

Sample Chapters from

Healer's Touch

The first book in the
Aenuk Chronicles trilogy

by Deb E. Howell

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Chapter One

Llew didn't break stride as she kicked the empty glass bottle aside, barely giving it a thought. Litter was the least of the hazards in Cheer's streets at night. She walked with her head down, hands thrust deep in the pockets of her sepia trousers, blending in with the evening's wildlife. With hair in dire need of a trim, there was always a risk that the disguise wouldn't hold – but it only had to hold until she got home. She would cut the offending locks in the morning.

A commotion broke out up ahead at Camille's Cathouse. Some john lacking the financial means to sate his desires by the looks and sounds of it. Perhaps he should have thought about that before buying such a large bottle of whisky. The town's men hunted gold by day, oblivion and pussy by night, and sometimes the two nocturnal aims conflicted. Both could spell danger for Llew.

She approached the still cussing man, stepping into the road to give him a wide berth. At this time of night, at least, one didn't need to be so cautious about steaming piles in the middle of the dusty streets; all the horses were asleep in their stables or paddocks, or waiting lazily outside a bar or brothel.

"Out for a good time, boy?" The old coot stepped in front of Llew, stopping her in her tracks. "I'll share one wi' yer."

Llew tried to side-step him, but he mirrored her movement.

"It's still five miras each. Two men, ten miras." The half-dressed madam on the porch folded her arms across her chest and stared down at

them.

“You said five miras per girl. We only need the one.” His arm snaked across Llew’s shoulders, drawing her in to him. If she hadn’t already been cursing staying late with Kynas, she would have started now. “What d’you say? I’ll let you go first. I won’t even watch. Sure you won’t mind me listenin’, though.”

Llew struggled to find her voice, her deeper, more boyish voice. She shook her head.

“Five miras per... service.” The woman’s eyes narrowed. “You want cheap, Renny, you go down see Hedy’s girls. They’ll look after you real nice.”

“Aw, but Hedy don’t have your wee Tamra.” Renny pulled Llew closer to his mouth. His breath reeked like it was coming from wrong end of his body. “Wee Tamra’s my favourite,” he confided in a loud whisper.

“Tamra’s busy, anyway. Now scoot.” The woman waved the back of a hand at the man, dismissing him. “And don’t come back till you’ve got some cash.”

Still clutching Llew, Renny waved his bottle, miraculously not spilling any liquor.

“Oh, you’re a hard woman, Cammy.”

“Better a hard woman than a limp dick any day, Renny.” The woman flashed a gleaming white grin at them. “Maybe next time you’ll rethink the whisky. Or at least buy it here. Then maybe we can talk discounts. Loyalty is rewarded at Camille’s.”

“Oh, aye.” The man turned Llew with him to dawdle back the way she’d just come. “Women, eh? Never give nothin’ for free.”

Llew didn’t know anyone who gave anything for free, and didn’t see why the brothel girls should be any different.

“Well, lad, shall we try Hedy’s?” Renny squeezed again.

Llew tensed the second his step faltered.

He regained his composure almost instantly and squeezed her shoulders once more, this time looking down at the way her shirt bunched across her chest. Two small but distinct peaks appeared as her shoulders rounded under the applied pressure.

“Well, well. Looks like my luck is on the up ’n’ up.” His arm reached around her shoulders so his hand could feel the soft flesh beneath Llew’s shirt. He sucked back a glob of spit, took a swig from his bottle, and tried to bring her around in front of him. Llew pushed against him and ducked under his arm. But he was quick and grabbed the loose waist of her shirt.

“Hey! We was just gettin’ to know each other.” He tugged and Llew bounced against his chest.

She used the momentum to break free of his grasp, turned and ran. The whisky hadn’t kicked in as much as she thought, because he was on her heels. She focused on keeping her line straight down the middle of the road. A straggling group of men leaving Polly’s Bar farther down the road made no moves to let her pass, seeming to find the spectacle of a young boy running from an older man interesting verging on downright hilarious. Some of them reached out to slow Llew, but they didn’t go so far as to stop her. Fearing that

the men would turn on her, Llew didn't plead for their help but pumped her limbs even harder, and a few moments later she was past them. Unhindered by the group, Renny caught up to her, knocking her into a narrow alleyway between McNulty's Bar and Barber Pierson's.

