “I saw your school records; you had high marks. Why do you think you wouldn’t do well in a job?”

Elsdon swallowed around the painful hardness growing in his throat. “My school-marks were deceptive. The essence of what I am— My family always knew the truth.”

“I thought you told Mr. Smith that your sister had a high opinion of you.”

Elsdon’s gaze flew up toward the guard, who was lapping away at his iron spoon. For a moment, Elsdon almost spoke; then he closed his mouth quickly.

The guard gave a soft chuckle. “He doesn’t talk to me about your sessions. It was in the first-day searching report he filed with the Record-keeper. The High Seeker is as much a prisoner of documentwork as the rest of us.”

Elsdon nodded. His face had grown warm again. Reaching down to toy with his spoon – the only ironware permitted to prisoners – he said, “Sara

was always generous too. But my father – he knows the truth about me.”

Even as he spoke, he knew he had gone too far, and he tensed. But when he looked up again, he was surprised to see a faint expression of distress upon the guard’s face, as though he had committed a social breach.

“I shouldn’t be asking you questions about your family,” Mr. Sobel said. “It comes too close to searching, and the Code won’t allow guards to search prisoners. It just seems odd to me, that you’d feel you were unqualified for work other than supervising your father’s household. Did you tell Mr. Smith all this?”

“Yes, of course. And then he asked me what types of work the other boys at my school chose. His questions don’t make any sense.”

The guard shrugged, scraping at his dish. “He often doesn’t make sense to me either. If you were to ask any prison worker in the world which man was most skilled at the art of searching prisoners, they wouldn’t hesitate to say, ‘Layle Smith.’ But if you were to ask anyone how the High Seeker does his work . . . After seventeen years, I’ve given up trying to understand the questions he asks prisoners.”

“That’s how long you’ve been with Mr. Smith?” As he spoke, Elsdon leaned back against the fiery wall. They were on the floor again, as they had been for the past three mornings, this being the period when they shared dinnertime. Sitting on the floor allowed Mr. Sobel to stretch out his tired legs.

The guard nodded. “I’ve been with him since his arrival at the Eternal Dungeon. He was transferred here from another prison, but of course he had to be retrained, as all of us do. He was taught by the old High Seeker – the High Torturer, he was called back in those days. I was guard for the High Torturer; after the training period I asked permission to serve as guard to Mr. Smith.”

“That didn’t anger the High Torturer? —You can have my gravy, by the way.”

“Are you sure?” Mr. Sobel waited for Elsdon’s nod before reaching over to take the plate. He sighed, saying, “Stealing food from a prisoner. I hope the Codifier never finds out about this. . . . No, the High Torturer was pleased when I asked for the transfer. He knew – we all knew – that Mr. Smith would be the one to succeed him, and the High Torturer wanted an experienced guard to help Mr. Smith learn the ways of the Eternal Dungeon.” Mr. Sobel leaned forward and scraped the gravy from Elsdon’s plate. “Not that I’ve ever done much besides stand around, dropping my jaw in awe. —Bloody blades, no, don’t give me your apple too. I don’t mind falling into the hands of the Codifier, but if Mr. Smith should learn I’m

taking food from you . . .”

“Oh, but maybe it would help you to be Mr. Smith’s prisoner.” Elsdon gave a small smile. “Good experience for a guard, don’t you think?”

Mr. Sobel shuddered visibly. “No, thank you. I’d prefer to be put on the rack by any of the other Seekers rather than endure five minutes being searched by the High Seeker.”

“But you must know him well if you’ve been his guard for seventeen years. Are you friends with him?”

Mr. Sobel suddenly seemed to lose interest in his food. Abandoning the last of the gravy, he pushed the plate back and shook his head silently.

Elsdon contemplated his bowed head for a moment before saying, “I suppose it wouldn’t be professional for the two of you to form a friendship.”

The guard shook his head slowly. “No, it’s not that. I . . .” He looked up. There was a tension to his expression that Elsdon had never seen before, even in the moments after Elsdon had attacked the guard.

“If you had a very great darkness in you,” Mr. Sobel said carefully, “a darkness so deep that it would frighten even those who worked in the bloodiest professions . . . Would you be able to share yourself with someone who had never experienced such darkness?”

Elsdon wanted to sever his gaze then, but the strain in Mr. Sobel’s face would not permit him to do so. He said softly, “I’ve seen that in Mr. Smith.”

The guard shook his head. “You haven’t,” he said firmly. “Truly, you’ve seen only the surface of the High Seeker so far. This other part of him . . . I don’t know how deep it goes, but it only begins to show itself when he’s with the worst prisoners, the ones he must rack. He uses it as a way to frighten them into confessing.”

“And you’ve seen this.” Elsdon’s voice remained soft.

Mr. Sobel let out his breath slowly. “Yes. I attend him in the rack room. Afterwards— It affects me almost as much as it does the prisoners, and I know Mr. Smith senses that. It’s little wonder he doesn’t want to share more of himself with me when we’re in our leisure hours.”

“Perhaps he’s afraid to.” Even as he spoke, Elsdon realized how absurd his words were. He was not surprised when a faint smile drifted onto the lips of the guard.

But all that Mr. Sobel said was, “You’re odd.”

Elsdon bit his lip, making no response.

“Not odd in a bad way,” the guard added hastily. “It’s just that here you are, a prisoner in the Eternal Dungeon . . . and yet, every time we meet, somehow we always end up talking about my troubles.”

“Perhaps I’m just trying to deflect the conversation from me.”

“Maybe. I suppose the High Seeker would be able to know that.”

Elsdon shifted uneasily, playing with the ironware once more. “What I said before about Mr. Smith . . . Don’t pay any care to me; I always get things in a muddle. I’m sure that when Mr. Smith is with his friends—What is it?”

He could not have said what made him sure that some great discovery had been made, for Mr. Sobel had neither spoken nor moved. Only his expression changed slightly, and this was quickly hidden as the guard got onto his knees and began to collect the plates.

Watching him, Elsdon said slowly, “Mr. Smith doesn’t have any friends.”

The guard looked up finally. Distress lay upon his face. “Look,” he said, “we shouldn’t be talking about the High Seeker like this. It isn’t right.”

“I’m sorry,” said Elsdon quickly. “I’m invading his privacy, and yours.”

“I don’t mind talking to you about my life, but . . .” Mr. Sobel uttered a soft curse and rose, abandoning the plates. He thumped his fist against the fiery wall, then stared at the flames for a moment before giving Elsdon a rueful smile. “Now you see why I’m not qualified to be a Seeker. Mr. Smith would never have let you trail-blaze the conversation like that.”

“I’m sorry,” repeated Elsdon, his voice falling back into hesitancy.

“Oh, I don’t mind, usually. It’s a weight off me from other times, when I must be the one giving prisoners orders.”

Elsdon watched the guard as he strode back and forth across the tiny confines of the cell, stopping occasionally to stand like a stork and shake the cramps from his loose leg. Through the door came the muted sounds of morning-time. It still disconcerted Elsdon to have his evening meal at dawn, though only the changing of guard shifts could have told him how much time had passed in this sunless place.

“You spoke earlier of a weight placed on guards and Seekers,” Elsdon said. “What did you mean by that?”

“I meant the Code.” Then, seeing Elsdon’s blank look, Mr. Sobel added, “The *Code of Seeking* – it’s our rule book. Our code of ethics. Our philosophy. . . . I’m not sure how to describe it. It tells why we are different from the other dungeons and prisons of the world, and what rules we must follow to assist the prisoners.”

“To assist them in confessing, you mean?” Elsdon said slowly.

“Oh, more than that.” Mr. Sobel stopped a moment and chewed on his thumb, his brows drawn low in concentration, then nodded at a thought. “Here’s what I mean. The Code says that if a guard observes any unusual behavior in a prisoner, he must report it to a Seeker.”

“What sort of unusual behavior?”

“Anything at all. For example, when Mr. Urman sliced you with his whip, you barely reacted. I didn’t notice this, because my eyes were closed from the knock on the head you’d given me. But that lack of reaction was unusual. Mr. Urman should have reported that to Mr. Smith when the High Seeker arrived at your cell. If he had, Mr. Smith would have known that you had experienced severe pain in the past and would have taken that into account when deciding whether to have you beaten.”

Elsdon pulled his legs up against his chest and said nothing.

“Some guards think the rule about reporting unusual behavior is foolish, but you’ve seen for yourself what can happen if it’s not followed,” continued Mr. Sobel. “The Code chains guards and Seekers with all sorts of rules like that, for the sake of the prisoners.”

“So that’s the only weight upon you? The Code?”

Mr. Sobel stopped in mid-stride and looked over at Elsdon, huddled against the wall. The guard cocked his head as he said, “What other weight do you have in mind?”

“I don’t know.” Elsdon stared down at the tips of his calf shoes. “Any sort of weight. I should think it would be hard being a guard – having to hurt prisoners, to frighten them . . .”

Mr. Sobel gave a sharp laugh. “Bloody blades, I can’t believe we’re having this conversation. Yes, you’re right about that – at least, it’s hard for me. But if you want to know the worst weight . . . It’s not being sure.”

“Not being sure?” Elsdon lifted his head.

“About the prisoners who are executed. Sometimes I’m not sure whether they really were guilty, or whether they just told us what they thought we wanted to hear. I wake up sweat-soaked in bed sometimes, thinking about that.”

The guard’s eyes were lowered now, his body still. He was silent for a long moment as Elsdon watched him, his own tension forgotten. Finally Elsdon said, “Is that the greatest weight upon the High Seeker too?”

The guard looked up. “I don’t know,” he said quietly. “Why don’t you ask him?”

CHAPTER THREE

The High Seeker remained motionless, like a hidden viper. After a long while he said, "If you were to ask the other Seekers in this place, I imagine that most of them would answer as Mr. Sobel did, that the greatest weight upon them is the fear that they have caused the death of innocent men and women."

Elsdon, who always seemed to end up crammed as far as he could into the near corner of the cell, said, "That isn't your greatest weight?"

"No. Mine is that I may have caused the release of guilty men and women."

Elsdon gripped his hands together so tightly they hurt. After a time he said, "I suppose that could cause the death of innocents also. I mean, if the criminals are murderers, and they repeat their crimes."

"That also, of course. But my immediate charge as a Seeker is to assist prisoners, and if I allow them to leave here trapped within the same darkness that brought them here, there is a chance they will never free themselves from that darkness. There are few places in the world that make as much effort to free prisoners from their dark chains as the Eternal Dungeon does."

"I suppose," Elsdon said in a soft voice, "that is true for the Seekers as well. So it must be especially hard for a Seeker to fail in breaking the chains of a prisoner, if his own chains were broken here."

Mr. Smith seemed disinclined to speak for a while. His cool green gaze kept Elsdon pinned to the wall. Finally he said, "Mr. Taylor, it has been many years since I have searched a prisoner who is as difficult as you are."

Elsdon felt confusion take hold of him. "Sir?"

"I ask you why you failed to leave your father's household upon your coming of age, and you treat me to a discourse on your father's dilemmas in finding someone to run his household. I ask you what work you were most skilled at in school, and you tell me about the problems your age-mates had in deciding where to take their skills after school-leaving. I ask you whether you got along well with your schoolmasters, and you outline – at great length – the health troubles each schoolmaster endures. And now, if I understand you correctly, you are seeking to comfort your torturer. Why?"

The final word came as a whiplash. Elsdon jerked back instinctively; his backbone ground into the corner. He said breathlessly, "I was just wondering if you knew . . . That is, if someone is chained in darkness as you say, how does he free himself from that?"

A long silence followed. The High Seeker's gaze had turned away from

Elsdon, as was his custom, and Elsdon was left alone with the small sounds of the prison: angry shouts coming faintly from another cell, and fainter still, the sound of fire behind the translucent wall. He could not hear the guards; he wondered whether Mr. Sobel was watching this conversation, and listening.

Finally Mr. Smith said, in as even a voice as he used at all other times, "When I was quite young, my mother taught me that, if you do mischief, the best way to keep yourself from doing mischief again in the future is to tell someone that you've done wrong – a parent, or some other figure of authority – and to ask their help in making whatever reparation you can for your misdeed."

"And the reparation—" Elsdon was forced to swallow in an attempt to open his tight throat. "What sort of reparation—? That is, if I knew someone who had committed a crime, and he was sorry for it, would the fact that he was sorry count in his favor? Could his reparation be less?"

His green gaze now locked upon Elsdon, the High Seeker said, "It is difficult to discuss this matter in the abstract. But if, for example, someone had murdered a member of his own family, and had done so without provocation from the family member, then I must tell you that I think it's likely any magistrate would place the death sentence upon him."

Another silence followed. Elsdon, who had pushed himself as far into the corner as any human being could possibly go, felt sweat cover his skin as though Mr. Smith had been torturing him with a brand. After a long moment, the High Seeker said, "Shall we continue this discussion tomorrow, Mr. Taylor?"

Elsdon shook his head. "No," he said in a low voice. "Now. I'm ready now to tell you what happened."

He spoke the final words in a whisper. The High Seeker nodded and glanced toward the door. As though a signal knock had been given, the door opened, and Mr. Sobel walked in. He was carrying a memorandum book and a pencil.

When the door had closed again, and Mr. Sobel was poised with pencil to paper, the High Seeker turned his attention back to his prisoner. Elsdon swallowed, trying to wet his dry mouth, and said, "I don't know where to begin."

"I would suggest," said the High Seeker, "that you begin with your father."

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He was four when his mother died. The death came with no warning other

than raised voices, and those were hardly unusual in his family: his mother had a fiery temper and often quarrelled with his father, always racing from the house afterwards in a fury. So Elsdon was not startled out of his play with his baby sister until he heard a scream, followed by a series of loud thumps upon the stairs. When he ran to the foot of the stairway to look, he found his mother lying crumpled there, as his father stared down the stairs with disbelief.

After that, matters changed between himself and his father. He could not remember the first time it happened, but the pattern remained the same forever after: his father would come into his bedroom, speak in a friendly manner to him about his play or other activities of the day, and then, with no change of expression, his father would bind him and beat him.

At first Elsdon assumed that all boys were treated thus by their fathers. Not until he reached school age did he learn that, in the Queendom of Yclau, boys were normally beaten only by their schoolmasters, and then only for dreadful offenses.

Since his father was in all other respects a man who adhered strictly to custom, Elsdon could only conclude that there was something particularly awful about himself that caused his father to punish him. Gradually he came to connect the beatings with the raised voices he had heard on the day of his mother's death, and with his father's occasional gentle hints that he possessed too much of his mother in him.

He had been too ashamed of the beatings to speak of them to his age-mates; now his shame deepened. He was grateful that his father always beat him on the bottom, where he could hide the scars from others, and he acquired a body shyness so intense that even the neighborhood healer ceased urging him to disrobe himself of his drawers.

His father was usually careful not to beat him elsewhere on the body. On the few occasions that the belt slipped, his father promptly took Elsdon to the healer. Elsdon always found ways to explain how his injuries had arisen, and he was grateful that his father backed his falsehoods. It was one of many kindnesses his father showed him, for he was a man who demonstrated great patience toward the ill-made son he had begotten.

At first Elsdon hoped that the beatings would drive from him whatever his father feared, but matters only worsened as Elsdon grew older. At times, Elsdon was seized with a fury he could not contain, and once, for no reason that he could understand, he threw a vase at his father. The vase missed, but Elsdon was terrified at what he had done. He was not surprised that his father's beatings became more frequent after that.

In the final year of his childhood, there was a change. Increasingly,

Elsdon was finding that the hardest part of his punishments was not the beating but the binding. His father must have guessed that, for one day the punishment abruptly switched: instead of beating him, his father simply bound and blindfolded him, then left him tied to his bed overnight.

Now he not only had to endure the shame of knowing what he was, but also the shame of soiled bed-linens. He washed them himself, determined that the servants should not know the truth about him. When he began to find it harder and harder to keep from screaming during the bindings, he begged his father to gag him. His father complied.

Elsdon had tried to hide the truth from his sister as well, but she knew. She was utterly unlike her mother, with no fire in her; instead, she had an innocent sweetness about her. She would come to his bedroom after the punishments and hold him while he cried. Once she even came into his room while he was tied and tried to free him. He begged her to leave him be, and she, uncertain as to the reason for the punishments, did as Elsdon wished.

It was a few months after his birthday of manhood that he finally rebelled against his father. His rebellion was not out of any lessening feeling that he deserved the punishments; it was simply that he considered himself too old to endure such punishments at his father's hands. If punishment was needed, he told his father, then his father should give Elsdon over to the city's patrol soldiers so that Elsdon could receive his punishment as a man does.

His father said nothing; he simply gave his son a look that sent Elsdon into his sister's room, where he cried in her arms for several hours.

The next day Elsdon murdered her.

He could not remember afterwards what the cause of the quarrel was, though he was sure that it was nothing more than the type of argument brothers and sisters normally have. He had never had any other type of quarrel with his sister. Yet in the midst of it, the fury came suddenly upon him, and what followed was a dark tumbling of screams and pleas and his sister's blood upon his hands.

And then it was over, and as Elsdon crouched down beside Sara, desperately searching for signs of life, he knew, finally, what it was that his father had feared about him.

o—o—o

“He knew what I was, you see,” Elsdon said in a broken voice. “Nobody else did. My schoolmasters thought I was bright-witted, and my friends thought I was kind and good. But he knew the truth. I remember once he

told me it was a shame I'd inherited my mother's face. I thought at first he meant only that he wished I wasn't ugly, but it was more than that. He knew that the ugliness was in my essence. He saw how lack-witted I was, and how cowardly, and how vicious . . . Well, you know all this. I don't know why I'm bothering to tell you."

The High Seeker did not speak for a time. He had remained motionless during the recitation, his gaze unwavering upon Elsdon's face, with no change of expression in his eyes to reveal what he thought. Now he said softly, "You appear to have a high opinion of my ability to know you. I erred about you on your first day here, as you'll recall."

"No." Elsdon shook his head vigorously. "You were right then. I didn't deliberately lie to you, but I did lie. I hate my father – I hate him as much as I must have hated Sara. It's a mercy he told the soldiers to arrest me, because I probably would have murdered him too, and anyone else who came my way." He forced himself to raise his head so that his gaze was level with the High Seeker's. "I'm sorry. I should have told you the truth the first day rather than force you to be patient with me, as my father was."

Mr. Smith's eyes were unblinking, like that of a serpent. "As it happens," he said coolly, "you are right that I know what you are. I have known what you are since the first day. The question is whether you are willing to listen to me if I tell you."

Elsdon's hands had been gripping each other. Now he brought his fists up to his lips and bowed his head over them. He nodded, a single jerk of the head.

"Will you believe me?" persisted Mr. Smith.

"Yes," whispered Elsdon. "You told me the truth about my execution."

"But will you believe that I have the skill to have discerned your essence during our short time together?"

"You've talked to me for nearly half the clock-hours of each day since I arrived," said Elsdon. "And even if you hadn't—" He stopped abruptly, and looked over at the third man in the cell.

Mr. Sobel had been perusing the pages he had written while Elsdon was giving his confession. Every now and then he crossed something out and scribbled in a correction. Now he raised his gaze from the papers. His eyes met Elsdon's; neither man spoke.

"Mr. Sobel," said the High Seeker, "will you wait outside, please?"

The guard left the cell silently. When the door closed, Elsdon said, "That's why you ordered Mr. Sobel to talk to me. To find out the truth about me."

"Is that the observation of a lack-witted man?"

The remark, coming as it did without warning, stung Elsdon as much as

his father's beatings once had. He stared down at the ground, trying to blink away the moisture on the edges of his eyelids.

"You mistake me, Mr. Taylor." The High Seeker's voice remained as cool as before. "I am telling you that you should not have believed what your father told you about your lack-wittedness. I do not need to trust your schoolmasters' reports on this matter; you have demonstrated your intelligence since the moment of your arrival here."

"But my father knew me—"

"Knew that you were a coward? Mr. Taylor, I can assure you that, if there is any place in the world where cowardice reveals itself, it is in the Eternal Dungeon. You have shown a reasonable fear of what fate awaited you here, nothing more. As for your purported ugliness—"

The change came without warning: a deepening of the creases around the High Seeker's eyes. The smile was in his voice also as he said, "I don't think your looks are a matter which need cause you any distress, Mr. Taylor."

"But I'm vicious," Elsdon whispered. "Even if the rest of what you say is true, you *know* I'm a brutal man. I told you what I did to my sister."

The smile disappeared from Mr. Smith's eyes. "You are chained by darkness. I will not deny that. You have been in grave danger from your furies, and it is well that you recognize that. But there is more to you than viciousness, as you have demonstrated by giving your confession freely."