The crash of the half-full bottle against the wall rang out as Llew fell to the ground. Quickly regaining her feet, she found herself facing jagged glass and Renny looking pissed off.

"That bottle cost me a night with wee Tamra. Come 'ere," he said, flinging both arms out in some sort of drunken embrace. He missed, but the bottle swung dangerously close and Llew hopped back, deeper into the alley. "You owe me the price of a bottle o' whisky, girlie. And maybe a bit more."

"You broke it, you drunk bastard." Llew dodged the man's next lunge and made a pass for the alleyway's entrance.

He brandished the bottle at her. "That ain't the language of no young lady."

"Who said anything about being a lady?"

They danced side to side, Llew looking for a gap, Renny blocking.

"Oh, you like playin' at it like a boy, eh? Well, I ain't picky. Turn around, we won't even have to take them pants right off." He paused to grab his crotch.

"Fuck you."

Llew lunged and Renny blocked her path again, grabbing her and throwing her back on the ground. He scrabbled at her feverishly, trying to get her trousers undone. Llew kicked wildly, she punched, she clawed, and when

he hit her back she grabbed his face, digging her fingers close to his eyes and returning the pain. Renny slashed her with the bottle, slicing her shoulder. Llew pressed her hand against his chin, pushing him up and closing her wound. He screamed and slashed again, cutting into her arm. Llew grabbed his wrist, healing this new scratch.

Renny cried out again and now swung the bottle blindly, hysterically, cutting Llew's cheek, neck, chest, forehead, shoulder, ear, nose, eye, throat...

Somewhere in all the chaos, a strange peace overcame her. She relaxed and let it take her.

* * *

Llew woke to the scent of blood, the jaunty tinkle of a piano being played nearby, light spilling across a wood-plank wall, and a heavy feeling in her chest. No. Not in her chest. It was on her chest, and it was sticky and damp.

Smell of blood. Heavy thing. Sticky and damp.

She pushed up. The corpse – she couldn't feel any breathing other than her own – lifted, teetered, and then the strength in Llew's arms failed. She fell back and the body dropped down with her. A shudder ran through her body. A glass bottle smacked to the ground and rolled across the ground, scraping the stones. Dim candlelight from the uncovered window above reflected from its shattered edge.

A broken bottle. The dead man.

Remembered pain flitted through Llew's mind. He had attacked her and now he was dead. The events between those two points were a blank. Her

shirt was wet, almost certainly with blood.

Mustering all her strength, she wedged her hands under the man's shoulders and heaved again, pushing higher on one side. His shoulder slid to the ground, easing the weight off her. Bracing herself on her elbows, she kicked and slid, freeing her legs. Clambering to her feet, Llew shook herself, trying to rid herself of the dead man's touch. Her nearly-white shirt looked black in the low light. Foul. Only slightly less so with the knowledge that it was her own blood. She could just make out his face, frozen in an expression of horror, in the flickering candlelight from the window above. There was no outward sign of injury Llew could see – apart from all the blood, of course.

She couldn't be found there with the body. The Farries would hang her without question. She turned and ran from the alley, emerging alongside the front entrance of The Diamond Duster – the last of Cheer's bars to close for the night, and even then usually only at the Farries' specific request.

"Bit of a rough one, there, lad?" Someone called after her.

Llew kept to the shadows – not that there were many Cheer locals out this late in the dark folds of night, but she had no way to explain her blood-soaked state if she did run into anyone.

The distance back to her hovel by Big River seemed longer than normal, but finally dusty dirt road gave way to swathes of tussock punctuated by the occasional matagouri or lancewood. She pushed her way through long grasses and past branches heavy with yellow bell-shaped flowers, grey in the early morning light, past her thatched, thigh-high hovel, before pulling off her shoes at the stony bank and wading straight into the water, not bothering to

remove her clothing. To have any chance of washing the blood from them, she would have to soak them now.

The swift current carried away the sensation of the man's weight lying over her even as it lifted the blood from her skin and washed it away. It was her blood. It was all hers. He had killed her, and now he was dead.

She had never killed before. Probably because she had never died before. Healing, yes, she'd done that. She knew what must have happened, and yet couldn't bring herself to admit it. Surely she couldn't do that. She couldn't come back from the dead. No one came back from death.

She pulled the shirt over her head, then squeezed it under the water, rubbing it and rinsing it and rubbing again. The cold glow of dawn crept across the sky. And the browned blood could not be washed from the garment. She had left Kynas' late, but not that late. How long had she lain unconscious? Or dead?

Llew cursed and threw the shirt to shore. She only had one other shirt, and she was almost certain it was getting too small. She would have to spend a good deal of her earnings on a new one. Or take the risk of stealing more than her usual quota. But she maintained a quota for a reason. After all, she only needed what she needed, and being greedy got you caught.

Already half undressed, she fought with her trousers until they jerked free of her body. They, too, were stained with her blood. Damn it! Clothing wasn't cheap. She could feed herself for free, but if she wanted to mingle with the general public, she had to buy clothes. While she knew how to use a needle and thread, her skills in that department only went as far as basic

repairs.

She dug her hands into the river bed and then, with handfuls of sediment, scrubbed the last of the blood from her chest, her face and her arms. Now acclimatised to the water's chill, she waded in a little farther and dunked herself under, emerging a few seconds later to wipe her eyes clear of water and slightly-too-long hair. She pressed her feet through the muddy sediment, feeling it erupt between her toes, and took the time to appreciate the warmth beneath its surface. Strange how that little bit of heat always remained, somehow not leached by the rushing water above. Like her own sense of worth, somehow not drained by living beneath the flow of Cheer's society.

Cheer. Named for the happiness the first settlers experienced when they started digging gold. The gold was gone. As was the cheer. But Cheer remained.

She peered at her hands in the rippling water. A man had died at her hands. But she had died at his hands first. It was little consolation, but it made forgiving herself easier.

Her fingers began to tingle and sting from the cold and she made her way back to shore, wiped herself down with handfuls of grass, returned to her little hovel and wrapped her woollen blanket about her. Despite having spent however many hours unconscious, she needed sleep. There were only a couple of hours before the market started. She drifted off, revelling in the aromas of dew-soaked grasses, damp stones, and thyme.

* * *

The heat of the sun on her otherwise frozen toes woke her. Llew lay

there a few more moments, pulling the blanket clear of her legs, savouring the heat and drinking in the perfumed air. There was little in her life she cherished, but moments like these almost made it worth it.

She dragged herself from her bed, pulled on her clean shirt – which was a little too tight across the shoulders and hinted at the breasts she preferred to keep hidden.

She sharpened her knife on a river stone, grabbed tufts of hair in her other hand and began hacking. The fringe had grown to her eyebrows and the sides were nearly covering her ears. Too long. She cared little for the end result – the less pretty the better. By the time she finished, the sun was well up. The market would be in full swing.

She struggled into the damp pants, fastened her belt, and headed for town, hoping brown stains on brown material would pass unnoticed.

The monthly market was one of the few times the people of Cheer really mingled and paraded. Women displayed their curves with cinched-in waists below elegant necklines, and men wore pressed shirts, trousers hooked up by suspenders, and vests decorated with gold chains and pocket watches. They preened and swaggered, yet still shared the street with the others who had arrived in Cheer too late to make their fortune. The predominant colour was brown in all its shades, with splashes of red, blue or yellow marking both a woman of class or a girl prospecting for tricks.

Llew was invisible among the finery and silent amid the propositions.

She had already collected three purses when something caught her eye. Two things, but there was only one she would be taking with her. One

was a knife. It hung from a belt slung across a pair of trousers filled in a most tantalising way by a fine arse. She watched the way the folds of material moved and shifted as the owner passed by stalls selling every variety of produce from meats to baked goods, hand-made crafts, and even entertainment in the form of song or dance. If she walked about with a knife like that slung from her hip, people would reconsider pushing her into alleyways. She was halfway certain the knife's finely carved ivory, or bone, handle had drawn her eye down first. A knife like that made a statement.

She needed that knife.

Her eyes trailed the handle everywhere it went. Her feet followed, and the rest of her body weaved its way between people and stalls. The arse and knife stopped. So did another street kid thinking he was in with a shot. Anger flashed through Llew. The knife was hers!

So fast she barely saw him move the man bared his teeth and growled at the would-be thief, frightening the desire for the weapon right out of him. Side-on, Llew could see the man's vest. A leather vest, heavy with smaller knives. Not small knives, just smaller than the one on his hip. She nearly reconsidered her need for the knife, but was convinced she needed it more than the man did. He did, after all, have all those other knives at his disposal.