Elsdon shook his head slowly. His hands were still clutching each other beneath his chin. "You would have broken me anyway, with Mr. Sobel's help—"

"A breaking is about to occur," Mr. Smith said, "but it is not my breaking. Mr. Taylor, do you know why I sent Mr. Sobel to talk with you?"

"In order to search me so that he could give you the information you needed to break me—"

"No. The Code forbids guards from searching prisoners, nor do I know what conversations passed between you and Mr. Sobel."

The High Seeker reached out then and placed his palm against the wall, resting himself lightly against the grey stone. He said softly, "We have two basic methods of breaking, Mr. Taylor, and we use variations on these methods with all the prisoners. With prisoners who are uncooperative, we do our best to instill fear in them, making ourselves appear to be an enemy too fearsome to be held out against. Mr. Urman's report of your attack on Mr. Sobel led me to believe initially that you were such a prisoner; hence my effort to frighten you on the first day."

"And the cooperative prisoners?" Elsdon asked, his interest quickening despite his worries.

“We try to establish trust with them. We allow them to see that we are not their enemy, and though we cannot save most of the prisoners from the consequences of what they have done, we will endeavor to see that their fates are no worse than the law demands. That is why I sent Mr. Sobel to you, Mr. Taylor: so you would know that there is at least one person in this dungeon you can trust.”

“I trust you.”

Another change came into Mr. Smith’s expression, but this one Elsdon could not read, nor could he read the shift in the High Seeker’s body as Mr. Smith drew himself up rigid. He was as stiff now as he had been on the first day, and on most of the occasions since then.

“If you trust me,” the High Seeker said, his voice turning from coolness to coldness, “do you trust me to tell you the truth about you? For though Mr. Sobel did not report to me his conversations with you, he did give me one piece of information that I felt would be invaluable in your breaking.”

“What information?” Elsdon asked, his throat tightening. He pulled back once more, squeezing into the corner as though he might find refuge there.

“He said that you asked no questions about your own welfare; you asked only about the welfare of those who were imprisoning you.” The High Seeker’s voice grew soft. “That is the essence of what you are, Mr. Taylor. Your father lied to you. And that is why you hate your father: because he lied to you and abused you most brutally.”

A dark wave, dashing itself upon a solid rock, shatters into a million teardrops and dissolves into the spray rising toward the sun. So it was with Elsdon; he felt his body racked over and over with the pain as he crouched down on the floor, sobbing. The bile was in his mouth again, but he barely noticed it. He was too busy feeling his bones shatter from the impact of the storm-wave.

He did not notice Mr. Smith move toward the door. But when he heard Mr. Sobel quietly speak his name, he leaned to the side with an old instinct for comfort, and in the next moment, Mr. Sobel’s arm hugged his shoulders.

The squeak of door-hinges made him look up finally. Through the spray of his tears, he could see a blurry image of the High Seeker, who was on the point of stepping into the corridor. Mr. Smith paused to look back at him, saying, “I need to visit the Record-keeper about some documentwork. I will see you tomorrow in the magistrates’ court, Mr. Taylor.”

And then he was gone, and Elsdon’s sobs began to batter him again with renewed force.

“Stupid,” he managed to choke out. “I’m so stupid. . . .”

“Don’t say that,” Mr. Sobel replied. “You were only a young child when the beatings began; you couldn’t have been expected to understand what was taking place.”

“Not that. The High Seeker. I made a fool of myself in front of him. You saw how he left as soon as he could. . . .”

“Hush, now.” Mr. Sobel handed Elsdon a handkerchief. “Don’t you think Mr. Smith has seen prisoners break themselves before? Why do you think we call these the breaking cells?” His hand rose up to wipe a tear from Elsdon’s cheek. “It will be all right now.”

“No, it won’t,” Elsdon said between sobs that threatened to choke him. “I killed my sister, and tomorrow I’ll die.”

He expected Mr. Sobel to reply. When the guard didn’t, Elsdon lifted his face toward him. Mr. Sobel’s expression was drawn into tight lines, as though he were straining against a great heaviness.

He said nothing, but continued to hold Elsdon until the dark wave lay shattered upon the rock, and Elsdon could cry no more.

CHAPTER FOUR

The judging room turned out to be located in the palace that sprawled above the Eternal Dungeon. This was Elsdon's first visit to the Queen's palace, other than during his journey to the dungeon; his terror at the torture to come had made him oblivious to his surroundings upon his arrival. Now, as he walked along the palace corridors, escorted by Mr. Sobel and Mr. Urman, his gaze lingered upon the marble columns, the mosaic floors, and the gilded plaster. He wished he would have had more than one chance to see it.

His hands were free as he walked. The guards had not bound him or even hooded him; Mr. Sobel had asked him once more to close his eyes while they traversed the dungeon, and he had gratefully done so. Now he did his best to store whatever images came to him in his remaining time. No windows existed in this part of the palace, which he regretted; he would have liked to have seen the sky again. But most likely this would all end as it had begun: in the narrow confines of a cell.

They reached a door guarded by palace soldiers, dressed in their ceremonial finery: an old-fashioned sword at one hip, a practical revolver at the other. Within the room, more soldiers stood, scrutinizing Elsdon as he entered. His guards withdrew, so swiftly that Elsdon did not have time to say goodbye to Mr. Sobel. He looked around uncertainly, trying to figure out what he should do next.

The judging room was very plain, only a few benches facing a gilded table upon a platform. The magistrate was already seated at the table; he was an elderly man with hollow cheeks and a no-nonsense look in his eyes. He was carrying on a low-voiced conversation with what appeared to be the magisterial recorder. The magistrate's voice was brisk as he spoke.

Aside from the guards, no one else was in the room, nor was there any indication of where Elsdon should sit. He looked hesitantly at the soldiers, wondering whether he should ask their help or whether he should wait for Mr. Smith to arrive, who would no doubt answer any questions he had.

A hand fell upon his shoulder.

He spun in desperate fervor, pushing hard with his hands before he could see who his assailant was. He caught a glimpse of his father stumbling back, and then a soldier was running forward, his sword unsheathed. The sword was pointed at Elsdon.

Elsdon stood rooted, feeling himself grow cold with awareness that, despite all his preparations during the night, he was not yet ready to die. And then a body stepped between himself and the approaching sword – a dark-clothed body, wearing a hood.

When he spoke, the High Seeker ignored the soldier, who had halted and was now sheathing his sword. In a quiet voice, Mr. Smith said to Elsdon's father, "Sir, I must ask that you make no contact with the prisoner. It is not permitted for witnesses against the prisoner to do so."

"He's my son!" Elsdon's father somehow managed to direct toward Elsdon a hurt expression at the same time as he gave Mr. Smith a bewildered look. "I was only trying to see whether he's been well treated."

"He has been treated well since his arrival at the Eternal Dungeon." Mr. Smith's voice was cool. "I would suggest that you seat yourself, sir. The judging is about to begin."

Elsdon looked over his shoulder at the gilded table and saw that the magistrate had been watching this exchange with narrowed eyes. Elsdon felt his breath being pushed back into his chest. He remained frozen like a bird under a predator's gaze until he heard the High Seeker murmur, "You may seat yourself where you wish."

Cautiously, Elsdon sought out a bench, choosing the one that was as far as possible from his father. His father gave an amiable but respectful nod to the magistrate. Elsdon's stomach sickened.

The High Seeker remained standing a couple of yards away from Elsdon. The magistrate glanced at him and said, "We're all here, I think. Who is our first witness?" He looked over at the magisterial recorder.

"Captain Farjeon!" the recorder cried, pitching his voice to be heard throughout the room.

One of the soldiers strode forward; he looked vaguely familiar to Elsdon. Pausing in the clear space between the benches and the table, he said without preliminary, "On the first day of the month, I and three of my men were on patrol in the Parkside district of the city. A young boy ran to us and told us that a girl was screaming in a house nearby. At about the same time, we heard the screams ourselves. We ran forward, but were hindered in our path by well-meaning subjects of our Queen, who had heard the screams also and wished to alert us. By the time we reached the front of the house in question, the screams had stopped. A small crowd of young women, wishing to investigate the source of the cries, had gathered at the front of the house, but they were unable to gain entry, as the front door was locked. We saw a man running toward the house from one of the neighbors' houses. He identified himself hurriedly as the owner of the house and said that the screams must have come from his daughter. He permitted us entrance to the house and showed us to his daughter's room. There we found a girl, fourteen years of age, lying bleeding on the floor. She had been badly battered; her face was barely recognizable, and her limbs were broken in several places. She had been punched repeatedly in

the chest and pelvis. We have submitted the prison doctor's report if you have need of it. The prison doctor later confirmed that the girl had been killed by her injuries. Next to the girl we found the prisoner, who was kneeling beside her, his hand on her throat. He had some of the girl's blood on his shirt and shoes and knuckles. We arrested the prisoner and delivered him to Parkside Prison for searching."

The magistrate glanced at the recorder to see whether he had finished writing all this down, then asked, in a voice as thin and rasping as sandpaper, "Did the prisoner say anything during the time that he was in your custody?"

"Nothing, sir. We did ask him whether he was the girl's assailant, but he didn't respond. His eyes were unfocussed, and I'm not sure whether he heard what we were saying."

The magistrate nodded and turned his gaze toward the High Seeker. "Does the Eternal Dungeon have any questions for the witness?"

"We would like to know," Mr. Smith said quietly, "whether the victim's father spoke, beyond what has been reported."

The magistrate raised his eyebrows at the soldier, who said, "I don't really remember, sir. I think he said something like, 'Oh, my heart, she's dead!' Then he said to the prisoner, 'Son, how could you do such a terrible thing?' I believe that the victim's father was questioned afterwards by Parkside Prison, but we had no further contact with him."

"Good." The magistrate seemed pleased at this shortening of the procedure. "The next witness is . . ." He looked over at the recorder.

The recorder consulted his notes. "Auburn Taylor!" he cried.

Elson's father appeared startled, as though he had not expected to be called upon, but he quickly rose and walked forward to where the soldier had stood before. He cleared his throat and said, "I'm not sure what you want me to say, sir."

"Just tell us what you know of this matter," the magistrate responded tersely.

"Nothing, sir, beyond what has been said already. It was so great a shock to me . . . Such a beautiful and gentle daughter she was . . . And I never would have guessed that my own son . . . Mind you, he has been violent before. The neighbors could tell you that. He throws things."

"Is that in the records?" the magistrate interrupted.

The recorder shuffled through the papers and said, "It's in the report of the Parkside Prison healer. The prisoner's medical records indicate that he was treated by the neighborhood healer on several occasions, at the father's request. The prisoner stated to the healer that he had received the injuries while engaging in violent behavior toward objects in his house.

The father confirmed that objects had been broken.”

“Let me see that.” The magistrate took the report and pondered it as Elsdon bit his lip, struggling to keep down the sickness that had been rising in his throat since the soldier’s testimony. After a moment the magistrate raised his eyes and said, “Does the Eternal Dungeon wish to question the witness?”

“We do not,” the High Seeker replied.

“Do you have anything else to add, Mr. Taylor?”

“No, sir, I had no idea this was going to happen. Perhaps I should have guessed . . . He lied to me sometimes after his violent spells, telling me that other people had caused the damage . . . Once he even blamed his sister . . . But really, how could I have guessed that he’d murder a sweet girl—”

“No more witness to give. Very well, thank you.” The magistrate dismissed Elsdon’s father from his view, and after a moment Auburn Taylor retreated, flicking a glance toward Elsdon as he did so. Elsdon shrank back and looked over at the hooded man beside him. Mr. Smith was watching him, but said nothing.

“Will Parkside Prison be offering witness?” The magistrate looked over at the soldier who had unsheathed his sword earlier.

“We will not, sir.” The soldier did not move from where he stood by the wall. He too looked familiar, though Elsdon could not dredge forth the memory. “By request of the victim’s father, no searching was done of the prisoner by us, and all evidence we received from the victim’s father was turned over to the Eternal Dungeon.”

“Good.” The magistrate sounded even more pleased. He was already glancing at the ticking clock in the corner, as though gauging how little time he could devote to the remainder of the judging. “That leaves us with the Eternal Dungeon. Mr. Smith, I assume that you have brought a statement from the prisoner, or we would not be here.”

“It is in the recorder’s hands, sir.”

The recorder was already placing papers on the desk before the magistrate. The magistrate made no effort to read them but pulled the last page out of the pile, glanced at it, and held it up in Elsdon’s direction.

“Mr. Taylor,” he said, “have you seen this document before?”

“Yes, sir.” Elsdon’s voice emerged as a whisper.

“Please stand, Mr. Taylor, and come forward. I don’t like having to shout across the room.”

Elsdon’s face grew warm. He rose quickly and stumbled his way past the rows of benches until he reached the open space. The magistrate watched him come forward, a tinge of impatience showing in his eyes.

“Now, then,” said the magistrate slowly, as though he were addressing a

small child. "Have you seen this document before?"

"Yes, sir." Elsdon's voice emerged too loud this time, causing his ears to burn. "Mr. Sobel – my guard – wrote down the words I spoke to Mr. Smith – the High Seeker – and this is the inked copy of his notes."

"And did you read afterwards what Mr. Sobel had written?"

"Yes, sir. Mr. Sobel showed me the inked copy and asked me whether he had written my words correctly."

"And you agreed that he had."

"Yes, sir. Mr. Sobel had me sign the statement."

The magistrate's look of impatience increased a notch, as though he were unused to prisoners volunteering information. In the same carefully spaced voice, he said, "And is this your signature? If you cannot see the document well enough, you may come forward."

"I can see it, sir. It's my signature."

"Hmm." The magistrate drummed his fingers for a moment, glanced at the clock, and said, "Now, then, Mr. Taylor, I am about to ask you a set of very important questions. I want you to understand that, if you answer yes to any of the questions, you will not need to fear repercussions from the Seeker who questioned you. I will place you in the custody of the Eternal Dungeon's Codifier, who will in turn be under the supervision of the magistrates during the time of any necessary investigation. Do you understand? No, Mr. Taylor, don't nod; answer me."

"I understand, sir."

"Good." The magistrate laid the papers down, folded his hands atop them, and leaned forward, saying, "Did you sign this statement out of fear of torture or any other adverse consequence if you did not?"

"No, sir."

"Were you threatened by anyone in the Eternal Dungeon if you did not sign the statement?"

"No, sir. I was well treated by everyone there."

"Were you promised any rewards if you signed the statement?"

"No, sir." He felt his throat close. "I know that the penalty for what I did is death, sir. Nobody in the Eternal Dungeon lied to me and told me otherwise."

"Hmm." The magistrate contemplated Elsdon's signature for a moment before saying, "One last question, Mr. Taylor. I know that you've just given me the answer, but I want to be clear here. You understand that the penalty for a crime such as you have been said to have committed is death by hanging?"

"Yes." Elsdon felt the sickness begin to rise again, and he swallowed.

"Sir, I was wondering . . ."

The magistrate, who had been looking over at the clock, raised his eyebrows.

“Would it be possible for me to receive death by some other means?” Elsdon asked in a rush.

The magistrate’s eyebrows remained raised.

“I don’t like ropes, sir,” Elsdon said in a low voice.

The magistrate shuffled the papers together and stacked them neatly before handing them to the recorder. “Death by hanging is the penalty prescribed,” he said. “Do you have any other questions?”

Elsdon shook his head slowly.

“Fine. The confession, please.” He looked over at the recorder.

The recorder, with a spark to his eye that suggested this was his favorite part of judgments, began to read Elsdon’s confession in a clear, rapid voice. He had not proceeded far before Elsdon’s father leapt to his feet, causing his bench to crash to the ground. “That’s a lie!” he shouted.

The soldier closest to Elsdon’s father loosened his sword in its sheath. Auburn Taylor caught sight of the movement at the moment he was taking a step toward Elsdon. He hesitated.

“Mr. Taylor,” the magistrate said dryly, “you will be permitted to respond once the confession has been read. Kindly remain silent until then.”

Elsdon’s father began to sink down into his seat, realized at the last moment that his bench was toppled, and switched to another seat. He did not speak for the remainder of the recital, though his lips moved and his face turned fiery red.

“You confirm that this is your witness?” the magistrate asked Elsdon when he was through.

Elsdon nodded. He was having a hard time keeping from looking back to see whether his father was storming toward him. The magistrate coughed, made a note to himself with broad scratches of his pen, and then turned to Elsdon’s father, saying, “You wish to respond, Mr. Taylor?”

Elsdon’s father walked forward. Elsdon backed away as far as he could within the cleared space, but his father ignored him. Speaking carefully, with no sign of anger, his father said, “Sir, I think there must be some mistake here. I won’t say that my son deliberately lied – though he does have a history of that – but I think his mind must have been muddled during his imprisonment. Possibly it was the torture that did it.”

The magistrate looked away from Elsdon’s father. “Mr. Smith?”

Elsdon turned his head and found that the High Seeker was standing next to him. Mr. Smith said, “The prisoner was tortured only once, on his first day of imprisonment. He was informed thereafter that he would not

be punished again. He showed no signs of mental distress during the searching, beyond that which he had shown since his arrival. He made his statement on the fifth day of imprisonment.”

“Hmm.” The magistrate looked for a moment as though he were going to turn his attention to the clock to ask its witness. Instead he said to Elsdon, “You confirm what you said before, that you provided this statement freely?”

“Yes.”

He could not manage to raise his voice above a whisper, but the magistrate seemed satisfied. Turning back to the High Seeker, he said, “Mr. Smith, you would not have submitted this statement unless you believed it to be true. Does the Eternal Dungeon have any witness to offer concerning this case?”

“Two small matters, sir; it is for you to judge whether they are significant.” The High Seeker’s voice was cool. “From the prisoner’s reactions to the punishment placed upon him during his first day, we believe, based on our prior experience in these matters, that the prisoner has been bound and beaten in the past. His legal records show no evidence that he has been arrested before or that he received such punishment during his schooling.”

“The boys in our neighborhood are a tough lot,” Elsdon’s father said. “No doubt they played rough games with my son. That doesn’t excuse what he did to my daughter—”

“Mr. Taylor, the Eternal Dungeon is giving witness.” The magistrate turned back to the High Seeker. “And the other matter you mentioned, Mr. Smith?”

“Upon arrival, the prisoner assaulted a guard when the guard unexpectedly placed his hand upon the prisoner’s shoulder. The door to the cell lay open and unguarded at the time, but the prisoner made no attempt to escape, nor did he continue his assault after his initial quick reaction. The guard reported the assault as being ‘reflexive.’ All of the prisoner’s subsequent behavior toward the guard suggests that the prisoner was indeed reacting in a reflexive manner to a perceived danger. Sir, if we might point you to the passage on the second page of the confession, which we have circled.”

There followed a moment of consultation between the magistrate and the recorder; then the recorder read aloud, “He never gives any sign that he’s angry. He just comes into my room while I’m sitting at my desk and puts his hand on me in a friendly manner—”

“Thank you, that is the passage in question.” The High Seeker’s voice remained cool. “Sir, before this judging started, the prisoner demonstrated

violent behavior toward his father. Did you happen to witness the initial cause of that assault?”

The magistrate’s face demonstrated that he had. He picked up his pen and began scribbling on his paper.

“This is rattlepated!” cried Elsdon’s father. “Of course I greeted my son by touching him; I was concerned for his welfare. And you saw for yourself what a danger he has become—”

“Mr. Taylor!” The magistrate’s voice turned crisp. “I have given you several opportunities to follow our procedures in this judging. The next time you speak without permission I will have you expelled from this room.” He nodded to a soldier, who came forward, his hand on his sword hilt.

Elsdon’s father, eyeing the soldier, made no reply. The magistrate turned to Mr. Smith and said, “Does the Eternal Dungeon wish to submit a request to the lesser prisons for a searching of Mr. Taylor concerning the crimes he is said to have committed against the prisoner? Or do you wish to search him yourself concerning the death of his wife, that being a death-sentence matter?”

Elsdon’s father drew in his breath swiftly, then looked at the soldier and shut his lips tight.

Mr. Smith replied, “Sir, the Eternal Dungeon has given consideration to this matter. I have consulted with the Codifier, and he does not believe there is sufficient evidence to permit an arrest in the matter of Mr. Taylor’s wife; nor does he believe it likely that the magistrates would accept evidence offered by the prisoner concerning crimes committed against him. This being the case, the Eternal Dungeon has sent a note to Parkside Prison, requesting that a special watch be placed upon Mr. Taylor’s activities, in case any troubles arise in the future.”