The boy stammered out an apology. Released, he ran with absolutely no care for who he bumped into along the way. So unprofessional.

The long-haired man in his dusty, wide-brimmed black hat turned and muttered something to his curly-haired companion. Both men laughed and turned their attention to a stall selling a range of meaty nibbles. Llew moved

closer.

It was hard to stay inconspicuous. People divided around her, she was like rock poking through water's surface. While extra height had its advantages, it was beginning to get ridiculous. Llew was keeping pace with most of the boys she knew, and despite most girls her age having matured a couple of years earlier, she only seemed to be getting taller and a little broader. No worthwhile breasts, though, damn it, just enough to compromise her pose as a boy.

As if to rub it in, a stylish dress with a tasteful neckline cupping two beautiful, rounded breasts hooked Llew's attention on its way past. It disappeared back into the crowd and she looked down at her own shirt that hung almost straight down – straight down enough for nearly everyone to assume she was a boy, which was fine by Llew, really, it was. A girl her age, with no parents, was better off being seen as a boy in a place like Cheer. Still, it didn't stop a small part of her coveting the chance to wear a pretty dress one day. One day. Not today. Dresses tended to lack pockets.

The task at hand was the knife, and the opportunity to take it presented itself while the pair of men were distracted by a clown hopping around with bells attached to his shoes. He jiggled these in the air while he juggled flaming batons. The taller, curly-haired man's eyes shone in delight at the display. The shorter, darker, knife carrier watched as a fellow professional might: nothing escaped his attention.

She moved in, her hand twitching, her finely honed muscles tensed. Keeping her eyes on the men and concentrating on looking like a casual

passer-by to other passers-by, she flicked the domed catch securing the knife in place, then moved with the dark-skinned man as he shifted his weight. She gripped the end of the knife handle between finger and thumb, and pulled: gently, but swiftly.

Llew withdrew back into the throng. She hefted the knife a couple of times and smiled at the weight and balance. There was something so right about it.

She slid the knife into her belt and pulled her shirt as low as it would go. The tip hung below the linen, but it wasn't enough to give the game away, she was sure.

“Hey!”

Now she was less sure. A quick glance over her shoulder removed all doubt. He was enraged, and he and his companion were pushing through the crowd toward her.

Llew took off, ducking fancy hats and parasols. She spared a moment of thanks for the unusually long legs that carried her through the crowd just as fast as the men following her. Skirting parcels and large bellies, and leaving a trail of indignant exclamations, she soon reached the edge of the market and slipped around the corner of a blacksmith's. Clinging to the wood-panelled wall, she listened. No footsteps to be heard. She took the chance to breathe deeply and relax. Being there, smelling the furnace and hearing the clang, she, as always, felt contempt for the men who'd told her she couldn't run her father's smithy when he disappeared. Who were they to judge her ability? Being a girl had nothing to do with it. She had worked by his side for years

and was perfectly capable.

Hearing a creak, Llew looked up, but could see nought save the eave of the roof. She stepped out from the building for a better look.

A crouching figure pounced. The sun, suddenly revealed, blinded her and she was thrown back, her head ringing from its collision with the road. Her wrists were pressed to the ground either side of her head. Her vision cleared to reveal a face framed by sandy-brown hair. She recognised the knife-owner's companion. He was grim, although there was something else there; a hint of exhilaration lit up the blue eyes. She struggled in his grasp, but he was strong and straddled her across the middle. Another set of footsteps approached and then a hand gripped her collar. The curly-haired man stood as she was wrenched from the ground and shoved into the nearby wall. Something sharp pressed against her chest.

She glanced down at a compact crossbow, loaded and digging into her sternum. She looked up into a dark, scowling face.

If he hadn't been threatening her, she might have thought he was attractive despite the scars – a hand-shaped burn under his jaw and a couple of lines through an eyebrow, among others. He had a darker complexion than most Cheer locals, with brown eyes and long dark hair. The wide-brimmed hat cast a shadow across his eyes.

“Well, you're a ray of sunlight on a cloudy day. Or should that be the other way around?”

“Shut up,” he said. His voice was deep and gravelly though he looked barely in his twenties. He spoke with an accent. Not local, then.

“Jonas—”

“Back off, Al. He took my knife,” he said over his shoulder without breaking eye-contact with Llew. Then he leaned in so close she could taste his breath. “Now, give it back.” He spoke quietly, but the commanding tone made her jump. The point of the crossbow grazed her chest through the thin shirt.

“Alright, alright!” She fumbled at her waistband to free the knife. “Could you consider maybe not pressing that thing in to me? I think you’ve drawn blood.” Sure enough, a little red seeped through the linen. Great. More blood-stained clothing. She held the knife up by her head and managed to bite her tongue against further comments. She guessed he was one to take care of his own problems rather than turning them over to the authorities – something that could work in her favour, if she played her hand right. Of course, it could also go horribly wrong.

He grabbed the knife, and, stepping back, sheathed it. Then his fist was in her gut, emptying her lungs and folding her over. He turned on his heel, saying, “Come on, Al. We got work to do.”

“Thanks for the sport.” Al grinned and his blue eyes flashed. “It’s been fun.”

Clutching her belly, Llew watched them disappear around the corner. A punch in the gut beat being hauled off to the gallows any day. Even as she coughed phlegm and tried to take in a full breath, she was intrigued. They were certainly not locals.

The scratch on her chest stung. She scanned the area about her, then saw what she was after. Across the street, perched in a windowsill, sat a

flower box overflowing with flourishing forget-me-nots. Ignoring the sign on the wall decreeing a “Magic-free Aghacia”, she brushed her fingertips across the leaves. They wilted. The pain in her gut eased and the graze on her chest tingled and ceased to hurt.

The flash of a dead man filled her mind’s eye, and for the first time in her life, Llew felt guilty for killing a plant. But she couldn’t return life. Once stolen, it remained in her possession.

Under the weight of the three purses, her trousers sat awry, revealing the slim hip under a too-short shirt. Time to rectify that. She turned back toward the market.

From the street corner she watched the two foreigners take the few wooden steps up to the grocer’s. While physically smaller both in height and breadth, the one called Jonas had an aura of power that labelled him the leader of the two, but they both moved with a confidence Llew envied. She wondered what kind of work they could be doing, but had little doubt that soon they would be moving on and leaving Cheer. Her envy grew.

Yet Llew loved Cheer. It was her home town, and the kind of town where people could make their fortune. The only problem with that was that one needed a small fortune to get the equipment needed to plunder the hills and high-country rivers. These days, absentee rich miners hired locals to do the back-breaking labour so that there was a steady, if dwindling, flow of gold out of Cheer; and less and less of anything coming in.

At least Cheer, and Aghacia as a whole, was untouched by the wars Llew saw mentioned almost daily on the news-stands. That was where Cheer

truly shined. Peace reigned. Its earliest settlers had hailed from far off lands Llew knew little about. Recent arrivals usually came from Phyos, the large continent to the east of Aghacia, bringing news of the ongoing wars between Quaver and Turhmos. Llew knew she'd been born in Quaver, but otherwise knew nothing of anywhere beyond Cheer. And there was no denying Cheer's natural beauty if one took the time to go beyond those areas touched by settlers whose greed recognised no boundary.

She made her way back up the main street, scooting around and past people studying the goods on offer or dawdling away from the temptation to spend more.

“Hey, Llew!”

Llew cursed under her breath. A one-time close friend, these days Kynas made her skin crawl.

Still, he was about the only real friend she had.

“Hi, Kynas.” She slowed her pace, allowing him to fall in beside her.

“It's been a good day.” He grinned, patting his pocket. “Did you have a good day?”

She jiggled the pouches hanging off her waist.

“Great,” he said, the jealousy only touching his features for an instant.

“You wanna come by my place?”

“No, Kynas. I'm not in the mood.”

“You ain't been in the mood all summer.” The boy pouted and stopped walking.

No.

Kynas had managed to pick up a job doing odds and ends for an elderly couple, the Maddockses. They couldn't pay him but allowed him to make a small outbuilding on their property his own. Llew had been known to share it with him on cold winter evenings. But it wasn't winter yet.