The magistrate glanced at the soldier from Parkside Prison, as though to check whether he wished to comment, then nodded and said, “In that case, the prisoner’s witness against his father is of no importance in deciding this matter. You do understand that, don’t you?” he said to Elsdon. “I can only dismiss the charges against you if witness is provided that you were provoked to commit the crime by the victim, or encouraged to do so by another party. Do you wish to offer witness of that sort?”

“No.” Elsdon’s voice was low. “Nobody told me to kill Sara, and she wasn’t at fault for what happened. She was innocent, and I—”

His voice broke. He shoved the back of his hand against his mouth, trying to push back the sickness there. There was a moment’s pause; out of the corner of his eye, Elsdon saw that his father was now relaxed.

“Do you have anything else to add before I pass sentence?” the

magistrate asked.

With his hand still pressed against his mouth, Elsdon shook his head.

“Mr. Taylor? You may speak now, if you wish.”

“No need.” Elsdon’s father spoke firmly. “I trust you to make the right decision in my son’s case.”

The magistrate glanced at the clock and gave a sigh of satisfaction. “Mr. Smith?” he said perfunctorily.

“Sir, the Eternal Dungeon wishes to retain custody of the prisoner.”

There was a stirring in the room; several of the soldiers glanced at one another. Elsdon forgot about his sickness and stared at the black-hooded man beside him.

The magistrate gave another sigh, this one heavy. “Do we have the proper documentwork for that?” he asked the recorder.

“It was submitted by the High Seeker upon his arrival here.” The recorder passed some papers over to the magistrate.

“Hmm.” The magistrate perused them, leafing through them carefully.

“What—?”

A sword hissed as it was released from its sheath. The magistrate looked up and said with ill-concealed impatience, “You have a question, Mr. Taylor?”

“What is being talked about here?” Elsdon’s father glared at the soldier holding the naked sword toward him before switching his attention back to the magistrate. “I thought this was a death-sentence case. Is my son to be executed in the Eternal Dungeon, then?”

The magistrate glanced over at Elsdon, who was sure his own bewilderment must be scribed upon his face, for the magistrate proceeded to say slowly, “Executions cannot be carried out by the magistrates unless the Eternal Dungeon releases prisoners into our custody. If a prisoner is judged guilty of a death-sentence crime, and if the Eternal Dungeon believes that the prisoner may have committed crimes beyond that with which he has been charged, the Eternal Dungeon may hold the prisoner indefinitely, in case further evidence is received concerning the crimes. Once the death sentence is passed, the Eternal Dungeon may retain custody of the prisoner only on condition that the prisoner receive eternal confinement within the walls of the Eternal Dungeon. That is the case here, Mr. Smith?”

“Yes, sir.” The High Seeker’s tone was matter-of-fact. “Given the evidence that has been submitted by the prisoner’s father concerning the prisoner’s violent tendencies, we believe it is possible that the prisoner engaged in other criminal acts. We intend to place the prisoner in confinement until we ascertain the truth in this matter. When the prisoner

finally dies, whether due to execution for his crimes or due to old age or any other cause, his ashes will be buried within the dungeon eternally.”

“Do you wish to submit a protest of the Eternal Dungeon’s decision, Mr. Taylor?” asked the magistrate. “You may petition the Magisterial Guild on this matter, since you are the victim’s father.”

Auburn Taylor’s gaze drifted over to Elsdon, who was sure he must now be white-faced, and then to the hooded man standing next to him. A smile floated softly across his face, like mist.

“No need,” he told the magistrate. “I’m sure that my son will be in good hands with the Seekers. Perhaps they will succeed in extracting any information on other crimes he has committed.”

“Good.” The magistrate slapped the papers down onto the table with finality. “Elsdon Taylor, for the murder of Sara Taylor, I sentence you to be hanged by your neck until you are dead. Where is that document again?” He turned to the recorder, who leaned over and leafed through the papers on the desk until he found the proper one. The magistrate read through the paper, scribbled something onto it, and said, “Mr. Smith, since you will not release the prisoner into our custody, you retain control in this matter. If at any time you should release the prisoner, his sentence will be carried out. If you do not release the prisoner, he will remain confined within the Eternal Dungeon under whatever conditions you deem necessary. Judging completed.” He stood up swiftly and had left the room by a door in the back before Elsdon was able to draw his next breath.

The judging room emptied more quickly than he would have imagined possible: the recorder followed in the wake of the magistrate, while the soldiers began to leave the room without a backwards glance. Elsdon’s father looked as though he wished to linger, but as he took a step toward Elsdon, the soldier from Parkside Prison halted by his side. “A word with you, sir,” the soldier said firmly and pulled Auburn Taylor from the room.

Elsdon looked over at the only remaining man in the room. He could see nothing but the eyes, which were bare of all emotion. “Thank you,” Elsdon said softly.

“Not at all.” The High Seeker’s tone was as matter-of-fact as before. “We retain custody of prisoners whenever the evidence permits it. I think the magistrates would grow weary of this, except that it saves them the expense of an executioner. The Eternal Dungeon is run under a separate budget.” He gestured toward the door.

After a moment’s hesitation, Elsdon led the way out of the room. The corridors were empty now, except for the marble columns, the mosaic floors, and the gilded plaster.

CHAPTER FIVE

He remembered the way back to the gates leading down to the cavern of the Eternal Dungeon. Mr. Smith stayed a few steps behind him, so that Elsdon had the illusion he was walking back of his own free will, unbound by any force. The feeling washed through him like a cool breeze on a sweltering day.

Only when they reached the heavily guarded gates did Mr. Smith step forward. Elsdon followed him past the three sets of guards, who seemed unsurprised by his reappearance. Nor, when they arrived at the Record-keeper's desk, did Mr. Aaron show any special interest in Elsdon. Instead he turned his gaze to Mr. Smith, who said, "Mr. Taylor requires the oath of eternal commitment."

The Record-keeper pushed forward three pieces of paper that were already at his elbow. "Read it through carefully," he told Elsdon. "If you agree to the oath, sign all three copies at the bottom."

Elsdon looked down at the first piece of paper. His name, he saw, was already filled in.

I, Elsdon Taylor, do swear on this day that I will remain eternally confined within the Eternal Dungeon under whatever conditions the High Seeker deems necessary. Except with permission of the Codifier, I will not leave these walls before my death, and I understand that after my death my ashes will be buried here. I will never return to the lighted world. I will obey the Code of Seeking, and if I should break the Code or know of anyone else who breaks the Code, I will report the matter to the Codifier. I will obey all orders given to me by the High Seeker, except those which would conflict with the Code of Seeking. I understand that, in any case where my best interests come into conflict with the best interests of a prisoner who is being searched, the prisoner's best interests must be followed. I am willing to suffer for the sake of the prisoners.

He read the oath twice, feeling both times as though someone was slicing through his bonds. Then he picked up the pen proffered to him by the Record-keeper and signed the papers.

The Record-keeper took two of the pages and pushed the third toward him. "This is your copy," he said, and turned immediately to say to the guard who was entering through a door to the right, "Mr. Sobel! I have not yet received your report on your last prisoner!"

“Sorry,” the guard replied cheerfully. “I’ll take care of it before my shift tonight. —Trial go well?” he asked Elsdon.

Elsdon nodded.

“Thought it would,” said Mr. Sobel. “I’ll see you later.” He walked past the ceiling-high tablet and disappeared through a door to the left.

Elsdon looked around and saw that Mr. Smith was standing by the open doorway through which Mr. Sobel had entered; it was flanked by guards. Stuffing the copy of the oath into his pocket, Elsdon hurried to catch up. He opened his mouth to ask whether he should close his eyes for this part of the journey, but Mr. Smith was already striding up the doorway’s steps to a dark corridor.

The corridor, which ran left-right to the doorway, was filled with smoke and the roar of flames. Coughing, Elsdon strove to catch up with the swift High Seeker, who had turned left. Dimly through the smoke he could see figures next to black piles, thrusting shovels into the piles and then throwing the contents into recesses in the left-hand wall.

As he and the High Seeker reached the first figure, Elsdon peered cautiously into the recess next to him. A fire burned furiously within a narrow channel between two walls. Part of its heat was travelling down into a tunnel beneath the walls, while the remainder of its heat and light travelled upward. Seeing the thick glass sparkling on the far wall, Elsdon suddenly realized what this was.

The man who had been shovelling paused a moment, wiping sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand. He was dressed in a laborer’s smock, but he grinned in a familiar fashion at Mr. Smith, who had paused when Elsdon did. “Morning, Mr. Smith!” he said. “I didn’t know you were ever awake in the daytime.”

“Good morning,” Mr. Smith replied. “How is the work coming?”

“Good.” The laborer gave a nod of satisfaction. “That coal you recommended from Vovim is working out well.”

“I’m glad to hear it,” replied Mr. Smith. “We don’t want the prisoners to freeze, do we?”

“Not unless that’s the new torture you’ve thought up for them!” The laborer roared with laughter. The other laborers, who had been eavesdropping on the conversation, joined the merriment. The High Seeker made no attempt to share in the humor. He nodded, then continued down the corridor, followed by Elsdon.

They walked quite a ways. The furnace area, it appeared, stretched for much of the length of the Eternal Dungeon. Feeling suddenly shy, Elsdon said nothing as they walked, and Mr. Smith appeared similarly disinclined to talk. They passed doors along the right-hand wall, but the High Seeker

ignored the doors. Not until they reached the end of the corridor did he turn to the last of the doors, pulling a chain of keys from an inner pocket of his shirt. With one smooth move he unbolted the lock, then ushered Elsdon through the doorway.

Elsdon travelled down a short passage, stepped across a second doorway, and found himself surrounded by people.

None of them took notice of him or the High Seeker. They were all hurrying back and forth through a corridor that ran parallel with the furnace corridor. This corridor, though, was lighted with lamps that brightened the place so much that it seemed day-lit. Some of the people held objects in their arms: bundles of clothing, great baskets of food, buckets and mops, children . . . Elsdon blinked, and suddenly he realized that half the people passing him were women. He looked over at the High Seeker and cried, "This isn't the Eternal Dungeon!"

"Certainly it is," Mr. Smith replied calmly. "It's the most important part of our world, the outer dungeon. In many ways, the inhabitants of the inner dungeon – the Seekers and guards – are the least important members of the Eternal Dungeon. If we ceased to do our jobs for a few days, nobody but our prisoners would notice, but if the hundreds of men and women who keep this place running through their labor failed to do their work, the Eternal Dungeon would quickly die."

Elsdon looked at one of the passing baskets; it held the same yellow apples he had been fed in his cell. Then he moved back toward the doorway to avoid being crashed into by a small boy and girl who were racing down the corridor, laughing. "You have children here too?" Elsdon said.

"Not many," replied Mr. Smith. "We discourage them from being raised here; it's not the proper environment in which to grow up, and we have a problem with overcrowding, as you can see. The Codifier permits a few young families to remain here, though."

Looking around, Elsdon saw what the High Seeker meant about the overcrowding. The corridor was packed nearly to bursting with the dwellers of the outer dungeon, and the doors along the corridor were so narrowly placed next to one another that Elsdon guessed the apartments within them must be quite small. He began to suspect that the cell he had found so confining was one of the largest spaces within the Eternal Dungeon.

Which led his thoughts to what lay next. Turning to Mr. Smith, he said, "Mr. Sobel told me that he would be seeing me later. Does that mean he'll be my guard?"

"The final arrangements for your confinement are still being ordered,"

replied the High Seeker. "In any case, this isn't the proper place to discuss such matters."

As he spoke, he flicked his hands toward the guards flanking the doorway to the inner dungeon, whom Elsdon had not noticed in his excitement. Turning the chain in his hands to a new key, the High Seeker stepped across the corridor. He unlocked the door in the wall opposite, then opened it wide, looking back at Elsdon. After a moment's hesitation, Elsdon stepped across the corridor and through the new doorway.

He found himself in a small room crammed with objects. A kitchen area lay to the right. Though no stove stood in the room, nor any sink or pump, there were storage bins; the ones that were open were filled with hard bread and dried fruit and other such long-lasting edibles. Some fresh cheese and fruit lay upon a shelf, protected by a glass cover, and on the narrow table sat a pitcher of water and a basin.

Immediately next to this portion of the room, cheek to jowl, was a living area with a cushioned bench facing a cushioned chair. The walls behind the bench held a series of sideboards surmounted with bookshelves, with a smattering of volumes lying upon the latter. A compact writing desk with an accompanying stool was tucked into the corner.

The living area, tiny though it was, took up most of the space in the room. Only at the far left of the room was a bed folded up against the wall, next to a small cupboard that Elsdon guessed must contain the chamber-pot.

He looked again at the High Seeker, still standing in the doorway, who said, "The Record-keeper has not yet assigned you permanent quarters, so you'll remain here for a day or so. This is our guest apartment for people newly arrived to the outer dungeon."

Elsdon's gaze went over to the door again. It was half-closed, and he could see that the door's lock could be opened from the inside.

For a moment, he felt too dizzy to speak. Then he looked back at Mr. Smith and said gravely, "Thank you. I won't violate your trust in me; I won't try to escape."

The High Seeker nodded as he stepped in and closed the door. "Feel free to make use of anything you find in this place," he said. "You'll want to get some rest, of course. I don't suppose you slept much last night."

Elsdon gave a quirk of a smile. "I didn't sleep at all."

"I hope the noise in the corridor doesn't disturb you, then. It takes time to become used to the living conditions of the Eternal Dungeon. Did you have any feeling of oppression when you first arrived here, because you were travelling underground?"

"No," said Elsdon, his brow puckered with thought. "That never

occurred to me. Do some of your prisoners dislike being underground?”

“I couldn’t say, but I certainly found it difficult to make the adjustment myself. I’d lived all my life aboveground, and I couldn’t shake the feeling that I’d be crushed to death, either by the earth above or by the crowds around me.”

This unexpected revelation left Elsdon speechless for a moment. Finally he said, “That must make it hard for you. I suppose you visit the broad, open spaces of the lighted world whenever you can.”

“Whenever I can, yes.” The High Seeker walked past him to the bookshelves and took a black-bound volume into his hand, saying, “If you should grow bored, you might want to peruse this. You’ll need to know the contents.”

Elsdon took the book from him and looked down at the title stamped in gold upon the cover. “Yes,” he said slowly, “I’m eager to read this anyway. Mr. Sobel made your Code sound interesting. I’ll do my best to finish this before I have to leave here.” He looked up as he stopped speaking, and his voice caught.

Standing beside him was a man with a face. His eyes were the color of summer leaves, and his coloring was a pale yellow-brown. He looked to be fairly young, in his thirties. He had high cheekbones that gave him a somewhat foreign appearance, but otherwise he had quite an ordinary look to him. Elsdon might have passed him on the street without taking notice.

His expression held a stiff formality that reminded Elsdon of a voice that had become familiar to him. It took him a moment to notice that the face was framed by black cloth that covered the sides and back of the head.

Elsdon’s gaze travelled up to where the cloth that had hidden the face was flung back over the head, pinned in place by two clips. With the cloth back, it could be seen that a frame held the hood snugly against the head. The frame tucked its way around the area above the eyebrows and presumably followed the same course round to the back of the head.

Suddenly the stiffness in the mouth relaxed into what might have been the beginning of a smile, if it had not been so faint. “We do have faces, Mr. Taylor,” the High Seeker said. “I know that children are commonly put to bed with scare-tales about faceless Seekers.”

“I’m sorry.” Elsdon swallowed. “I didn’t mean to stare. I just didn’t realize that Seekers were allowed to raise their hoods around prisoners.”

“We’re not allowed to lift our face-cloths when we’re in public,” Mr. Smith replied. “It’s part of our uniform, which we must wear at all times; it helps to keep our relations with the other dungeon inhabitants on a professional level. However, when we’re in private with friends or neighbors, we are permitted to show our faces.”

Elsdon couldn't speak for a minute; he stared down at his shoes. Finally he looked up and said diffidently, "I'm glad you think of me in that way, as a neighbor. I – I'm starting to think of the Eternal Dungeon like that. As a place to live, not just a place to be imprisoned."

The High Seeker made no reply. After a moment Elsdon added in a rush, "I know that's silly."

"Not at all." Mr. Smith's voice was, as always, cool and formal. "I'm glad you consider this to be your new home. It's how we like all of the eternally confined to regard it." He took a step backwards and said, "I must leave, I'm afraid; I have only a few hours to sleep before I resume my duties. I'll return at dawn, if you believe you'll be awake then."

"Probably," said Elsdon with a smile. "I think you've switched me over to being awake with the night, like a bat."

"Waking hours tend to be arbitrary in a place with no sunlight. Do you have any questions before I leave?" He eyed the silent young man before him, then said, "Mr. Taylor, I hope that at this stage of our acquaintance I need not tell you that you can be honest with me."

Elsdon gave an awkward laugh. "I'm sorry, I just— I was wondering whether, when I'm confined, I'll be permitted to see you again. I'd – I'd miss you if I couldn't talk with you again."

The High Seeker turned his eyes away suddenly, as he was wont to do when he was searching Elsdon. He was silent so long that Elsdon felt his face grow warm, and then reach the point of burning. At last the High Seeker looked back and said quietly, "If you wish to see me, then certainly we may meet. We'll speak more tomorrow."

"Good night, sir."

"Good night." And then the High Seeker's face was hidden again as he left Elsdon in the tiny, unlocked apartment.

o—o—o

Eighteen hours later, Elsdon was in the same position he had held for virtually every moment of eight hours: curled up in the armchair, staring down at the pages of the *Code of Seeking*.

He was only one-quarter of the way through the slim volume. Every time he read a sentence, he found himself going back and rereading it over and over, and then he would fall into a meditation, and then he would read the sentence again. Once he brought the book's binding up to his nose to breathe in the scent of leather; then he placed his cheek against the cover, which was warm from his hands. His limbs felt relaxed and his spine curved with comfortable ease against the soft cushions. He could not

remember having felt this way since before his mother's death.

The sound of a knock startled him out of his dreaming. Cautiously he walked to the door and opened it. On the threshold stood Mr. Smith.

The High Seeker did not speak until the door was closed again. Then he glanced at the book, which was lying open upon the chair. "You've found a way to occupy yourself, I see."

Elsdon nodded. "There's so much in it; it's hard to absorb it all." He hesitated. Mr. Smith had not raised the face-cloth of his hood, and Elsdon's ears turned warm as he recalled how their last conversation had ended.

"Did any portion of the book interest you above the rest?" Mr. Smith asked.

"The rule that Seekers may not touch prisoners."

He had spoken spontaneously; too late, he thought that this remark must reveal his lack-wittedness, for surely, among all he had read, this had to be one of the least important passages. But Mr. Smith nodded and said, "A difficult rule for any Seeker to follow, particularly when the prisoner is distressed by his searching."

"Is that why you left the cell when I was crying?" The words leapt out of Elsdon, unconstrained by caution.

If there was any change in the High Seeker's expression, the hood hid it. "It seemed a matter best handled by Mr. Sobel, since you had come to trust him."

"But I trust you also. I told you that before."

Mr. Smith gazed upon him unblinking, the hood-shadow darkening his eyes. "I am glad to hear that. You are about to learn that that trust is mutual. Will you come with me, please?"

He gestured toward the door. Elsdon looked at the book on the chair before reluctantly closing it upon his bookmark. As he did so, he caught sight, for the first time, of the title page, and of the name written there. His breath whistled in, and he looked at the High Seeker, but Mr. Smith said nothing, and so Elsdon left the black-bound book behind, along with the brightly-furnished apartment and the unlocked door.

They made their way back through the furnace corridor between the inner and outer dungeon, and through the entry hall where the Record-keeper was absorbed with taking down information about a newly arrived prisoner, and then they reached the door which, Elsdon knew, must lead to the breaking cells.

"Should I shut my eyes?" he asked.

His hand on the latch, Mr. Smith looked back at him. "There's no need," he said, too softly to be heard by the men standing nearby. "We

hood prisoners who are being searched because we would prefer they not see the corridor that leads to the cells. It wouldn't confirm the scene of terror the prisoners expect."

Elsdon could see why, once they had begun travelling down the new corridor. It was dimly lit, but the lights were ordinary oil lamps attached in a quite ordinary way to the walls. The walls themselves were plastered, and were painted a deep green that matched the eyes of the High Seeker; the floor was of wood and was polished to a shine. The Eternal Dungeon, it turned out, looked like Elsdon's old school-hall.

Some of the doorways they passed were flanked by guards, but Mr. Smith stopped at a guardless door. As he opened it with his set of keys, Elsdon glanced up at the number painted above the door, and he felt his heart jerk. He looked over at the High Seeker, who was holding the door wide open for him.

"I'm to have my old cell?" He wished that his voice sounded steadier.

The High Seeker shook his head. "I needed a place for a test. A new prisoner has not yet been assigned to this cell." As he spoke, he pulled something from his belt, and Elsdon realized, with another jerk of the heart, that Mr. Smith was carrying a whip.

If the High Seeker noticed that Elsdon's skin had lightened abruptly, he made no mention of it. Instead he followed Elsdon into the cell, closed the door, and asked, "When you were at Parkside Prison, did you give any thought to what you would do if you were released?"

"Yes," said Elsdon, unable to break his gaze from the whip. "I knew I couldn't go home – my father wouldn't want me there. I wasn't sure what I'd do after that. I thought the best thing to do would be to find some way to stop myself from ever hurting anyone again."

"And have you found such a way?"

Elsdon shook his head. "It's just as well I'm to be eternally confined," he said in a low voice. "I couldn't be trusted to be free again. Not when I have this ugly darkness inside me, marring me." Then he remembered, too late, and he looked quickly at the High Seeker.

Mr. Smith seemed unoffended, though. His voice was as cool and level as usual as he said, "Well, then, to find a way to deal with that will be our first task, won't it? Because I can assure you, we do not permit the eternally confined to idle away their days – they must put their minds to work at whatever task is at hand."

Hope leapt within Elsdon's body. "You mean you'll help me with this? Help me to destroy the darkness?"

"I cannot be certain that you'll be able to do so. –Hold this, please." He handed Elsdon the whip in a nonchalant manner, then moved his hands to

his collar. "However, when a man is unjustly imprisoned, sometimes his only hope lies in imprisoning his prison-keeper. You may or may not be able to rid yourself of your darkness, but if you chain the darkness and make use of it, as it has made use of you, then the bond between the two of you will take on a very different character."

Elsdon said nothing; he was too busy staring as the High Seeker removed his shirt, neatly folded it, and tossed it onto the ground. Mr. Smith wore no undervest. His chest was smooth, and his skin there was dark, hiding any blemishes he might have had. As he turned his back, though, Elsdon saw faint scars, long faded.

The High Seeker, moving forward, placed his forearms against the wall and pressed his body forward. He looked over his shoulder and said, "I would like you to beat me on my back."

Elsdon dropped the whip; he had gone numb with the shock, except for his heart, which was pounding. He resisted an impulse to flee the cell.

Mr. Smith's gaze flicked toward the fallen whip, but all that he said was, "This is the test I have in mind, Mr. Taylor."

"I'd hurt you," Elsdon whispered.

"You cannot hurt me badly; it takes skill to wield a whip with any great power." Then, as Elsdon did not move: "Would it help if I told you I have been beaten before? It is a required part of the training of a Seeker, to undergo any torture he might inflict upon a prisoner."

Elsdon knelt slowly. As his hand touched the leather, he whispered, "If I should lose control again—"

"There are guards within call; they would respond quickly. Mr. Taylor, you ought to know that I would not permit any test that would bring serious harm to either of us."

"But why are you doing this?"

The High Seeker did not reply. Elsdon, rising, looked at the whip in his hand. He had held one before, when he was a young boy and had gone to his father's stables to talk with the servants there, in the years before he began to avoid the servants, lest they guess his secret. He remembered the carriage driver placing the whip in his hand and saying, "Try it; you'll enjoy it."

He had enjoyed it all too much. Thinking back on it, he thought he knew why. With his stomach clenching in a painful manner now, he asked, "How many lashes should I . . . ?"

"Twenty will be sufficient, I believe." The High Seeker's voice was passionless and without tension. "Begin now, please. One."

"Try it; you'll enjoy it," the carriage driver had said, and young Elsdon had pulled back his arm and swung the lash through the air, hitting a

nearby post with the faintest of cracks.

The carriage driver had laughed and shown him how to change his grip. “Harder, lad,” he said. “The post won’t fight back. Give it all your strength.”

He tried again, swinging the lash over and over against the pole. It was odd: he felt no pleasure from the act of swinging and hitting, but afterwards, when he drew the lash back, he felt as though a tightness within him had been uncoiled.

“’Tis the same with lovemaking,” the carriage driver told him when Elsdon explained this. “You may be sleeping with the ugliest whore in town, but getting that hoarded energy out of you always helps.”

Young Elsdon thought about that ugly whore, and about what it would be like to bring his whip down upon a horse. He found himself shivering in misery at that thought, and tried to remind himself that horses needed to be trained. A well-trained horse was a skilled horse, and he had seen for himself the pride that some of the horses had in their work. If whipping the horses would help them to become better—

“Stop.” The High Seeker’s voice was hoarse. There was only darkness in the holes where his eyes should have been, and his chest was heaving.

Elsdon, feeling the shock and fear shoot through him, dropped the whip and hurried over to Mr. Smith’s side, remembering at the last moment that the High Seeker was not permitted to touch him. “Are you all right?” he asked, his voice high with anxiety.

“Give me a moment.” Mr. Smith’s voice was no longer cool and level; it was rasping and gasping. He had turned sideways and was leaning his shoulder against the wall, looking as though he would slide down to the floor at any moment. The movement hid his back from Elsdon, so that Elsdon was unable to see what damage he had done. Elsdon waited, his hands gripped tight together; he struggled to hold back the tears that were trying to squeeze through.

Finally the High Seeker opened his eyes and said, in a voice closer to normal, “You have more power in your arm than I’d thought.”

“I harmed you.” Elsdon could barely force the words past the tightness in his throat.

“You gave me twelve medium lashes; I’ll be fully healed within the week. Will you hand me my shirt, please?”

Elsdon rushed to do so, saying, “I’m sorry. I’m sorry.”

“Why apologize? You passed the test in an excellent manner.” Then, as Elsdon stood dumb, Mr. Smith took the shirt and began to pull it on, slowly and stiffly. “You did precisely as I asked you to. You beat me on my back, nowhere else. You stopped the moment I gave the order, even though

you had been led to expect that you would be permitted to give me eight further lashes. You could not have shown better control. How do you feel?”

“Like I’ve been with the ugliest whore in town and received release,” Elsdon said slowly.

To his surprise, he heard Mr. Smith chuckle softly. “I’ll try not to take that as an insult. May I assume that the whipping is the ‘whore’ for you, and that you received no pleasure from it?”

Elsdon nodded. “Not from the hurting. From the release. It’s like with Sara.”

Mr. Smith nodded. “I thought that might be the case.” He bent down, grunting as he did so, and retrieved the whip from the floor, wrapping it neatly in a circle before attaching it to the hook on the left side of his belt.

Elsdon said slowly, “You’re saying that, instead of working for my father, I should have taken up work that would have allowed me to release the violence in me in ways that would bring good to others – such as becoming a carriage driver.”

“I think your skills could take you higher than that exalted position.” Mr. Smith’s voice cradled a hint of amusement. “However, the principle remains. Many a fine general got his start when he realized that, if he did not find a way to chain his darkness and make it serve him, he would end up in the Eternal Dungeon.”

“And now I’m here.” Elsdon’s voice was dull; he was thinking of knowledge gained too late, and what he could have done with this knowledge if he had held it earlier.

“Now you’re here,” Mr. Smith agreed. “Which will simplify matters, should you wish to train to be a Seeker.”

Elsdon stood motionless. He opened his mouth, closed it, and then said, in the voice of a healer making a tentative diagnosis, “You’re mocking me.”

“I do not make mock on such matters.” And indeed, all shadows of amusement had vanished from the High Seeker’s voice.

“But I thought— That is, Mr. Sobel said that few men qualify to be Seekers.”

“Indeed. A Seeker must be willing to sacrifice fundamentals of life permitted to other men, such as marriage and children; he must have the ability to read beneath a person’s words to discover the unstated truth within; he must know in an instant if the prisoner is undergoing undue pain or is on the point of breaking; he must have the ability to go without sleep when a prisoner has need of him, to put aside passions when he is attacked, to resist the twin evils of remaining cold to the prisoner’s dilemmas or of immersing himself so fully in the dilemmas that he cannot

view objectively what the prisoner may have done. Many of these qualities are learned over time. However, you have begun to show that you possess the quality most necessary in a Seeker.”

Elsdon felt his chest tighten. He said in a low voice, “You mean that I can torture prisoners.”

“I mean that you place the needs of others over your own.”

In the silence that followed, Elsdon’s eyes scanned the cell. It had become all too familiar to him during his short time there. He knew the color of the mortar between each block in the translucent wall. He knew exactly how far to the ceiling the door rose and how far it swung out. He had memorized the screws that held the bed-shelf in place. He had looked at everything there was to see in this cell, and had conned it twenty times over. To be in a cell like this for another fifty years, or a cell even smaller . . .

“You say I place the needs of others over my own,” he said to the waiting High Seeker. “The oath which the Record-keeper had me sign required that of me – that I place the best interests of the prisoner above my own. And the very first sentence of the *Code of Seeking* says that a Seeker must be willing to suffer for the prisoners.”

Mr. Smith nodded silently. He was in the stance he adopted when placing torture upon prisoners: relaxed, his eyes intent on the person before him.

Elsdon drew a deep breath and said, “If I accepted your offer to be a Seeker – if I let myself be freed rather than eternally confined within a cell – then I could never be sure whether I was doing this for the sake of the prisoners or for my own sake. So I can’t do that. I can’t.”

His voice shook on the final words. Angry at himself for his weakness, he tried to stand straighter under the High Seeker’s gaze.

Mr. Smith said nothing, but his eyes smiled.

Seeing this, Elsdon let his breath out, slowly this time. “That was the test. You were offering this temptation to see whether I would take it.”

“My offer is a genuine one.”

“But if I were a genuine Seeker, I wouldn’t take it.” Elsdon looked around the cell again. This time he remembered that the cell had one change from when he had been there before: its door was unlocked.

“Everything you’ve done since my judging . . .” Elsdon said. “Letting me walk back from the trial without guards, having me sign the oath of eternal commitment of my own will, placing me in an unlocked apartment overnight, offering to let me go free . . . It’s all meant to make it easier for me, isn’t it? When I walk into that locked cell, I’ll know that I was offered alternatives, and I chose not to take them.”

Still the High Seeker did not speak. Elsdon straightened his shoulders yet further and said quietly, "I'm ready now. You can take me to my new home."

Mr. Smith gestured toward the door. Elsdon left behind the cell with its bright, flickering flame.

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As Elsdon and Mr. Smith retraced their path along the corridor to the entry hall, they passed Mr. Sobel and Mr. Urman, who were escorting a hooded prisoner. Without a word, the High Seeker returned Mr. Urman's whip to the guard's hand. Mr. Urman took it without moving his eyes from the prisoner whose arm he grasped. Mr. Sobel, walking on the other side of the prisoner, gave Elsdon the briefest of smiles before returning his attention to the more important party.

Elsdon and the High Seeker walked back through the entry hall, which was empty now except for the Record-keeper, scribbling at his desk, and several pairs of guards, doing documentwork on the fringes of the room as they awaited new prisoners. Beyond them was the doorway to the corridor between the inner dungeon and the outer dungeon. Mr. Smith gestured Elsdon through the door, for Elsdon was continuing to lead the way, as though he were a host and Mr. Smith the guest.

They did not walk all the way to the outer dungeon this time. Instead, Mr. Smith stopped at one of the doors along the corridor, which was featureless but for its latch and lock. The High Seeker pulled his chain of keys out, used the appropriate key, and pushed the door. It opened to darkness.

The High Seeker looked at Elsdon, waiting. Elsdon swallowed around the heartbeat fluttering in his throat and said, "Sir, I wanted to tell you . . . Please forget what I said yesterday about coming to visit me. I realize now that this was a selfish request – your time must be with the prisoners who are being searched, not wasted with a prisoner who has already been broken."

"This isn't the proper place to discuss such matters," the High Seeker replied, inclining his head toward some figures further down the corridor who were shovelling coal into the dungeon's furnace.

Elsdon looked again at the cell: it was utterly black, for even the faint light in the corridor did not penetrate beyond the first couple of steps. Pulling in a breath in the manner of a man who must swim deep and does not know when he will be able to breathe again, he walked into the cell.

He could hear behind him the soft chatter of the laborers tending the

fires, and ahead of him, through the wall that faced the outer dungeon, he could hear the voices of people passing. He had a moment to think to himself that this was an unexpected bounty: he would be able to amuse himself by listening to the free inhabitants of the Eternal Dungeon. Then the door closed behind him, and he was left in the dark.

For a moment, with a jerk of the heart, he thought this was part of the punishment. Then he heard the quiet step of the High Seeker as he walked forward. It took all of Elsdon's new-found courage to remain fixed in place. It was not simply the eeriness of being in a cell whose contents he could not see; it was being alone in the dark with a man like this. He forced himself to remember all that the High Seeker had done for him.

A minute later, Elsdon's heartbeat eased as he heard the scratch of a match against sandpaper. The lamp needed time to take light, but after a while, although the room was still grey with shadows, he could see about him. The first thing he noticed was a door, placed against the wall of the outer dungeon. This puzzled him, for he could not imagine why the guards who tended him would need to enter from that direction. Then he saw the remainder of the room.

A kitchen area lay to the right; though no stove stood in the room, nor any sink or pump, there were storage bins. Nearby was a living area with a cushioned bench facing a cushioned chair. The walls behind the bench held a series of sideboards surmounted with bookshelves, with a smattering of volumes lying upon the latter. . . .

He swirled round to face the High Seeker, the heart now beating hard at his throat. "No!" he cried. "I told you, I can't accept your offer to be a Seeker!"

"Do you still have your oath of eternal commitment?" Mr. Smith asked in an unruffled manner. He had raised the face-cloth of his hood, and his face was now naked to the younger man.

Elsdon thought for a second, then shook his head. "I'm sorry. I used it to mark my place in the copy of the *Code of Seeking* you showed me."

"I'll see that the book and the oath are sent to you. In the meantime . . ." The High Seeker pulled from the pocket of his shirt a piece of paper, its edges worn with use. "This is an older copy of the oath, so the phrasing has changed somewhat since it was signed. But it will remind you of what you swore."

He opened the paper and handed it to Elsdon. One of his fingers, covering the initial line, pointed to the lines immediately below. Elsdon looked down at the words written there: ". . . swear on this day that I will remain eternally confined within the Eternal Dungeon under whatever conditions the High Torturer deems necessary."

His heartbeat stilled somewhat as the meaning of the words penetrated him. He looked over at the High Seeker, who said, “As you surmised, Mr. Taylor, we cannot spare our time with prisoners who have already been broken. We only offer eternal confinement to prisoners whom we believe can be trusted to look after themselves, without need for more supervision than any other member of the Eternal Dungeon receives. There was never any question of placing guards or locks about you – not only would that be a waste of our resources, but it is unnecessary. You made it clear on the first day of your arrival in the dungeon that you have no need for such restraints.”

This time Elsdon did not look at the door behind him, knowing what he would see. “Thank you,” he said softly. “Thank you for trusting me. I’ll stay within this – this cell—” He stumbled upon the word, finding it difficult to apply it to his pleasant surroundings. “And I’ll do whatever work you require of me.”

For he had remembered, in that moment, Mr. Smith’s words about not permitting the eternally confined to idle away their days. All was clear now; he looked around the room, trying to sight whatever craft or chore the High Seeker wished him to do.

Mr. Smith said in a dry tone, “You might wish to take a second look at the paper you hold.”

Elsdon read through the remainder of the oath, whose phrasing was not so very different from the phrasing of his own oath. Only when he reached the signature did his breath whistle in. He looked up to see that there was a suggestion of amusement around Mr. Smith’s eyes. Elsdon said tentatively, “You’re a prisoner here?”

“I am eternally confined, yes. But I did not arrive here as a prisoner. All men who choose to become Seekers must sign the oath of eternal commitment, for if we held so great a privilege above the other prisoners – to be able to leave here and return to the lighted world whenever we wished – then we would become so distanced from the prisoners being searched that we would not be able to understand their fears and their hopes. . . . Other dungeons in the world, greedy for the skills of their torturers, make prisoners of the torturers, but ours is the only dungeon in the world where the confinement is offered and freely accepted.”

“So when I refused your offer that I should become a Seeker . . . When I chose to enter my cell rather than accept what I believed to be full freedom . . .”

“You qualified yourself in that moment to become a Seeker-in-Training. You showed that you place the needs of the prisoners over your own.”

It was too much. Elsdon stared again at the small comforts of the room

about him, and at the two doors through which he could step at any time, and he heard the noises of his fellow inhabitants of the Eternal Dungeon, with whom he would be able to speak whenever he wished. He put his fists up against his mouth to suppress the sound there.

Beside him, Mr. Smith said quietly, "There is no need for you to rush a decision. You have undergone great pain – not only recently, but for most of your life. It will take a long time for you to heal from that; at the very least, you should rest for the next few weeks. It may become clearer to you during those weeks whether you should train as a Seeker or take some other job in the Eternal Dungeon. You would qualify for many positions here, and I've no doubt that most of the other dungeon inhabitants will be annoyed at me for trying to snatch a young man of such talents. So take your time to rest, and heal, and think."

Elsdon was still standing motionless in the center of his cell when he heard something tinkle onto the bookshelf beside him. It was the key to the cell. Elsdon turned to see the High Seeker walking toward the door to the inner dungeon.

"I must go," Mr. Smith said, looking back at him. "As you've seen, I have a new prisoner – I must work a little later today than I'd intended."

The sounds of morning bustling now seemed to Elsdon like a lullaby sung at day's end. It reminded him of how the previous day had ended, and of the words he had spoken then. As the High Seeker reached forward to touch the latch, Elsdon said abruptly, "Mr. Smith!"

The High Seeker had been reaching up to his hood. He stopped and looked back, eyebrows raised.

Elsdon walked forward to the door and said, his voice soft with hesitation, "You told me that a Seeker must have the ability to read beneath a person's words to discover the unstated truth within."

There was no change in Mr. Smith's expression. "That is a quality much valued in Seekers."

"You told me also that, when Seekers are in private with friends or neighbors, they're permitted to show their faces."

For a moment, the High Seeker's face remained unscribed, revealing nothing. Then the blankness broke, and something touched the edge of his mouth: the smile Elsdon had heard before, but not yet seen.

"I have no need for more neighbors," the High Seeker responded, waving his hand toward the wall adjoining the crowded corridor of the outer dungeon. "As you can see, I have too many already."

Even before the High Seeker finished his speech, Elsdon's own smile had broken through. "Good night, Layle," he said, his voice thick with shyness.

“Good night, Elsdon.” The High Seeker touched him briefly on the arm. “I’ll come by tomorrow after my shift, if I may.”

Elsdon nodded, and the High Seeker’s hand rose to touch his hood. Then the cloth covered the smile, and Layle Smith slipped into the inner dungeon.

With his departure, the cell grew quiet. Elsdon looked round at it, trying to decide whether to eat or read or sleep or explore the waiting wonders of the outer dungeon. Suddenly he flung his arms up, like a boy released from a hard schoolmaster. Emitting a cry of joy, he twirled about in the room for a bit before collapsing, laughing, onto the armchair.

Then his smile faded. Very softly, at the edge of his hearing, he could hear someone crying. The sobbing was hard, and it came from the direction of the inner dungeon.

He thought for a long while about this sound before he got up and walked through the door to the outer dungeon, in search of the guest apartment he had left behind, so that he could fetch the black-bound book lying there.

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. . . The first of the Eternal Dungeon’s High Seekers was also its most famous, not only for his own actions, but for the manner in which Layle Smith influenced the men and women around him.

Time has destroyed many valuable records from the Eternal Dungeon. To our good fortune, however, a historian living three generations after Layle Smith, working from documents now lost, compiled a set of statistics concerning the “success” rate of the Eternal Dungeon’s High Torturers and High Seekers.

It comes as no surprise to learn that Layle Smith headed this list, with a ninety-seven percent success rate in breaking prisoners. Of the prisoners he broke, eighty-three percent were later sentenced to execution by the “magistrates” (judges).

These statistics are often cited to demonstrate the barbarity of Layle Smith. That the first High Seeker often used barbarous methods to break his prisoners no one today could deny. Yet the statistics hold a different meaning for anyone well acquainted with the history of the Eternal Dungeon.

Unlike institutions today where arrested men and women are questioned, the Eternal Dungeon was not sent prisoners whose guilt was thought to be open to question. Instead, the lesser prisons of Yclau sent

prisoners whose guilt had already been determined as certain, so that the Eternal Dungeon could extract the confession needed to learn whether other parties had assisted in the crimes. Under the circumstances, what is surprising is not the high number of executions of dungeon prisoners, but rather the fact that the Seekers made any effort at all to discover whether the prisoners were innocent.

Moreover, a final statistic, usually not cited, offers us another perspective on Layle Smith. The same historian who compiled the statistics about the first High Seeker notes, in an off-hand manner, that eight percent of the prisoners who were sentenced to death because of testimony that Layle Smith obtained were offered eternal confinement within the Eternal Dungeon.