For a few years now, they had been friends, looking out for each other. Kynas had even helped her make the transition to life on the street – it wasn't her fault she had soon outstripped him in the skills he taught. But last winter something had changed. Huddling together to keep warm had become something different. They had experimented, explored themselves and each other. For a while it had been fun. But it wasn't long before Kynas wanted to play when Llew didn't. And suddenly the shelter wasn't free to her any more. Their friendship had irreversibly altered.

She continued walking. She wasn't about to prostitute herself just to make him feel better. He should know that. Llew had cut her hair short, taken to dressing like a boy, and learnt the art of picking pockets to avoid that lifestyle. Besides, there were plenty of others willing to see to his needs. Well, okay, so she'd originally cut her hair and worn pants to please her father, who preferred having a son over a daughter who reminded him so much of his wife. But she had kept the look for her own reasons.

She stopped into Inael's store to try on a couple of shirts. With little occasion to dress up and not enough money to be concerned about matching styles and colours, she stuck to her usual off-white linen. She bought two shirts, figuring it was always handy to be able to wash one while still having something decent to wear. She thanked old Inael and skipped down the steps

and back onto the dirt road heading for home.

The streets were quieter away from the market. Llew strolled along with her head up like any other respectable citizen. When she wasn't picking pockets, she found that skulking only served to attract more attention, so it was always best to behave like an innocent. The trick was to look natural doing so.

“Llew!”

Llew turned to the distressed voice. “Kynas?”

The boy was struggling in the grip of two uniformed men. Farries! Llew instinctively stooped, stepping in by the side of a building.

“Help me, Llew! They think I killed Mr. Maddocks!”

“Well, who else?” one of the Farries said, shaking Kynas. Cursing, Llew pressed herself deeper into the shadows.

It would be stupid of the boy to put his deal with the Maddocks at risk, but it was a natural conclusion for the law men to draw – and any excuse to remove another urchin from Cheer's streets would do.

“I don't know!” Kynas wailed, kicking his legs and trying to wriggle free of the Farry's grasp. Realising his efforts were futile, he relaxed. And then his finger pointed to Llew. “That one. Sh– he did it!”

Chapter Two

The *Lady Pancetelle* wasn't much of a lady in Braph's opinion. His ears had been assaulted by foul language throughout the journey, she smelled as bad as the Ryaen docks, and no-one could accuse her of being sleek: there was a definite swelling around her middle. She'd also been a rough ride, but he could excuse her a great deal: at least she had carried him safely to Ryaen.

He scratched his beard, sweeping his eyes over the docks. Dirty, stinking and noisy, the scene offended his senses. Sea birds squawked overhead, showering departing passengers in green and white guano. With a thought and a gesture he conjured an invisible barrier around him. A woman's gasp and complaint nearby soon let him know it hadn't been for nothing. He rewarded her accusing look with a contemptuous one of his own, as she dabbed herself free of the deflected droppings with a handkerchief, and continued on his way.

Burly men lifted crates from the *Lady* and hurled passengers' luggage to the docks. Braph had no luggage but the bag slung from his shoulder, and so departed at a brisk pace, with little regard for those in his way.

Away from the docks, Ryaen was almost pleasant. Quieter, at the very least. The fashions weren't dissimilar to those on Phyo: tightly corseted women in brilliantly-coloured dresses, and men in suspenders and bowler hats, trying to look as though they had more important things to do than pass lewd comments on the women. Braph knew better.

He reached the Livery stable, assessing the horse flesh with an unskilled eye. Every one of the creatures was a simple brainless beast.

However, if he were to make his way to Cheer under his own steam, it would leave no power to perform even the most basic magic. And there was every chance he would need far more than basic magic to take the girl back to Turhmos.

“After a horse, mister?”

“Indeed.” Braph looked the man up and down. He wore a heavy leather apron over simple brown trousers and a filthy shirt. Braph was unimpressed. “Your best.”

“Speed, stamina or temperament?”

“All of them.”

“You’ll be wanting Revera. She’s a good’un.” The man grinned. “You got money? I can’t be sending her out without a decent deposit, you understand?”

Braph nodded.

“Right y’are.” The man disappeared through a heavy side door, appearing some time later leading a saddled horse.

“That’ll be ten miras.”

“How much?”

“Ten miras. She’s a good horse.”

“Hmm.”

“Eight?”