Eight percent may seem like a small proportion. But if we keep in mind how many prisoners Layle Smith searched yearly, and how long he retained the title of High Seeker, we begin to understand the reason for the many complaints, during this period, of overcrowding within the Eternal Dungeon. The Eternal Dungeon was a ship of refugees, packed from bow to stern with hundreds of men and women whom Layle Smith had rescued from death.

This is the image that Layle Smith must have held amongst his contemporaries, and the image should not be forgotten, even as we acknowledge that the darkness we recognize in him today was first noted by those who worked alongside him. “Light and darkness cannot exist in a single place,” some historians say, but the history of the Eternal Dungeon, and of its first High Seeker, suggests otherwise.

—Psychologists with Whips: A History of the Eternal Dungeon.

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Turn-of-the-Century Toughs

Honored six times in the Rainbow Awards for LGBTQA literature, *Turn-of-the-Century Toughs* presents an epic tale of adventure, friendship, romance, and class struggles.

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Volumes in the cycle: [The Eternal Dungeon](#) | [Dungeon Guards](#) | [Life Prison](#) | [Michael's House](#) | [Waterman](#) | [Dark Light](#).

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REBIRTH

Excerpt from the first volume of the Eternal Dungeon series

The corridor was cold. It was always cold. Elsdon had been startled when he first learned that the prisoners being searched were the only inner dungeon inhabitants granted the luxury of a furnace. He had grown accustomed since then to the dungeon's autumn chill, which remained the same year-round.

Much like its master. He stole a look at the High Seeker as they walked side by side down the corridor between the prisoners' cells, passing an occasional pair of guards flanking the door to a cell that was in use.

"You must never lie to a prisoner," the High Seeker said. "The Code is quite strict about that, and equally strict in its penalties for violation of this rule. You must never lie, though you may often be called upon to mislead."

"What is the difference?" Elsdon asked, his mind only half fastened upon what the High Seeker was saying. His thoughts were instead upon

the stiffness of Layle's posture, which he remembered from the day they first met. Layle had only relaxed that stiffness once during Elsdon's imprisonment, when Elsdon was being beaten; it had given Elsdon a mistaken impression of the High Seeker's character. Since that time, Elsdon had seen the High Seeker relaxed and informal many times – but only when he was alone with Elsdon, in the privacy of Layle's cell.

“I misled you when you were my prisoner,” the High Seeker replied. “I led you to believe that I was searching you for the truth about the crime you were accused of committing, when in fact I was setting up the conditions by which you would break yourself and admit your wrongdoing. Were you resentful of my misleading when you learned of it?”

Elsdon did not have to think back that far. He shook his head at once. “I knew that you had done it for my sake.”

“But if I had lied to you – if I had told you that my questions to you were aimed at my breaking you – would that have made a difference in how you regarded me?”

Elsdon nodded slowly. They had passed into darkness: no lamps lit this end of the corridor, and no guards stood in front of the doors here. The High Seeker paused before one of the doors and pulled his ring of keys from his inner pocket. He slipped off one of the keys and handed it to Elsdon.

“This is a master key,” he said in a low tone. “It will open any cell where prisoners are searched. Under ordinary circumstances you will not need to use it – the guards will let you in and out of any cell where a prisoner is present – but you may need it in an emergency. Keep the key under your pillow when you sleep and within your inner pocket when you're awake, and never allow a prisoner to guess that you hold it. Some prisoners would kill you to possess that key.”

His voice was matter-of-fact. Elsdon carefully threaded the key onto his own key-ring, which so far carried only the keys to his cell and Layle's. He was slipping the ring back into his inner pocket when Layle gestured toward the door they stood before.

Elsdon leaned forward and fumbled with the lock in the dark corridor. He did not succeed in turning the key until Layle, stepping further down the corridor, retrieved a lamp from where it hung on the wall and brought it over to illuminate the door. Elsdon had just time enough to see what was written above the door before he stepped inside and Layle's light caught the contents of the interior. Then Elsdon forgot to breathe.

The room was slightly larger than a breaking cell, but colder; the cell did not end against a furnace-warmed wall, as a breaking cell would, but instead against the same cold stone that lined the other walls. Upon this

stone hung black objects of varying sizes. They were too far hidden into the shadows for Elsdon to catch more than a glimpse of them: something narrow and pointed, something else long and sharp, something else blunt and hard . . .

His mind was not upon the wall decorations. All of his attention was focussed upon the great table in the midst of the room, and the straps at its head and foot.

He felt Layle's hand upon his shoulder, and he jerked away from the touch automatically. Then he forced himself to remember that he was a Seeker. This was his workplace; he ought not to be reacting as though he were a prisoner being brought here. He sucked in several breaths of chill air, then walked forward and inspected the rack more closely.

From the books Layle had instructed him to read, Elsdon knew that racks came in many shapes. This one was of a simple design. The foot of it held a fixed bar with straps on it for the ankles; the head of the rack held a moveable bar with straps for the wrists. The most impressive feature of the rack was not the bars or straps but the giant wheel which controlled the moveable bar. It was placed flat against the head of the rack and was nearly as high as a man. Approaching it, Elsdon found that his chin barely rose over it, and his arms must be spread nearly to full width to span the circle. The wheel led to a mechanism that was unintelligible to Elsdon, but he could see that the movement of the wheel was divided into exact intervals by a series of notches hidden from the view of any prisoner who lay upon the rack. Indeed, only the guard controlling the rack would be able to see the notches, Elsdon decided, peering down at the hidden control. The levels inscribed upon the control went from zero to ten, and four notches quartered each level.

His gaze wandered back to the moveable bar, and from there to the straps. He swallowed.

"How much does this stretch the prisoner?" he heard himself ask in a hollow voice.

"Hold onto a strap and see," the High Seeker suggested.

Moving cautiously round to the side of the rack, Elsdon picked up one of the straps; it was made of calfskin and was soft to the touch. He took firm hold of the strap, then braced himself.

The High Seeker, standing now at the wheel, turned it minutely. There was a click, and the strap tugged slightly in Elsdon's hand, as a child might tug at the hand of a parent.

Elsdon looked over at the High Seeker, startled. "That didn't hurt!"

"It's more impressive when accompanied by the lecture of a Seeker, explaining the terrible effects of the machine," Layle said dryly. "But no,

the rack's primary purpose is not to hurt the prisoner – it is to drive fear into the prisoner. We use it only on the worst prisoners, the ones who have broken the Code repeatedly and without remorse. Such prisoners are unlikely to break through pain alone; fear is the best weapon we can use against them.”

Elsdon let the strap drop and went over to Layle's side. The wheel had turned over to the first notch, one quarter of the way from zero to one. “But is the rack dangerous to the prisoner?”

“Not at the lower levels. At the higher levels . . . In theory, a healthy man should not receive permanent damage if he is placed at level ten. But we cannot always know the full state of health of our prisoners, despite the dungeon healer's careful examination of their medical records. We have had prisoners suffer heart death while on the rack.”

Again, his voice was matter-of-fact. Elsdon gave him a sharp look. After a moment, Layle added, “All rackings must be approved by me, and I rarely permit Seekers to take their prisoners beyond level three. The primary point of this room, as I say, is not to cause pain, but to cause fear. Hence the decorations.” He waved his hand toward the walls.

The lamp, which Layle had laid upon the groin-high bed of the rack, did not quite shed its light upon the walls. Elsdon had to go over to the wall and touch one of the objects before he could be sure of what hung there. Then he looked back at Layle and said, in a voice that he hoped was steady, “These are from the old dungeon?”

“The royal dungeon that existed in Yclau before the Eternal Dungeon was formed? No, those were destroyed at the time that the *Code of Seeking* was first issued. These belong to me.”

Elsdon stared at him, his hand dropping from the black iron. “You collect instruments of *torture*?”

“Antique ones.” Layle's voice was bland. “Some of the dealers who sell the books I own also sell objects such as these. Hung here, they make a great impression upon prisoners entering this cell. We've had prisoners break the moment they saw these instruments—”

“—thus saving you from having to rack the prisoners. Yes, I see.” Elsdon ran his hand over the iron, which was thin at one end, but gradually grew into a globular shape. At the other end of the instrument, a pair of long handles regulated by a notched bar allowed the instrument to be slowly opened. “What is this?” Elsdon asked.

The High Seeker stepped forward and slid his palm lightly over the surface of the cold metal, as a man might slide his hand along a cheek. “This,” he said, “is the Swelling Globe. It is no longer in use in most countries of the world, though it continues to be used in Vovim – this is a

Vovimian model.”

“The books you had me read say that the Vovimian torturers are the most barbaric men of that barbarian culture,” commented Elsdon.

The High Seeker’s gaze did not stray from the object he was stroking. “The books are right. If you want to know what Yclau’s dungeon was like in the years before the Code was compiled, you need only look to Vovim’s Hidden Dungeon. The Vovimians continue to practice methods of breaking that all civilized countries have abandoned.”

“How is the Swelling Globe used?”

For the first time, Layle looked over at Elsdon. His hand dropped from the metal. “It was used in the prisoners’ orifices,” he said coolly. “I will lend you a book that describes the exact nature of its use. Do you have any other questions while we are here?”

“Yes,” said Elsdon. “I’m wondering whether the question you were afraid I’d ask earlier was whether you ever take love-mates.”

His school days were not long over; he could still remember vividly the varied expressions on his schoolmasters’ faces when he would unexpectedly ask questions that would turn a class discussion upon its head. Some of his schoolmasters had been angry; others, for reasons he had not fully understood at the time, had been pleased. He now knew, as he had not known in those days, that this gift for being able to take other people by surprise was one of his qualifications for being a Seeker. Yet it was still startling to see Layle suddenly jerk his head away, and to know that he had succeeded in catching the High Seeker off-guard.

After a moment, the High Seeker said in a detached voice, “As I stated earlier, I do not consider it wise for a senior Seeker to enter into bonds with a Seeker he supervises.”

“But you supervise all of the Seekers – does that mean you never take a love-mate? Surely the Code doesn’t require the High Seeker to be celibate. If it did, then it would spell out so important a rule more clearly.”

He waited breathlessly for the next few moments, trying to read what he could from Layle’s rigid posture – the High Seeker’s face was still turned away. Then the High Seeker moved.

Not toward him; away from him, rounding the head of the rack so that he stood half-hidden by the opposite side of the table. When this was done, he turned his face back. His eyes were now as cool as they ever were, dark under the dim lamplight.

“It was a personal decision,” the High Seeker said impassively, “and as such is not a proper subject for conversation during my on-duty hours. Do you have any other questions? If not, then I must start my preparations for searching my prisoner tonight.”

His tone was dismissive. Elsdon felt desperation well within him, coalescing into a hardness inside his throat.

“Please,” he said, keeping his voice soft, “you must know why I’m asking this. Even if you don’t want— If you want me to go away, I will, but I need to know whether it bothers you. That I feel this way. If you think it’s wrong for me to feel this – if it’s a violation of my duty as a Seeker or as your friend – I could try to stop myself—”

He broke off. As he was speaking, he had taken a step toward the High Seeker, following Layle’s path over to the side of the rack. Now the High Seeker moved again, turning to round the corner at the foot of the rack, so that he remained half-hidden from Elsdon.

Elsdon possessed several qualities which qualified him to be a Seeker, but the most important was this: he could read words and gestures to understand what lay beneath them. He had not used that skill on all occasions in his life. His strong desire to please his father had blinded him, making him incapable of recognizing the truth about his father’s abusive nature. And there had been times – more times than Elsdon liked to think of – when his wild anger against a bully-boy blinded him to the boy’s better nature. But discernment was a skill that had served him well more than once in the schoolyard, and now, without warning, it came into play once more.

Few other men, had they been standing in that room, would have understood Layle’s withdrawal to be anything other than an indication that the High Seeker wished to remain distant. But Elsdon – his mind adding up the dim light, the height of the rack, and the height of the High Seeker – recognized what those other men would have missed.

His breath whistled in. The High Seeker stiffened yet further. Speaking softly, as though uttering sacred words, Elsdon said, “You want me.”

o—o—o

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THE AWAKENING

Excerpt from the first volume of the Dungeon Guards series

The breaking-cell corridor was chaos. Men dashed to and fro – not merely guards but also Seekers, who were famed among the world’s prison workers for their calm under crisis. Some of the guards, especially quick-witted, were ushering Seekers into breaking cells. Other guards dashed in the direction of the gunfire that was continuing in the hallway that held the Seekers’ cells. Barrett Boyd took a swift glance around the breaking-cell corridor, but no Seekers stood within reach . . . and in any case, it was far more important that he seek safety for the man running at his heels. Barrett jerked open the door of the closest breaking cell.

The cell was filled with blood.

Much of it lay in a pool near the door. It glistened under the electric lamp-light that had replaced the light from the old coal-furnace. Or so Barrett had been told; he had no memory of that transition, only an occasional, far-off image of flickering flames behind the glass blocks at the ends of the breaking cells. The light in this breaking cell seemed stark by comparison. It fell upon the blood, red and moist, and upon the prisoner who lay facedown upon it, the top of his head blown off.

There was more blood on the wall – too far away to come from the prisoner. Barrett wondered whether it belonged to a guard or to a Seeker.

“This way!” Clifford Crofford had made no attempt to follow Barrett into the breaking cell. He had already reached the crossroads of the inner dungeon, where the breaking-cell corridor met the narrow cross-passage leading to the outer dungeon . . . and before that, to the hallway where the Seekers’ living cells continued to endure gunfire.

Barrett slammed the breaking-cell door shut and raced to join Clifford. The breaking-cell corridor was nearly empty now, efficiently cleared of its Seekers by the guards who were trained to protect the torturers who questioned prisoners in the Eternal Dungeon. Though not all of the Seekers were torturers now, Barrett reminded himself as he reached Clifford. He was feeling within himself the usual conflict of duties. Should he protect the Seekers, or should he join in killing the men who had stained their hands with prisoners’ blood?

As he reached Clifford, Barrett took a quick look down the narrow cross-passage to the outer dungeon. All that he could see were the Codifier’s four guards, armed with revolvers, clustered in front of the exit door. The Codifier’s guards were evidently intent on keeping the dungeon’s invaders from reaching the outer dungeon where both male and female laborers worked, and where a few children of senior-ranked guards lived.

Barrett thought fleetingly of Mr. Sobel, married with four young children. Then he wondered what had happened to the Codifier. And then Barrett and Clifford were past the most dangerous point of their journey and had reached the shadowy portion of the breaking-cell corridor that led to the crematorium.

The crematorium was a death trap; Barrett knew that without having to think about it. It held three entrances, but two of those entrances were kept locked at this time of night. The third – the great doors that Clifford and Barrett were approaching, of ceremonial height – could not be locked. Anyone who entered the crematorium would be easy prey for the shooters.

Seemingly Clifford had reached the same conclusion, for he grabbed the handle of the nearest door in the corridor. It opened to his touch, although these rooms were supposed to be kept locked at all times, even – or rather, especially – when they were in use.

Barrett followed Clifford's hasty retreat into the room . . . and then his eyes were blinded.

He shielded his face at once with his arm, but the light had been too bright; his eyes could see nothing. His arm was bare; he had been in the guardroom when the crisis began, naked as a newborn babe, just emerged from the showers in the guards' washroom. All he had on now was a pair of his off-duty trousers, hastily pulled on; his chest and feet were bare.

A key scraped metal as Clifford locked the door – which was odd, since Clifford shouldn't have a key to this place. There was no bar to pull down, but the doors of these rooms were somewhat more secure than the doors of the breaking cells. The breaking-cell doors opened outwards, but the rack-room doors opened inwards, since it was assumed that the only men using the doors would be Seekers or guards or the occasional outer-dungeon laborer, come to clean up the room's sweat and urine and blood.

Barrett could smell the sweat now; by that alone, he would have known that this room was in use, even without the light. Beside him, Clifford was saying, "I think that will hold, at least for a while. The doors are iron, so— Sir, what's wrong?"

Clifford was evidently treating this as a work situation, which was reassuring. Forcing himself to breathe evenly, Barrett said, "Prisoner."

Clifford gasped. Cautiously, Barrett lowered his arm. The light was still there, but now that he knew of its presence, it was bearable.

From where he stood, next to the door, Barrett could barely see the prisoner. The great wheel of the rack, nearly as high as a man, obscured most of the prisoner's body. Through the spokes of the wheel could be seen a bit of straw-colored hair, while just on the edge of the wheel, bound in chains and leather, lay a hand, very pale.

All of the prisoner was bathed in light. Barrett glanced at Clifford, knowing that Clifford's view of the prisoner was very different.

Clifford, who had never before entered one of the rack rooms when it was in use, had turned very pale. He had worked in the Eternal Dungeon for many years and knew very well what took place in these rooms; indeed, he had guarded the doors while the Seekers did their work. But knowing that prisoners were racked was a very different thing from seeing one racked.

"Should we let him go?" asked Barrett aloud. He wondered, indeed, whether the prisoner was dead; the still figure on the rack had made no sound.

Clifford – used to having Barrett turn to him for questions like this – made no reply to Barrett's enquiry; his throat was throbbing. "Oh, sweet blood," he whispered after a moment.

This was odd. Clifford hated torture as vehemently as Barrett, but he was in no way squeamish. Squeamish guards never lasted out their training period in the Eternal Dungeon. Barrett stared at him, curious, faintly aware of shouts in the distance.

Clifford shook his head, as though awakening from a nightmare. "It's Rupert Raupp," he whispered.

The name meant nothing to Barrett. Names usually didn't. "You know him?"

Clifford nodded. He was hugging himself now, as though he were a small child rather than a much-decorated guard in the Eternal Dungeon. "I used to work with him," he whispered.

Which meant that the prisoner must have worked in the Eternal Dungeon at one time; Clifford had never held any job except here, Barrett knew. Yet more curious, Barrett asked, "Did I?"

"For two years." The voice, faint but firm, came from the rack; the accent was mid-class. "I was junior guard under you for part of the time you were senior day guard to Weldon Chapman."

Barrett stepped closer to look. Within the cocoon of light lay the prisoner, stretched upon the rack. His shirt and trousers were black with sweat, but there was no blood. There rarely was, Barrett had been told; the racks were designed to frighten rather than maim. Barrett had often wondered whether, if he delved far enough back, he would remember whether this was true.

He ran his hand lightly upon the iron bed of the rack. The touch brought back no memories. It was hard to believe there had been a time when he had stood at that wheel, turning it as prisoners screamed in agony. This particular prisoner appeared in no hurry to scream, though he

was breathing rapidly, and his face was shining with sweat.

“Guard?” said Barrett. His language had shortened, as it invariably did when he was in the presence of other guards and Seekers. Only a handful of men working in the inner dungeon could be trusted.

“Till I was dismissed.” The prisoner’s voice was very level, despite his evident pain. “By the High Seeker, in the eighth month of the year 360.”

Shortly before Barrett’s own punishment, then. This must be one of the guards who had been swept up by Layle Smith’s determined purge of rebellious dungeon-workers, back in the crisis of 360. Barrett wondered what Mr. Raupp had done to attract the High Seeker’s wrath.

Whatever Mr. Raupp had done in 360, the High Seeker was evidently not through with him. Barrett took a more careful look at the prisoner, his eyes adjusting to the dim light. “Murder?” he asked politely. “Or rape?”

Mr. Raupp was not afforded the chance to describe the charges against him, for at that moment, Clifford called low, “Sir! The gunfire has stopped!”

He looked back at Clifford. The junior guard was swathed in his own light. Only recently had Barrett realized that the light was evidence of his love for Clifford. It was still a strange revelation to him. Until he met Clifford – or rather, until he took notice of the guard who had been desperately trying to attract his attention for three years – he had thought that nobody in this world mattered except the prisoners.

It had been a severely limited perspective on the world; he knew that now. That being the case, Barrett spared a thought for the Seekers. There was no knowing how many of them had been in their so-called living cells when the gunmen burst into the Eternal Dungeon. Some would still have been sleeping; Barrett had come on duty early. The remaining Seekers would have been scattered in various portions of the dungeon: in the breaking cells, in the rack rooms, in the entry hall . . . perhaps a handful in the common room or the crematorium or the healer’s surgery. Some might even have been in the outer dungeon or in the judging rooms in the palace above; those Seekers were presumably safe from the gunmen.

Though there was no way to know what was going on in the palace, Barrett reminded himself as he returned to Clifford’s side. This might be a general attack on all who worked for the Queen.

“How did they get in?” he asked Clifford.