Braph sighed and dug into his money pouch. It still seemed an exorbitant amount for horseflesh, but he wasn’t an unreasonable man. Everyone had the right to earn a living. He placed eight paper notes into the

man's hand. The fingers closed on the paper, but the reins were not handed over and instead the man studied the paper, his brows furrowed.

“What's this?”

“Paper money. They're Turhmos miras. Accepted everywhere on Phyos.”

“Got any real money?”

Braph sighed once more, working hard to keep his temper in check, and held out his hand to receive the notes back. When they weren't forthcoming, he snatched them out of the man's hand before rummaging through his pouch again and bringing out an assortment of coins. Before the man saw them, he closed his hand and opened it again displaying the eight miras – or what *looked* like eight miras – and sprinkled them into the outstretched palm. Braph couldn't say how long they would maintain their appearance. He'd only ever performed the trick when he was parting with coins and had yet to keep any he had altered. Grubby fingers closed over the money, and the reins were thrust at him.

Outside in the Ryaen sunshine, Braph gathered the reins and swung himself into the saddle. The horse was shorter than he would have liked and he hoped he hadn't been played. On the outskirts of Ryaen he jabbed his heels into her sides. She took off with a turn of speed that nearly sent him over her rump and maintained a pace that had him in Lanich by early evening.

He booked the finest room in the finest hotel in Lanich. That wasn't saying much; this was Aghacia, after all. In Duffirk, Turhmos' capital, they had hotels reaching eighty feet high and contraptions to lift you all the way to

the top – elevators, they called them. Lanich’s finest was a mere two storeys and a rickety flight of stairs.

Braph threw his hide gloves on the bed and flexed his fingers. They, along with the rest of him, were stiff from the day of riding. He thought about treating his tired muscles but decided a simple night’s rest might ease his aches. He had a good number of crystals on him, but it was better to save them until really needed.

Propping his leather-booted foot on a chair, he unbuckled the small compartment behind his ankle to check the last crystal he’d made from Orinia’s blood. He touched the crystal, remembering their last day together. Then he refastened the buckle. That one crystal held more power than the others combined, more power than he should ever need. Unless he ran into his brother. But there was no need for Jonas to be in Aghacia, and only the smallest chance he was still looking for Braph. No, Braph was almost certain that Aris – Jonas’ captain, father-figure and creator – wouldn’t risk his little project by pursuing revenge.

A knock came at the door and Braph opened it to receive his evening meal, brought by a sullen serving girl. A place as small as this didn’t usually offer room service, but they did if you had the knack for asking in the right way. Braph had the knack; he had the knack for all sorts of things.

He placed the tray on the bed and set about peeling off the rest of his leather – the long jacket, and the triple-buckled boots, the thick leather belt with its equally heavy buckle, finally unlacing his trousers and sliding them to the floor. Then he threw himself in the chair and chewed at a piece of tough

meat while he contemplated the days ahead, one leg slung over the chair arm.

He'd met the girl's father in Cheer about five years ago. She must have been there, too, but her father had led him astray. And if Turhmos hadn't allowed Orinia to become so ill, forcing Braph's return, he would have found her. If she had since moved, he had to hope there was a new trail to follow. And he hoped she was as powerful as her mother and not diminished by her father's half-blood.

Orinia. He missed her, though it irked him to admit it. She had been everything to him during some of his most important formative years: his mother, his wife, his mistress, his best friend, the source of his power. Behind every great man... With her behind him, he had indeed been great; he had been supreme. He would be again.

His meal finished, he put the plate by the door. Then he fished in his bag for his thunderstick, one of his own inventions. As far as he knew it worked, but he was still perfecting the ammunition for it. For now he used small spherical pellets that he packed down on top of the explosive. He had been developing an all-in-one round that didn't require packing the powder first, but he couldn't experiment further without his workshop. The device would be needed should his magic prove insufficient to defeat his brother.

He lounged in a chair by the open window. Resting his elbow on the sill, he sighted along the thunderstick's barrel. A man in a dress coat hurried along the street completely unaware that, if he chose, Braph could put a hole in the back of his head. For a brief moment, Braph sorely wanted to, just to know how it would feel.

“Bang,” he said, emotionless.

Braph slept well. In the dawn, after a brief period of meditation, he stretched his muscles and took to his horse once more, aiming to be in Iaves by nightfall. Another day closer to Cheer.