The junior guard shook his head rapidly. He was dressed in his uniform; like Barrett, he had evidently intended to arrive for duty early, but he kept his uniform in the outer-dungeon apartment where he lived. “I don’t know. I was just entering the inner dungeon when the Codifier’s guards reached that entrance. They were about to thrust me back into the

outer dungeon, but Mr. Sobel appeared and grabbed me. He had a gun in his hand. He asked me where you were. I told him I didn't know. He gave me his extra key to the rack rooms and ordered me to find you and to come here. He said he'd come for us."

To kill them? Barrett contemplated that possibility. In the midst of so much bloodshed, it would be easy enough for the High Seeker's senior-most guard to shoot Barrett and Clifford and any of the other guards and Seekers who had recently raised a rebellion against the use of torture in the Eternal Dungeon. The High Seeker had seemed mild-mannered when Barrett spoke with him privately two nights before, but Layle Smith frequently seemed mild-mannered. Killers often were.

"Gun?" He fastened on that image.

Clifford gulped air, the first sign he had shown that he was struggling for composure. "He has special permission to use a gun in the dungeon, if it's necessary in order to protect the High Seeker."

Whereas the remainder of the Seekers' guards, working in a cramped dungeon where it was too easy for bullets to ricochet, were bereft of all weaponry except daggers and whips. And neither Barrett nor Clifford were armed with even that, Barrett was acutely aware.

"There's only him and the Codifier's guards," said Clifford, misery permeating his voice. "They're the only ones with revolvers. The guards at the main gates have rifles, but if the gunmen killed them—"

Barrett held up his hand. A moment later, Clifford's face changed. He too had heard the approaching men.

There were voices and bangs on a nearby door, and then more gunfire, followed immediately by a scream. Barrett found himself wondering whether the gunmen had sighted one of the guards, or whether they had managed to shoot their way past the locks on the iron doors of the breaking cells. Without thinking further about it, he pointed silently. Clifford hesitated only a moment before obeying his order, sliding under the rack. The room was dark, and the shadows under the rack were darker still; Clifford could not be easily seen now, with the great wheel blocking view of him.

More gunshots. There were no accompanying screams, which was reassuring. Barrett stepped toward the prisoner. The man was showing admirable restraint; he had said not a word since introducing himself, though his tendons were taut from the stretching, and sweat poured from his forehead.

Barrett's instinct was to let the prisoner free. That was always his instinct. But he had learned, through hard experience, that this particular instinct was not to be trusted. He had helped a prisoner to escape from a

Seeker once, believing the prisoner's story that the Seeker had raped him. Only afterwards had he realized that the prisoner was a dangerous criminal, skilled in deceit. This prisoner might be the same.

And right now, he might be contemplating ways to kill Barrett and Clifford. Barrett's hand moved to his trousers pocket.

The prisoner, Mr. Raupp, looked at what lay in Barrett's hand, and then said, in the same even voice as before, "May I have a drink of water first?"

Barrett shook his head. The *Code of Seeking*, which bound even ruthless torturers such as the High Seeker, required that racked prisoners be given water when they required it, but there was no time for that now. The gunmen were coming closer.

Barrett stuffed the handkerchief into Mr. Raupp's mouth.

The prisoner's eyes teared immediately from the thrust of cloth, but Mr. Raupp made no attempt to evade the gag. He simply looked up at Barrett, like a magistrate sitting in judgment upon a perpetrator.

Feeling sick, Barrett turned away. He reminded himself that he might be protecting Mr. Raupp as much as Clifford. The gunmen had killed the prisoner in the breaking cell. There was no way to predict how many men in this room the gunmen would kill, if they knew that the room was inhabited.

Barrett moved into the corner, behind the door. This too was instinct. Apparently he had done this before, at least once in his life. He wondered whether it was during his time as a guard, or whether instead he had been hunted during the army career he had not known he possessed till Clifford had happened to mention it, three nights before. It was mildly inconvenient, at times, having a memory that stretched no further back than four years.

But his instincts as a guard and a soldier stretched back further than that. He waited, heart pounding, as the men reached the door.

There were yet more shots; one of the shots caused their door to vibrate. Someone shouted, "Don't waste bullets, fool!"

"Aye, and how are we to get in, then, tell me that?" replied the gunman.

"Leader will have a plan. Leader always does, aye? Let's go check that guard's body. Maybe there's keys."

The gunmen moved off. Barrett felt his fists loosen. His mind was moving rapidly forth from what he had heard.

Commoners. He was not really surprised; if there were any men in the queendom who were likely to attack the Eternal Dungeon, it was commoners. Far too many commoners had screamed with agony in the breaking cells and rack rooms of this royal prison. Some were now ashes, buried in the communal pit in the crematorium, condemned to execution

through judging-room testimony provided by the Seekers who had broken them. There must be hundreds of commoners alive, maybe thousands, whose kinsmen and kinswomen had suffered in this dungeon. Reason enough for a group of armed commoners to attack the Eternal Dungeon.

But were they just a random group of commoners, banded together? “Leader” suggested organization and planning. Which meant . . .

“The Commoners’ Guild?” It was Clifford, whispering from under the rack.

Barrett shrugged. There was no way to know. It made a difference, though. If a hastily formed group of commoners had attacked the Eternal Dungeon, then sooner or later such amateurish attackers would be subdued, if not by the dungeon guards who were ill-prepared to fight invaders with guns, then by the Queen’s guards in the palace above. The only wonder was that the Queen’s guards hadn’t already arrived, bearing their bayoneted rifles.

Unless . . . unless the Eternal Dungeon was not alone in being attacked. Unless the Commoners’ Guild, with its thousands of members and years’ worth of experience in fighting elite men and women, had made its canny plans for months on end before attacking the palace, intent on killing the Queen and all who worked for her.

Barrett felt indignation swell in him. Which was a surprise; he had not known that he possessed such loyalty to the Throne. His past was always surprising him.

“Sir,” said Clifford breathlessly, “if it’s the Commoners’ Guild . . . We may be alone. We may have to fight the gunmen ourselves. And if we do—”

Barrett held up his hand in a sharp gesture. Clifford fell silent. A moment later the footsteps were clear. They were rapid. The door rattled. Barrett squeezed himself back into the corner.

Then came the sound of metal against metal. A key in the lock.

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MERCY'S PRISONER

Excerpt from the first volume of the Life Prison series

From that point on, we played dice every evening. After the first day, our stakes were hard candies supplied by Thomas. If I won, I kept all the candies, while if Thomas won, I kept all the candies. It was that sort of game.

I made sure he won at least half the time, though; I wanted to keep his temper sweet. It wasn't hard. If I'd tried to strangle him, I suspect that he would have appeared at my doorway with an apology for failing his duty as my guard. I should have had utter contempt for his softness, but something about the way his eyes turned cool when I took an occasional misstep warned me that I ought not to hurry my conclusions about him.

After the first day, the subject of his father didn't come up, and I cursed myself for missed opportunities. I tried making general enquiries about his family, but to no avail. From the gossip of the other guards, I heard tales about Thomas's fiancée, whose primary virtue appeared to be that she would beat him bloody if he so much as turned his eyes in lust toward another human being.

Thomas never spoke of her to me. Instead, we discussed philosophy.

"It's like in music," he said. "There are strict rules determining which notes sound beautiful together."

"I heard a foreign band once that didn't adhere to any rules about beautiful notes," I replied.

He shrugged. "Maybe you just didn't know their rules well enough. The rules don't have to be the same everywhere. But there has to be *some* sort of regulation, some sort of boundary, or there's no beauty."

I shook my head as I passed him the dice. "Beauty's in freedom, not in prison walls. Listen: Who are the happiest men in Mercy? The guards, because they have no rules to adhere to except that they should keep us imprisoned. The rest of us have the rules – we're the miserable ones."

He sighed as he watched the dice tumble. "If you make a rule that random notes are beautiful, that won't make the notes any more beautiful. Rules have to make sense. When they make sense, the results are more beautiful than a lack of rules."

He was filled with pretty nonsense like that. I listened to it just as much as was necessary to keep the conversation going. My own thoughts were on how to break beyond the boundaries imposed upon me so I could regain my freedom, and my nights were filled, more than ever, with thoughts of Sharon. I would wake each morning with a sigh of happiness. "Beautiful

boundaries,” my ass. If Thomas had known what it was like on that day of freedom . . .

All this time he was taking care to keep his distance from me. I began to suspect that this was as much courtesy to me as it was security to himself. Though he never said so explicitly, it was clear from all his talk of boundaries what he thought of the other guards’ behavior toward their charges. I asked him once, when I had gotten to know him well enough to ask such questions, how he got along with the other guards.

“Well enough,” was his surprising answer. “They think I’m eccentric, of course, but I don’t try to suggest that my way is better than theirs, so we get along fine.”

This would have given me pause for thought, if I’d been in any mood to pause. But the more I got to know the young man, the more sure I was of the success of my plan, and the more impatient I was to put it in action. The trouble was how to do so without making him unduly wary.

I was unable to take my first steps until the morning he arrived at my cell wearing cool eyes.

At first I was afraid the cause was me. It was the beginning of the day, but I had been awake since well before lamp-lighting, having been woken by screams in another cell. I found this irritating, as I’d long since trained myself to ignore such routine noises. Now I was curled up on the bed-shelf with a book, a gift from Thomas. The only things more boring to me than walls are books, but I hadn’t told him this, naturally, and I was in the habit of bringing out the book during the minutes before I expected him to arrive each day.

Catching sight of Thomas’s eyes, I slowly uncurled myself, my body tingling in preparation for whatever punishment I was about to receive. It would be an unjust punishment, of course, but I was used to those.

But all he said was, “I can’t stay for long. There’s a meeting of the guards this morning.”

“What sort of meeting?” I asked, not really caring.

He had already turned away, though, and was kneeling next to my blankets. “They still haven’t delivered the third blanket. I’ll have to get it from supply myself. Nothing works in this prison the way it should—” His voice broke off abruptly. From where I sat, facing his back, I could see the trembling along his shoulder-line.

Someone once said to me, “Don’t stand useless! *Do something!*” Well, all my attempts at doing since that day had ended in disaster; I had long since adopted the philosophy that it is better to stand back and let matters take whatever course they will. So it could only have been unusual curiosity on my part that prompted me to rise from the bed-shelf and walk

toward Thomas.

I was still three steps behind him and just starting to put my hand forward when he rose and whirled, faster than a whip. The dagger was in his hand before he had risen. It was the first time since my flogging that I'd truly seen him at work, and if I'd had any doubts about where he received his training, they were erased in that moment.

It unnerved me, so naturally I reacted with a snarl. "Put that bloody blade away before you hurt yourself, calf-boy. Do you think I have nothing better to do this morning than face the leaded whip for trying to strangle you?"

"I'm sorry." The dagger was already in its sheath before I'd had time to speak. "I'm not at my best today."

"So it would seem." I was tempted to let the matter die there – I'd lost whatever dribble of curiosity had driven me forward – but I couldn't think of any way to step back without looking nervous, so I said, "What's wrong with you anyway? You're acting like a jittery three-year-old."

For a moment he didn't reply; then he said softly, "Sedgewick found Harrow in bed with Dorn this morning."

"*What?*" This was news of the decade. Harrow was the older prisoner whom Dorn had been whipped for defending. Love affairs between prisoners were an old tale, but until now, the most that any pair not cellmated had managed to accomplish was a two-minute coupling in the kitchen when a guard stepped away from supervising the workers. That coupling had taken place in front of a dozen prisoners; the desperate yearning of prisoner love-mates was well known.

"How did Harrow manage that?" I asked, my curiosity returned.

"They haven't figure out yet; that's what the meeting's about. There will probably be new customs instituted that may affect you. . . ." His voice trailed off. It was clear that, for once, his mind was not on me.

"What of Harrow and Dorn?" I asked, giving him the lead he wanted.

All at once the chill was back in his eyes, and when he spoke, his voice was colorless. "They have already received part of their punishment. Harrow was forced to watch while Sedgewick raped Dorn. Then Harrow's guard put his whip to Harrow while Sedgewick told Dorn, at every stroke, that it was all his fault. Harrow made hardly a sound, I'm told, but Dorn was screaming by the end. They've put Harrow down on the first level, where he'll stay for a week; then he's to be transferred to the third level."

He recited this tale without any shock in his voice – and indeed, I could have told him several dozen variations upon it. So I jerked with surprise in the next moment when he suddenly said, with the ferocity of a snake striking, "It's not *right*."

“Right?” I gave a dry laugh. “Who’s to say what’s right or wrong in a prison with no boundaries?”

“Oh, there are boundaries all right.” He pointed at my blanket, taking on suddenly the voice of the supply master. “No, Merrick can’t be given a third blanket; he was given three blankets upon arrival. Yes, some prisoners give back their third blanket, but Merrick can’t have any of their blankets; he was given three blankets upon arrival. No, you can’t buy Merrick a blanket; he was given three blankets upon arrival. . . .’ If they can come up with such blastedly rigid regulations for counting blankets, why can’t they bind the guards to make them treat the prisoners like human beings rather than cattle?”

“My father’s a cattle farmer,” I replied. “I envy his beasts.”

“Then you see what I mean.” He was pacing back and forth along the edge of the cell now, like a newbie prisoner. “There are customs for everything in this prison: when the lamps should be lit and dimmed, what sort of shifts the prisoners should be given, what sort of luxuries the prisoners should be permitted, and so on. If we can decide that prisoners should be permitted fruit no more than four times a year, why shouldn’t we decide that guards should not be allowed to ill-treat their prisoners?”

“Well,” I said, “have you tried suggesting this to your father?”

He stopped in midstride and looked back at me. I waited, my body tingling in anticipation of his reply.

“Tom!” From behind us, Oslo clanged his dagger against the bars of my door as he passed. “Give your love-mate a goodbye kiss and hurry your body. The meeting’s about to start.”

“Thanks, Oslo.” Thomas turned, and I stepped back to give him room to unlock the outer door.

“Your love-mate?” I said as Oslo greeted Sedgewick cheerfully nearby. Sedgewick grunted in reply. “Is that what the guards call me now?”

He shrugged. “They can’t think of any other explanation for why I treat you as I do. Simple humanity doesn’t seem motive enough.”

“No,” I said softly as he stepped away. “It doesn’t, does it?”

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WHIPSTER

Excerpt from the first volume of the Michael's House series

“Psychology?” said Janus, running his tongue over the unfamiliar Yclau word. “And that’s why you went to the mind healer?”

Archy nodded as he leaned back in his chair. He was now sipping the coffee he had scorned earlier. “Some of these mind healers specialize in sexual disorders. I’ll admit I was nervous on my first visit. I was afraid that the healer would try to turn me into the model husband that my mother wanted me to be. But the man I went to said it was quite natural that I wouldn’t want to confine my attraction to one sex alone, and so he set about helping me to recover my sexual leanings to what they had been before my mother twisted me. And I succeeded,” he added with a certain smugness.

“We’d gathered that,” replied Janus dryly. “Archy, about your latest account—”

But Michael unexpectedly interrupted. “So the mind healers are able to expand people? Do they only expand men’s feelings toward other men, or can they expand people in other ways?”

There was a pause as Archy peered over his cup at Michael. Then the player said cheerfully, “Oh, I believe they work with patients who have a variety of sexual dysfunctions. Actually, a few mind healers work in this city and in the nearby provincial towns. They were trained in Yclau, but they’ve tried to integrate their Yclau training with this kingdom’s native traditions in medicine.”

“I imagine,” said Janus, “that they’re expensive.” He was fingering his empty bill holder again.

“Well, yes, under ordinary circumstances. But I tell you what I have in mind. There’s a healer in this city that my old healer recommended to me when I first moved here, in case I should need any additional help while living in Vovim. You go to him and tell him to send the account to me. What he’ll actually do, if experience tells me anything, is send the account to my mother, who will pay it and then rain down upon me a series of missives telling me how I’m driving her to ruin with my immoral ways, and how I ought to come home where she can keep an eye on me and find a nice, high-ranked woman for me to marry. And in exchange for that extended headache . . . Well, I’ll find a way in which you can pay back your debt to me.” He smiled at Michael.

Janus, envisioning another long, unpaid account, looked quickly over at Michael, only to find that Michael was looking at him. A pause ensued, during which Janus was able to hear the nearby traffic, overlaid by the singing of birds in the garden trees. Then Janus said, "We'll have to think about it."

Archy sighed in an overly dramatic manner as he rose to his feet. "Janus, you two are like conjoined twins. I can never get an answer from Michael without him consulting you first. Well, I should be returning to work. Let me just settle with our hostess." He turned back toward the lunch-room.

"Michael," Janus said softly as the player stepped away, "why do you want to—"

But Michael was paying no heed to him. Following Michael's gaze, Janus saw that his friend was looking at the thick clump of elderberry bushes nearby. A moment later, a man stepped out of the bushes.

Janus tensed. From the state of the man's clothes, it appeared that he had entered the garden by climbing over its wall, and from the state of his appearance, it was clear that he had no business here. His hair was matted and his beard was long and straggly; the palms of his hands were cracked, and he had dirt under his fingernails. He was stripped down to his shirt and trousers, like a dockyard laborer, and he had no shoes.

The man approached the nearest table. The woman there shrank back, and the man at the table said something in a furious tone. The half-dressed man did not respond; he merely made his way to the second couple. This couple listened to what he had to say, but they shook their heads and turned back to their conversation. The intruder made his way to the third table and stood looking down at Michael and Janus.

"Money for the deserving poor, sirs," he said; lacking a cap, he held out his hand. He spat the words, as though they were an insult, and his angry eyes suggested that any gift from them would be ill-received.

Janus remembered the days when, meeting a beggar, he would readily drop a coin in the man's cap. Those days were gone, partly because he had discovered that the city was filled with thousands of homeless beggars, and mainly because he and Michael were busy rescuing some of the youthful beggars from the streets and giving them a home. Janus and Michael could not afford to give money to strangers when they could barely feed their own boys.

Janus had opened his mouth to explain this when Michael, in a swift gesture, brought out his bill holder and proceeded to dump the contents on the table, within reach of the beggar.

Janus was startled out of speech. The beggar stared at the pile of bills,

then raised his eyes to look at Michael. His expression held something between bewilderment and suspicion.

Michael was in the process of returning his bill holder to his jacket pocket. "Rovner's?" he asked in a conversational manner. "Or Levitt's?"

There was a moment's silence as the beggar's gaze drifted slowly over Michael's white suit. Then he said, in the same hoarse voice with which he had spoken before, "McCormick's. And you?"

Janus had recovered his power of speech, but he found he could not say anything. He had finally taken in the fact that the beggar before them, with his cracked skin and gnarled beard, was no older than Michael or himself. Twenty-two? Twenty-three? The young man looked as though he had been living on the streets for years.

"Outram's," Michael replied. "But I had luck in my path." He pointed his thumb at Janus.

The beggar's gaze drifted over to Janus, and then to the gold-tipped walking stick leaning against Janus's chair. "Aye," said the young man in a dull voice. "That's how I should have done it. Found myself a patron to take care of me after." Then he scooped up the bills. Before Janus could recover himself to correct the misapprehension, the beggar turned and walked away, his left foot limping.

"Michael," Janus whispered as he leaned forward, "that's all the money we have in the world! How are we to pay for food for the rest of the month?"

Michael said nothing. His gaze had not wavered from the ex-prostitute since the young man had left the table. Turning to look, Janus caught a final glimpse of the beggar's eyes before the young man disappeared back into the bushes.

Then he understood. Angry eyes. Hasan's eyes, as Janus had last seen them.

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MASTER AND SERVANT

Excerpt from the first volume of the Waterman series

The ocean steamer gave a deep whistle of farewell as a group of small boys – too small for service – laughed and chased a taxicab that was putting its way down the street next to the harbor of Solomons Island. The driver of the motorcar, his face dirty with the sooted steam from his engine, thumbed his nose at the boys, but the master sitting behind him, stiff with dignity, took no notice of the boys. The motorcar paused in front of the Bureau, and the cab-driver leapt out to open the 'car door for the master. Back at the far end of the street, closer to the steamboat wharf, another group of boys splashed pump-water on one another as old men – too old for service – whittled and gossiped on a bench.

“M Carruthers,” Carr repeated when the visitor asked.

The visitor's eyebrows went up. “So your first name really is ‘M’?”

Carr nodded as he stepped out of the way of a nurse with a pram. The nurse, not surprisingly, gave him a puzzled look before lowering her gaze. Carr explained to the visitor as the two of them continued to walk down the dirt road, “There's a law here in the Dozen Landsteads that your title initial has to be part of your official name. My parents hate that law, so they made my first name ‘M’ in order to get around the law.”

The visitor laughed as they approached the gold-domed bank of the Second Landstead's capital, which had a plaque outside proclaiming that it would remain open until midnight every day in the high holiday season between the Masters' Spring Festival and the final day of Spring Manhood. “I like your parents already. They sound like troublemakers.”

From the tone of the visitor's voice, it was clear that he considered “troublemaker” to be the highest paean. Carr glanced over at him. Although the last days of frost continued to cling to the Second Landstead, the visitor had peeled off his cloak. Underneath was a plain tunic such as Brun himself might have worn in the middle tri-centuries, but in a startling shade of neon yellow, as though the visitor were a perambulating advertisement.

“And how do you wish to be addressed, sir?” Carr asked. Even though he had already marked the visitor as a master on the young man's official papers, the “sir” came out more as a question than as a mode of address.

The visitor flashed him a smile. “I'm Jesse. Just Jesse. No title, and nobody uses my last name except people who don't like me. What do people call you – Emmy?”

Carr winced. “I'm called Carruthers by the other lads in school. My friends call me Carr.”

“Glad to meet you, Carruthers.” In the first note of politeness he had shown, Jesse extended his arm. Carr reached out to shake it, but for some reason, Jesse grabbed his hand and shook that instead.

“So this is the Dozen Landsteads,” Jesse said, turning his head to look at an oyster shed next to the harbor, where servant-women were queuing up to buy their family’s meals.

“The Second Landstead,” Carr replied. Then, as Jesse raised his eyebrows again, Carr explained, “Each of the landsteads has its own House of Government, its own culture, its own geographical features. All of the landsteads are located next to the Bay, though. Most of our nation’s income comes from shipping or fishing or other water-related occupations.”

He felt as pedantic as his old tutor, and from Jesse’s grin, Carr suspected that he sounded that way as well. “Is the Bay where your family’s income comes from?” Jesse asked.

Carr shook his head wordlessly. They were passing the Bureau now, with its long line of unemployed – or unemployable – servants. Some of them looked as though they had been standing there for months. Others, presumably possessing the proper letters of recommendation, were being ushered inside with alacrity.

Jesse pointed his thumb. “What’s that? A charity drive?”

Carr stared at him a moment before he could be sure that Jesse was not joking. Then he said, “The Bureau of Employment. That’s where servants go if they want their certificate of employment sold to a new employer.”

“Sold, huh?” Jesse twisted his head to look back. “How much money do the servants make from the selling?”

“Nothing.” Carr had to clear his throat. “Aside from the cut that the Bureau receives, the previous employer gets all the money from the transaction.”

“Fucking hell!” Jesse’s expletive was unexpected, explosive, and unfortunately loud. A first-ranked mistress, walking hand in hand with her young children, stared at him with a scandalized expression, then lowered her gaze to his wrist, obviously trying to ascertain what mark he wore. Carr carefully tipped his border-guard cap at her so that she could see the mark on his own wrist. Her mouth tightened as she glanced again at Jesse, but she nodded her greeting to Carr and hurried past.

Jesse had seemingly not noticed any of this; he was awaiting an answer. Carr said feebly, feeling that his uncle should be here to respond to such remarks, “The fee is supposed to give masters incentive to write good recommendations for their former servants.”

“And not make the servants feel like chattel, huh?” Shaking his head,

Jesse snorted. “Gods damn it, I thought you Landsteaders claimed to have abolished slavery four centuries ago.”

Carr paused, not so much because it was hard to answer the question – indeed, he could have answered the question by rote from the time he was two – but because he was having a hard time making sense of Jesse’s pattern of speech. It wasn’t simply that Jesse kept tossing in slang that Carr was unfamiliar with. It was that he mixed expletives from different nations so freely. The Yclau – Carr knew from having met a few low-born Yclau who swore – would use Landsteader profanity such as “fucking,” but “damn” and “hell” were Vovimian epithets, and why in the world would someone who was Yclau swear to gods?

“Are you from the First Landstead?” he asked cautiously. For all he knew, Vovimians might be swarming in that landstead.

From the dark look Jesse gave him, Carr gathered that the other young man thought he was avoiding the real issue. But Jesse answered readily enough, “Nope. Never been there. Never even been on this continent before.”

“But—” Carr glanced down at Jesse’s bag, which Jesse had insisted on carrying himself, and where the passage-of-port was now placed, within the secret compartment.

Jesse laughed. “Did you think I was Yclau? I’m a colonial.”

“Oh!” Enlightenment dawned, and Carr gave Jesse’s garish tunic a more careful look.

He had never before met one of the citizens of Yclau’s many overseas colonies; since those colonies lay so far over the ocean, colonials usually travelled to this continent by rocket, which meant that they landed in Yclau or Vovim. They would not land in the Dozen Landsteads, whose airports were only designed for short-travel dirigibles.

Well, now Carr understood why Jesse spoke such a peculiarly accented form of what the rest of the world persisted in terming “the Yclau language,” though the Landsteaders, with greater justice, called it the Landstead tongue.

“Which colony?” he asked cautiously, trying to remember his world geography.

“Oh, I’m from Tenarus, originally. Heard of it?”

“No,” Carr replied truthfully.

“Didn’t think you would have. What’s that over there?”

Carr looked at where he was pointing. They had reached the place in the road where they could see the waters of the Patuxent River, which divided the Second Landstead from its western neighbor, the First Landstead. A longboat carrying stacks of cordwood passed an empty shad-

galley, whose journeyman master called the time of the strokes to the rowing watermen. The boat-masters of the two vessels exchanged shouts of greeting.

Beyond the river – or rather, straight down the middle of it – stood the high wall which constituted the border between the First and Second Landsteads. The only break in the wall came where the Celadon-Brun Memorial Bridge travelled through a small gap. From where Carr stood, he could see the formidably large building that housed the Second Landstead's bridge border guards, who were charged with preventing dangers from entering the Second Landstead – and more importantly, with preventing valuables from leaving the Second Landstead.

“That's the border between the Second Landstead and the First Landstead,” Carr replied.

“Huh.” Jesse craned his head to look up toward the top of the cement wall, which was crowned with barbed wire. “You guys sure don't like each other, do you?”

“The wall is ours.”

He thought he had succeeded in keeping his tone reasonably level, but Jesse turned his head immediately, saying, “Your hatred isn't mutual, then? Have you ever visited enemy territory?” He waved his hand toward the wall.

Carr frowned. “We're not at war with the First Landstead. We simply restrict travel and imports from the neighboring nations – all of them, not just the First Landstead – in order to preserve our culture.”

Jesse pondered this for a minute. “Okay, I don't get the ‘neighboring nations’ bit – we're talking about another landstead, right? – but I get that you guys are isolationists. So you haven't visited the First Landstead?”

“No,” replied Carr, frowning with puzzlement now. “I could do so with permission of my liege-master, but I've never seen the need.”

Jesse raised his eyebrows. “How fucking feudal of you. Is that why you don't get along with the First Landstead? Because you guys are so old-fashioned that you have steam-cars and liegemen?”

Now it was Carr's turn to raise his eyebrows. “The First Landstead still adheres to the master/liegeman/servant system of social order. I would have thought even a colonial would know that.”

“Why should I?” asked Jesse cheerfully. “It's part of the Dozen Landsteads.”

Carr halted. They were standing now on the road that led to the short bridge to the mainland, where the masters' district of the Second Landstead's capital was located. There stood the Second Landstead's House of Government, which was still located, after many tri-centuries, on

the southeastern tip of the Second Landstead. Its location, far from most of the other Houses of Government within the Dozen Landsteads, served to keep the Second Landstead from quarrelling often with anyone except its closest neighbor, the Third Landstead.

Carr said slowly, "The First Landstead broke away from the remainder of the Dozen Landsteads over seven tri-centuries ago. It became the original territory of what developed into the Queendom of Yclau. It didn't declare its independence from that nation until half a tri-decade ago, and none of the upper landsteads have permitted it to rejoin the Alliance of the Dozen Landsteads." He narrowed his eyes as he tried to read Jesse's expression. "Didn't you know any of this?"

"I must have fallen asleep during history class at school," Jesse replied cheerfully. "Say, listen, is your house within walking distance?"

Carr gave him a long look before saying, "Not for two masters."

For some reason this statement, unlike Carr's comment about Jesse's ignorance, caused the young man to flush. Mentally classifying Jesse in the category of "Privileged foreigner who doesn't like to be reminded he is privileged," Carr turned toward the harbor.

As usual, Solomons Island Harbor was clustered with dozens of workboats that carried men unloading shipments or seeking repairs. No doubt any of the watermen there would have been willing to take Carr home. On any other day, he would simply have walked up to a random boat, introduced himself, and allowed himself to be chauffeured to his House.

He was suddenly conscious, though, of what the young man next to him would think if he took up the time of working watermen. He hesitated, uncertain what to do; then, to his relief, he saw the solution.

He hailed the open-hooded cab that was now headed away from the Bureau of Employment, but which screeched to a halt the moment that the driver saw his green tattoo. Carr held the door open to let Jesse scramble up into the cab; then he waved back the driver, who had been about to get out to hold the door open for Carr. "House of His Master's Kindness," he said as he climbed into the velvet-upholstered seat next to Jesse.

"Right you are, master." The driver leaned over to plug the appropriate numbers into the taximeter. "Will you be placing this ride on your House's account?" Not surprisingly, he made the suggestion in an unenthusiastic manner; the mansion of Carr's House lay five miles into the countryside, and some of the first-ranked masters and mistresses had a habit of bilking payment to cab-servants, since they could easily hire a different driver's cab the next time they needed one.

Carr pulled out his wallet and extracted the appropriate amount, then

added a generous tip. The driver took the bills with a smile and a salute. "Thanks, master. Can I get you and your companion something to drink?" As he spoke, he reached over to the passenger side of the front seat and pulled out the serving tray holding wine bottles.

"Nothing for me, thank you. Jesse?" He turned his attention to the other young man, who, he found, was opening his own wallet. "I'm paying for the ride," Carr told him hastily. "I'd be going this way in any case."

"Damn right you're paying for the ride; I don't have that type of money. —Here." He offered the driver a bill. "Have a drink on me."

The driver gave a surprised look at Jesse, glanced at his blank wrist, and cast a wary look at Carr. Carr nodded.

"Thank you, sir, master." The driver nodded at Jesse and Carr respectively before pushing the drinks tray back into hiding. "I'll have my drink after I've finished work. Don't want to get into trouble with my master — much less be stopped by a policeman and have my certificate of employment taken away." He pushed on the pedal, and the engine spit out steam.

In an open-hooded cab, with the engine hissing and the wind whistling, it was impossible to talk, but Jesse seemed disinclined to converse in any case, keeping his attention focussed on the street, where little servant girls and boys played at the waterside. Carr wrapped his scarf across the lower half of his face in order to protect himself from the steam and the breeze; the driver, cheerful from the two tips he had received, must be racing along at almost thirty miles an hour. The greasy smell of the steam blent with the smoke from the chimneys of nearby businesses, until Carr felt as though his parents had decided he should be trained as a chimney sweep.

Once the cab travelled beyond the narrow confines of the servants' district on Solomons Island, the air cleared of the smell of fish and waste. They were travelling now through the masters' district of the Second Landstead's capital: Avondale, which lay on the mainland. Elegant nineteenth-tri-century buildings with sweeping lawns were dotted at intervals with the sweet-scented flowers of Spring Transformation week: crocuses and snowdrops. The cab passed the tower that was all which was left of the High Master's twelfth-tri-century castle. The tower, much renovated, still remained the heart of the House of Government.

Then the cab reached the countryside and began the circuitous route toward Carr's home.

The trip took twice as long by 'car as it would have by boat; the roads twisted and turned as they followed the many creeks that spread through the Second Landstead, like cracks in ageing furniture. The roads travelled through the farmland, so that the cab driver had to stop periodically to

open and close farm gates. After the first couple of times, Jesse hopped down to open the gates, much to the bemusement of the cab driver. He was even more bemused when Carr silently lent his shoulder while Jesse was trying to push the back of the cab across a muddy part of the road.

The countryside was fresh with the smell of earth, except where that smell was overwhelmed by the soot from passing motorcars. The second- and third-ranked masters usually drove their own 'cars for their families; the first-ranked masters and mistresses had chauffeurs. Occasionally, someone would recognize Carr from his visits to his uncle's House and would bow their head in greeting.

Finally, after much zigging and zagging, the cab reached a point where the farmland grew smaller, and the woods grew larger. The cab was climbing hills now; the steepness began to grow strong as the trees closed in, bringing with them the smell of damp leaves from the previous autumn. And then came the smell – the unmistakable smell – of marshland.

They stopped short of being able to see the marsh; the cab turned around in a small circular driveway in front of a hill with grass and hedges, topped by a mansion, red brick with white trim.

The front lawn of Carr's mansion was nearly empty, Carr saw as the cab slowed to a stop. Aside from a few older servants trimming hedges, nobody was there but a slight-bodied girl almost two sun-circuits younger than himself, who was walking down the tree-lined driveway from the mansion, her arms cradling a basket. When she saw Carr, she smiled and curtsied; then, belatedly remembering her training, she looked nervous.

Carr's parents were nowhere around, so he didn't reprimand her. "Where are you going, Sally?" he asked as he climbed out of the cab.

"To the market, master. Comrade," she corrected herself quickly. "The mastre— That is, your mother decided that she wanted some fennel in the soup tonight."

"How are you getting there? By boat?" Carr asked.

Sally shook her head. She had long hair the color of sun-rays, and eyes the color of the ocean, a bluish-green. "No, mas— Comrade. Your mother said not to bother the watermen at their work. I'll walk. It's a nice day." She gave the barest nervous glance at the dark clouds on the horizon.

Not for the first time, Carr felt like cursing his mother. Sending a girl, only five and a third tri-years old, to walk a ten-mile round trip on a day when a thunderstorm was likely, just for a bit of fennel . . . But there was no point in overruling his mother's orders; the servants found it hard enough to figure out what the House Master and Mistress wanted, without having their son give the servants contradictory orders.

So Carr simply took out his wallet again and handed the appropriate

amount to the cab driver. “Take this young woman to Solomons Island and back, please.”

“Giving me another gift, master?” The driver, grinning, hopped down to open the door for Sally, helping her up the steps to the passenger’s seat in the service half of the cab. She giggled, delighted, and settled herself into the cab with a flounce of her skirt, as though she were a first-ranked lady.

Jesse waited until he and Carr had both finished coughing from the dust thrown up by the departing cab before he said, “Trying to compete with me?”

“What?” Carr looked at him blankly.

Jesse scrutinized his face, then smiled. “My mistake. You’re just naturally generous. Noblesse oblige and all that, right? This all belongs to you, then?” He waved his hand toward the House’s mansion.

“No,” said Carr quickly. Then, when Jesse raised his eyebrows, Carr hesitated before opting for his parents’ set speech on such matters. “It’s wasteful for a single family to live in such a large building. My parents rent out much of it to the house-servants, reserving only a few rooms for their own needs.”

“Hmm.” Jesse gazed up at the two-storey mansion, flanked on both sides by wings, which sprawled across the lawn. “How very medieval of them. Puts the servants nicely under their thumb, doesn’t it? If the servants don’t behave themselves, they not only lose their employment – they lose their homes as well.”

Carr was silent, not knowing how to respond to Jesse’s accurate assessment of the situation. Jesse gave a small, humorless laugh. “Okay, so maybe I’m not going to be as crazy about your mom and dad as I’d thought. Kid, you’ve got one hell of a wild set-up here, and I’ve got the feeling this shit’s only going to get weirder when we walk through those big-ass doors up there.”

“Jesse,” replied Carr, feeling the irritation build in him, “would you mind speaking the Landstead tongue from now on?”

Jesse chuckled lightly. “As long as you keep being honest with me about how things work here. Last thing I need is to walk into enemy territory without someone guarding my back. Coming?” And he took his first step onto the path to the mansion, looking over his shoulder, as though he were the host and Carr was the guest.

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LOCKUP

Excerpt from the first volume of the Dark Light series

Layle Smith discovered his special talent the week he was appointed to revise the Eternal Dungeon's code of conduct.

He spent the first afternoon with a headache. This was not merely because he had been plied with drinks by fellow torturers who – taking due note of the fact that Layle was now in direct succession for the title of High Torturer – had decided to make a head start on oiling their way into his favors. Already, culinary bribes had started to pile up in his living quarters within the dungeon. Some of them were doubtless poisoned. Layle wondered whether he should test the bribes on the prisoners.

Then he groaned as the racket began again. Sitting at his desk, he covered his head with his arms. The High Torturer, with impeccable timing, had decided that this would be the week he brought in engineers to do a full refit of the Lungs, which had broken down temporarily the previous year. Fortunately, Layle had been visiting the Lungs at the time that the steam-powered bellows unexpectedly stopped. He had quickly sent warnings to all quarters of the Eternal Dungeon that the machine which circulated air throughout the underground dungeon had failed. It was thanks to him that hundreds of lives had been saved. He had received a commendation from the Queen, and no doubt his rescue had played a factor in the High Torturer's decision to assign him the supreme honor of revising the dungeon's *Code of Seeking*. It was an appointment that had raised many an eyebrow, given that Layle was the youngest torturer in the dungeon, only twenty-three. All eyes would be upon him to judge whether he was worthy of his new post.

But gods protect him, how could he get any work done on the revision amidst the clanking and shouts from the laborers across the corridor?

Layle pressed his hands upon his ears, his eyes watering as he tried to read the volume on his desk in the flickering light of the oil lamp. It was not as though he had an easy job before him. One hundred and twenty pages of the Code were devoted to the three dozen instruments of torture in the dungeon. He would have to decide when they should be used, for how long, and how many dead bodies could be tolerated in the quest for justice.

There were also a couple of pages at the end of the Code about determining first whether the prisoners were innocent. He thought that section could use a bit of expansion.

The hammering continued. He'd already met the chief engineer, an amiable man imported – so like so many of this queendom's engineers – from the tiny island nation that the Queendom of Yclau had colonized several centuries before, at the time when the New World rediscovered the Old World. Layle had read a book about the travails which the Yclau explorers had undergone during that time. On one occasion, for example, the explorers had visited a primitive city by the name of Londinium. In Londinium, they had decided to bring back to Yclau a native playwright to whom they'd taken a fancy.

There had been riots in the streets over that. "He's a national treasure!" had cried one native as the playwright clung to his desk, desperately trying to scribble a few more words of the play he was working on, which had the eccentric name of *Hamlet*.

Natives could be absurdly parochial. However, the playwright had refused to create any plays during the rest of his captive life, so after that, Yclau's explorers had abandoned the idea of enslaving natives; instead, they lured talented natives overseas to the queendom with promises of riches. As a result, Yclau – not the little island colony – was now the most technologically advanced nation in the world: the birthplace of an Industrial Revolution that had changed the queendom forever.

Layle glanced at a mechanical jill-in-the-box which the native engineer had been fiddling with when he came to visit. The engineer had left it behind when Layle expressed his admiration of its ingenuity. Layle had spent most of the afternoon since then attempting to figure out how to revise the Code in a manner that was unlikely to draw the wrong sort of attention from the High Torturer.

The High Torturer was a man of changeable tempers. The last dozen torturers he had executed had discovered that too late.

Sighing, Layle reached over and picked up the jill-in-the-box. It made an odd little clicking sound as he grasped it – no doubt he had touched a hidden button to turn it on. But the jill-in-the-box seemed no longer to operate, for some strange reason.

Layle put the mechanical toy back on his desk and rose to his feet, flipping down the face-cloth of his black hood in preparation for work. Barbaric colonial construction. He would have to hope that the engineers did a better job on the Lungs.

On his way to work, he took a detour to visit his faithful senior-most guard.

Mr. Sobel was confined to his bed in the Eternal Dungeon by order of the dungeon's healer this week, since he'd acquired a bad case of influenza. Characteristically, he was sitting propped up in bed, working on official documents.

"I really don't know how to advise you, sir," he replied when Layle had confessed his inability to know where to start with the Code. "You're right about Mr. Jenson's temper. I'd hate to see you become the target of his wrath. On the other hand, you *are* assigned the job of revising the Code to be more modern. Keeping the Code old-fashioned . . . Well, that would be failing your duty to this dungeon. I imagine that Mr. Jenson knows you would like to make some changes."

This was undoubtedly true, since Layle and the High Torturer had spent the past five years locked in combat with each other over Layle's tendency to bend the dungeon's rules. It was a miracle that Layle was still alive. "Perhaps I could take small steps," he suggested. "Transform the dungeon in modest ways. We have engineers here, bringing the Lungs to a newer fashion. Perhaps they could do further work in the dungeon?"

Mr. Sobel, who was a few years older than Layle but considerably more in touch with the times, considered this for a moment. Then he reflected, "The newspapers are full every week of stories about new inventions. I could have the Queen's patent office send me a list of the patent applications this year. That's work I could do in bed."

"Good," said Layle crisply. "Now I'm off to take a much-needed break of rest and relaxation."

"Sir?" With a look of confusion, Mr. Sobel cast his eyes toward one of the old-fashioned water clocks that stood in every room of the dungeon. As a result of his promotion, Layle was now assigned the role of supervisor of the day shift. The clock showed that the day shift was about to begin.

Layle gave one of his dark smiles, hidden by the hood. "You're sick. That means I get to be the one to rack the prisoner."

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Chronicles of the Great Peninsula

Honored in the Rainbow Awards for its portrayal of gender, *Chronicles of the Great Peninsula* presents an epic tale of gods, adventure, friendship, romance, and betrayal.

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Volumes in the cycle: [The Three Lands](#) | [The Thousand Nations](#).

[Chronicles of the Great Peninsula resources](#). Map, chronology, pronunciation guide, family tree, and fanworks.

LAW LINKS

Excerpt from the first volume of the Three Lands series

I broke off the last entry because I was able to identify for the first time where a pair of guards was located. For most of today, I haven't been able to do this, for the guards climb the mountains as quietly as I do, except when they are in pursuit.

I tracked the noise, and found to my delight that I had located the sublieutenant and another guard. Nothing could be better, for no Koretian in his right mind would try to hunt the sublieutenant of the border mountain patrol. (Whether I am in my right mind in trying all this is a matter I will leave to my Emorian reader to decide.)

I hid in a hollowed-out area next to a ledge where the two guards were standing. The hollow was easy to hide in, for it was screened by one of the mountain bushes that grow to a man's height and are thick with twigs and needles. I have scratches all over me now. I was in a shadow so dark that I could barely see myself, but I could catch glimpses of the sublieutenant

and the other guard, who were standing on the side of the mountain, trying to listen for me.

It was my first close view of Emorians, aside from the ones I saw in Koretia. They don't look much different from Titus and Fenton, except that the Emorians I've seen before this all shaved their faces, and these men had beards. I suppose that it's hard to find time to shave yourself if you are a soldier. The sublieutenant is a red-haired man, so white of skin that I wondered briefly whether he was sickly, but he has given no indication of illness during his pursuit of me. He has a very odd smile, one that looks as though he's uncertain whether to smile, but his laugh, which I heard briefly, is quite energetic. He is light-framed, but I had already learned that this allows him to run faster than any of the other guards, and the muscles in his thighs and arms are hard. His voice, which I've only heard talking softly so far, is pleasant in timbre, and is less distinctive than his whistle, which has an emphatic tone to it.

The other guard, whose name is Fowler, is less remarkable in appearance. He appears to be about a year younger than the sublieutenant, and he has sandy-colored hair. He seems to be on friendly terms with the sublieutenant, for he addresses him by his name, without his title.

I was interested in overhearing their conversation, not only so that I would be able to find out how they planned to hunt me, but also in hopes that they would mention the man named Quentin whom Fenton thought might have joined the patrol. But though they mentioned the names of several other guards, that name never passed their lips.

Eventually, Fowler went off to the other side of the mountain, while the sublieutenant remained on the ledge, listening. I stayed very still during this, and apparently succeeded in making no noise, for when Fowler returned and said, "Any luck?" the sublieutenant shook his head.

"I surrender," he said. "We're going to have to bring the expert in on this." Without any more words, he let out a whistle.

It was a name-whistle, I knew; whenever the sublieutenant sends an order to a particular guard, he precedes it by a whistle that always begins with a trill. I identified these trilled whistles eventually as names, and by now I know the whistled names of every guard in the day patrol. But this was a whistle I hadn't heard before.

The acknowledgment came immediately, though it was faint. Fowler said, "By the spirits of the dead Charas, I'm tired," and he and the sublieutenant sat down on some rocks overlooking the slope and began chatting. Their backs were to me.

I was intent on hearing when the so-called expert arrived, but I never did. I saw him first, sliding along the side of the mountain so quietly that

not even the two guards heard him coming. As I shrank further back into the hollow, I caught a glimpse of his face: it was light brown, and set into it were two sky-blue eyes.

For a moment I was simply confused. This could not be an Emorian, not with skin that dark. Then I remembered, and nearly laughed aloud at my puzzlement. Of course – this man was from the borderland, just like me. Not the Koretian borderland, but the Emorian borderland, where Emorians and Koretians intermarry, just like at home.

He was immediately behind the two guards now, but they were still unaware of his presence. He had a way of putting his feet down as gently as a mountain cat lowers its velvet paws; if I had closed my eyes, I would not have known that he was there. Yet there had been no tentativeness to his climb around the mountain; he had placed his feet with decisiveness and accuracy, exactly on the rocks that wouldn't give way under him. He hadn't been running, but he had moved almost as quickly as though he had been doing so.

I felt my heart beat inside me. The guards who had been hunting me were skilled, but until now, I had been certain that I was the best jackal here. Now I knew that I had met my true rival.

“What is the problem, sublieutenant?” The man had the softened vowels of a borderlander, but his words were spoken with an Emorian accent to them; he sounded like Fenton. The other guards stood and turned, but did not appear startled. Apparently they were used to being crept up on by this man.

“I apologize for disturbing your sleep, sir,” said the sublieutenant. “We have a stubborn breacher on our hands – we have been chasing him all morning.”

The lieutenant paused before replying. His face was very serious, with no trace of a smile to greet the two men smiling at him. He had a scar down his left temple and another along his neck – once I started looking, I could see that he had scars over most of his body. He appeared to be in his mid-twenties.

“Are you seeking my advice, or do you wish me to take over the mastership?” he asked. His voice was so quiet that it blended in with the wind, and I had to watch his lips to tell what he was saying.

“I would be grateful if you could take over the day patrol for this hunt, sir,” replied the sublieutenant. “It is not a serious enough matter yet to justify calling out the night patrol, but the breacher has escaped us twice, and I fear that he is beyond my abilities.”

The lieutenant nodded, then sent out a piercing whistle containing his name and another signal I could not identify, but that I tentatively labelled

according to what the sublieutenant had said.

Four acknowledgment whistles chirped back; this has been occurring all day in the exact same regular manner, and so I've concluded that the guards are trained to respond in a particular order, though why this should be so is not clear to me.

"Now," said the lieutenant, "report."

The sublieutenant began telling him what had been happening all day. I was surprised when Fowler simply stood by, listening silently, but at the end the lieutenant said, "Report, Fowler," and I realized that this was a set routine known to the soldiers. I would have thought that it would have made more sense for Fowler simply to interrupt the sublieutenant's report whenever he had anything to add, but I reminded myself that Emorians probably have their own ways of doing things. It would be a great mistake for me to assume that Emorians always act like normal people; they are foreigners, after all.

(No, *I* am the foreigner now, I realized after writing the above sentence. I must adopt the Emorians' way of thinking and acting if I want to learn about their law.)

After Fowler had added his brief comments, the lieutenant said, "It sounds as though the breacher knows our signals."

"One of the King's spies, then?" Fowler said, lifting an eyebrow.

"Perhaps. It is too early to say." The lieutenant turned toward the slope overlooking the pass, and stood motionless, with his back toward me. Like all of the patrol guards, he wore a back-sling. These appeared no different from my own except that a leather strap hangs part of the way out of them; I had not yet figured out its purpose.

The lieutenant added, "He did not draw his blade, you say."

"No, though he had a chance to do so when we closed in on him," the sublieutenant replied.

The lieutenant nodded and turned back to look at the others; I caught another glimpse of his azure eyes. "Very well, then, we capture on sight. Every guard to stay with his partner at all times. We communicate by words only from this point on. If the hunted shows signs of drawing his blade, do *not* try to capture him by yourselves; retreat and call for help from the rest of the day patrol. Understood?"

The others nodded. Fowler said, "Our first problem will be finding the breacher, sir. He is as silent as a hibernating burrow-bird at the moment."

"I will take care of that," replied the lieutenant. "Spread the word to the others – and for love of the Chara, remember to stay with your partner. Just because this Koretian has refrained from drawing his blade yet, that does not mean he will refrain from changing his mind. I do not want any of

you ending up like Byrd.”

The sublieutenant gave one of his half-smiles, drew his sword, and held it flatwise against his face. I'd seen the soldiers at Blackpass make this gesture, so I knew it to be a salute. Then he sent out a series of whistle-signals to the other guards, none of which I could identify except for a request for locations. These locations the guards evidently gave, for the sublieutenant and Fowler were soon headed down the mountain in the direction of one pair of the guards.

The lieutenant resumed looking over the pass. His head turned slowly from one side to the next as he did so; after a moment, I realized that he was listening for the hunted. The sublieutenant had done the same thing not long before this, but something made me take shallower breaths and stay absolutely still.

He was a long time listening. It was hard staying still, and I could feel my nose beginning to drip. (I caught a cold last night, having finally reached a point in the mountains where the autumn air has already arrived.) I reached up and wiped the moisture from my nose, sniffing as I did so – then froze as the lieutenant's hand went to his sword hilt.

There was little sound as he drew his blade, for the sheath was made of leather. For a moment more, he and I stood fixed in our positions. Then he turned with a suddenness that made me jump, and walked swiftly and unerringly up to the bush.

“Come out,” he said sharply in Common Koretian.

There was no use in pretending I wasn't there; he was close enough to see me now. I considered staying where I was and making him come in after me, but fighting amidst those thorns would do as much damage to me as to him. Better to appear to be a compliant prisoner.

I slid past the twigs, bowing my head, and trying to appear as much as possible like Siward in the moments after I bound him. I didn't look up at the lieutenant. All that I could see was his sword, pointed my way. I said in a trembling voice – it was not hard to produce such a tone – “Please don't hurt me.”

My act worked; the lieutenant's voice was gentler as he said, “Turn around, sir.”

He spoke this time in Border Koretian, having identified my accent from my few words, and it was clear from the ease with which he spoke that this was his native tongue as well. I was standing with my back against a cliff wall. Slowly I turned away to face the wall, but not before allowing a few tears to drip from my eyes – again, this effect was not hard to produce.

I even managed to tremble as he took my limp wrists and pulled them back behind me crosswise. He did so firmly but without any harshness. I

felt the touch of leather against my wrists; this was the meaning of the strap in the back-sling.

A cold touch against my wrist told me that he was still holding his sword, but I knew that he would be doing so lightly, now that he was absorbed in binding his passive prisoner. I waited for the moment at which he began to draw the first knot together; then I brought my right elbow back hard against his stomach. In the same moment, I grasped the blade of his sword with my left hand.

I cut my palm in the process, of course, but I succeeded in wrenching the sword away from the lieutenant. I swung my left side around in order to force the lieutenant to back up to avoid being sliced open by his own blade. For a moment I caught sight of him; he was bent over from the pain of my jab, but his eyes had turned hard, and he did not appear frightened at what I had done. Then I threw the sword high and heard it clatter down the mountainside. I had no interest in harming anyone in the patrol; I simply wanted to disarm this guard, above all the others.

By the time the sword fell, I was already at the edge of the ledge, preparing to climb further down the slope. At the moment of my descent I looked back to see where the lieutenant was. He was standing where I had left him, still panting to regain his breath, but his right hand was raising the edge of his tunic with a smooth motion. Something brown was wrapped around the top of his right leg, and his hand touched it; then he withdrew his hand, and afternoon sunlight flashed off of a tiny object in his palm.

I had never before seen a thigh-dagger, but I had heard what injuries it could inflict. For a fleeting moment, I wondered whether I had been wise to strip the lieutenant of his sword.

Then there was no time to think, for I was scrambling down the mountain with the lieutenant in close pursuit behind me. He did not whistle to his men, but I knew that the sound of the hunt would alert the other guards to where we were. Somehow I had to find a hiding place before the others caught up.

I nearly discovered the place by falling into it. I had encountered this sort of ravine before, though, while travelling through the mountains near Mountside. Everything in the border mountains is black, but nothing is blacker than these fissures that occasionally occur between two mountains. If you aren't on the lookout for them, it is easy to fall straight into them, and Hamar and I had found pleasure in tossing pebbles down them and seeing how deep they were. Some were so deep that we never heard the pebbles strike the ground.

These clefts are deep, but they're also very narrow. As a result of some

experimentation (and lots of dares), Hamar and I learned that it was possible to go down into these ravines by bracing our backs on one side of the cleft wall and propping our stretched legs against the other side; with a narrow enough ravine, we could work our way up and down without trouble.

I used this fact to my advantage to plan an elaborate practical joke on my brother one day: I ran straight into the path of a cleft and disappeared into the hole with a cry, leaving Hamar to surmise my death. Actually, I had caught the edge of the ground at the last minute and jammed myself into position, but it's impossible to see far into these ravines, even when you're standing straight over them. I nearly killed myself trying to keep from laughing when Hamar came forward to peer into the hole . . . until I looked up and saw his face turned moon-white. When I emerged from the hole, Hamar gave me the worst fist-beating of my life, but I never grudged him it.

Now I gave no elaborate thought to what I was doing, having done it before. I stripped off my back-sling, since I needed my back bare for this feat, and flung the sling under a narrow overhang at the foot of the mountain. Then I ran back around the curve of the hill to see where the guards were.

The lieutenant was very close behind, so close that I could see the razor-edged dagger in his hand. Not far behind him were the sublieutenant and Fowler; the rest of the guards were beyond sight, but I could tell from the sound of their footsteps that they were closing in fast.

I waited until I was sure that the lieutenant could see me; then I turned and began running around the mountain, toward the ravine. I heard the lieutenant shout something behind me, but I paid no heed to his words, for I was concentrating on the difficult task of sliding, jumping, screaming, catching, jamming, and – hardest of all – freezing.

The panting of my breath nearly obscured the thunder of steps. I forced myself to take longer and shallower breaths and then looked up, despite the fact that I knew I shouldn't allow my reflective eyes to chance catching a bit of light.

The lieutenant was staring down the ravine; he was joined in the next moment by the sublieutenant and Fowler. Fowler took a long look at the black pit below, then backed away. I heard him say something to a pair of guards who had just arrived. The sublieutenant looked over at the lieutenant and said, "Anything?"

I resisted the temptation to hold my breath; any change in sound might alert the lieutenant to what had happened. The lieutenant was standing motionless. His thigh-dagger was now in his left hand, and his right hand

was curled in a ball. After a moment he said quietly, “He’s breathing – but it makes no difference. These ravines are too deep; we will not be able to get him out of there.”

The sublieutenant glanced down at the lieutenant’s hand, then reached into the lieutenant’s back-sling and took out a face-cloth. He handed it to the lieutenant, who absentmindedly wrapped it around his right hand. As he opened his palm, I saw that it was covered with blood; he must have accidentally cut himself with his thigh-dagger during his final effort to reach me before I fell.

“Shall we call down to him?” asked the sublieutenant.

“No.” The lieutenant’s voice had turned flat. “There is nothing we can do for him. He has his dagger; he will use it when he realizes his situation.”

“If he has the courage to do so.” This comment came from Fowler, still standing beyond my view.

“He has it.” The lieutenant’s voice was clipped short. He glanced over to the side as another pair of guards arrived, their voices raised with queries. He cut short their questions with a decisive whistle.

It was an End of Hunt whistle that Fenton had taught me . . . although, he has explained with a half-smile, I would never hear it used if the hunt for me ended this way. The whistle means, “The hunted is captured dead.”

“Return to patrol,” the lieutenant added, and turned his head back to look down the hole. His face was in shadow, but what little I could see of it appeared to hold no expression.

There was soft murmur as the guards began to depart. Soon only the sublieutenant remained, still standing beside the lieutenant.

The latter said, without looking his way, “I said, Return to patrol.”

“I was wondering whether you needed help in finding your sword, lieutenant,” the sublieutenant replied in a matter-of-fact voice.

After a moment, the lieutenant said, “Thank you, yes. He dropped it down the north side of Mount Skycrest; I will be there to search in a minute.”

The sublieutenant nodded; then he disappeared from my view. I heard his retreating footsteps and his whistle as he signalled something to his partner. The lieutenant remained where he was, staring down at me – to his knowledge, he was now alone. So only I saw his eyes close and his hands form into fists, and only I heard him whisper, “May I die a Slave’s Death.”

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SEARCH FOR THE JACKAL

Excerpt from the upcoming first volume of the Thousand Nations series

A full unit was guarding the first checkpoint we came to: four soldiers in Jackal-black uniforms, and eight soldiers in brown uniforms. None of the soldiers, Koretian or Emorian, looked happy. I imagined they spent their days listening to the curses of travellers they were duty-bound to waylay.

The sublieutenant overseeing the unit, who wore the weary expression of a man who carried out his duties without taking out his anger on innocents, was patiently listening to the Lieutenant explain why, as subjects of the Chara, we shouldn't have to endure the indignity of being stopped at a checkpoint.

"Everyone in Koretia is now a subject to the Chara, whether he's born in Emor or Koretia," said the sublieutenant, who wore the brown uniform of an Emorian soldier. "Just show me the letter of permission to travel from your baron, sir, and I can let you and your nephew on your way."

The Lieutenant, huffing audibly and muttering about cursed bureaucrats who are determined to grind down the ordinary traveller, fished inside our travelling bag. He handed over a packet of papers at arm's length. His farmers' hat was cunningly angled to shadow his face. He wore a dagger at his hip now, but that was hardly surprising; even though Koretian men no longer routinely wore blades as a sign of their manhood, wary travellers in Koretia still wore blades to protect themselves against bandits. The Lieutenant's army sword, of an Emorian design, would have attracted more attention, but we had left that with the others.

I had a blade too, but it was well hidden in our bag: the dagger which a former Chara had given to my grand-uncle as a sign of friendship. It was delicately carved, not in keeping with the commoners' tunic I now wore. There were other objects in the bag that we dare not allow the soldiers to see, such as the map.

The sublieutenant's eyebrows were raised now as he read the document. I hoped that the Lieutenant was as skilled in forgery as he was

in torture. If the sublieutenant decided to arrest us, we'd have little chance of escaping from a dozen sword-armed soldiers, with the night watch no doubt sleeping in the nearby guardhouse.

"You possess high-ranked kin," the sublieutenant observed, raising the paper to the light to read it better. The light turned the paper translucent, so that I could see that there was a seal behind it, but not what the nature of the seal was.

"It comes in handy sometimes," said the Lieutenant in so flat a voice that I looked sharply at him.

"Hmm." The sublieutenant continued to stare at the document. I prayed that he would take his time.

With the Lieutenant scouting ahead in his usual proficient fashion, we had known we were approaching a checkpoint, but Eadred and Neziah had rejected the idea that we should simply skirt around the checkpoint.

"Boar droppings," said Eadred, pointing to something on the ground. "We should stick to the path."

They had finally, reluctantly approved a detour onto a tiny path that wound its way close to the black border mountains. That path wouldn't help us around the checkpoint, but it might help all of us past these guards. The Lieutenant and I had waited an appropriate amount of time to let the others make their preparations; then we had slowly walked forward, chatting with each other, under the pretense that we didn't know what was awaiting us around the bend.

So here we were, and the trap had not yet been sprung. My mouth was dry, thinking of all the things that might go wrong.

"Very well," said the sublieutenant. "You can go ahead. —No, over there," he added as I took a step forward to pass him. "To the guardhouse. We need your portraits sketched."

"Our portraits?" My voice soared far too high to be natural. I hoped he took this to be the apprehension of an innocent farmboy who has never left his village before. I envisioned the sketches being submitted to the Chara's spies so that they could identify a certain young man who had slipped through their fingers.

"New rules. All travellers are to have their portraits sketched by an army artist. It will only take a few minutes of your time. You can leave your backsling here."

Worse and worse. I ventured a look toward the Lieutenant. He had his head cocked to one side, as though he were not attending to what the sublieutenant said.

A moment later, I knew why.

"May we die a Slave's Death!" The sublieutenant's shout of this ancient

oath was involuntary. All around us, the soldiers were beginning to back away, too frightened even to think of drawing their swords. The Lieutenant took the opportunity to snatch back our document.

The sound was far greater than I had expected. My ears still rang from the force of the bang, a thousand times louder than the hard bang of a sword against a shield. The ground rumbled as the face of the mountain that was nearest us began to slide down. As I watched with horror, a goodly portion of the mountain crumpled to the ground.

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Final comment by Dusk Peterson

If you've enjoyed this e-book, I hope you'll let other readers know about it. If there's a *Turn-of-the-Century Toughs* story you'd like me to write, [please let me know](#). I love writing stories to prompts. I also love it when readers create [fanworks](#) of my writings.