Chapter Three

The little –

The second officer spotted her and started running. Llew shot off down the road, taking the first turn and continuing on a convoluted path through the streets of Cheer. There weren't a great many routes to choose from and she had to cover the same ground several times. Clutching her better-fitting, perfectly clean new shirts slowed her down, but she didn't want to throw them down and leave a hint of where she had been, never mind the waste of money.

Damn Kynas! She'd never even met Mr. Maddocks, and she was sure as hell it wasn't the old man lying on top of her that morning. She wondered if they'd found that body yet. It was likely someone had – probably a john taking a leak on the Diamond's wall. But would they be looking for a killer?

Llew hadn't taken the time to check, but she was certain there wouldn't be a scratch on him. Well, nothing deadly, anyway. It was just that there was all that blood. *Her* blood, but they wouldn't know that.

She headed for the seedier side of Cheer where shadows seemed deeper, drunks seemed drunker and morals were all but missing entirely. She turned down litter-strewn Prince Tanath Road and saw a gang of street kids loitering outside a half-collapsed building. These children were evidence that mining could be dangerous and prostitution had side-effects Llew preferred to avoid.

“Hi, Llew.” One of the girls looked up from a game of knuckle-bones.

“Annie.” Slowing to a walk, she tipped her head to the younger girl in

the tatty dress; at the moment still young and pitiful enough to successfully beg, she would soon graduate to a place in one of Cheer's brothels. She had never mastered the art of picking pockets. "You didn't see me, okay?"

"Okay." The girl shrugged.

Llew stooped through a hole in the wall to a space under the building's floorboards. The children behind her were silent, watching. She scooted along on her belly, thankful that she didn't have breasts to worry about. Behind her the sounds of the children's games started up again.

Her new shirts were now filthy, and one snagged on a stray nail sticking out from a board. She threw them aside and yelped as her knuckle struck the support beam above her. Sucking at the wound, she peered through the shadows under the building. Cheer's sun was bright and its light hindered by little since the buildings were mostly only one storey. It filtered through the gaps, allowing her to see well enough.

Somewhere on the opposite side of the building she emerged into Lomirir Way. It was deserted, so she clambered out, dusted herself off, and walked briskly in the general direction she had been going before. If the Farry was still after her, there was nowhere she could disappear into permanently. She had to hope that he had enough doubt in Kynas' accusation to give up, although she didn't doubt that simply removing another kid from the street could be incentive enough.

She rounded a corner, walking past a man sitting on the rickety wooden steps at the back of an old store.

"Lady Llewella, are we peddling our goods today?" His voice was

slurred.

“No, sir.” Head down, she carried on walking past, not looking at him.

How could he have picked her for a girl, let alone known her name?

“You wouldn’t turn away a paying customer now, would you?” His feet scuffed the dusty road behind her.

Llew turned to face him, recognising one of her father’s old drinking “buddies”, but continued to walk backwards. “Japod, you never were a paying customer. In fact, I think you still owe Pa money.” She turned away and walked a little faster.

“Your pa ain’t been chasin’ me for it.”

Well, of course he hadn’t.

Too many people knew who she was – hair short or long, dress feminine or masculine. She’d just been a tomboyish girl when her father had been around. Only after he left did she try to become known as a boy. But all her father’s friends still recognised her. She had hoped their respect for him would be enough for them not to put pressure on his daughter to entertain them. Apparently, she was wrong.

“You’d do an old friend a favour, wouldn’t you, Llew?” The rasp of his feet over the coarse dirt grated on her ears.

Her mind raced with plans to lose him without running straight into the law man. But Japod lunged, grabbing her legs, sending them both into the ground. Llew got a face full of gravelly dirt and a bite of her own cheek, while the old man was cushioned by the backs of her legs. He scrabbled to start yanking at the waist of her trousers.

“Get off!” she yelled, coughing on inhaled dust.

Her belt-ropes were thin and they gave under the man’s determined tugs. Llew’s efforts to right herself were thwarted as her legs continued to be pulled out from under her in Japod’s efforts to unwrap his prize. Her pants slipped, exposing her long-johns. The two buttons didn’t deter him long. Japod’s dry fingers dug into her flesh. He gasped, and the skin of Llew’s cheek healed. The distraction gave her the pause she needed to swing an arm, knocking him off her. He rallied quickly and was on her again.

Japod’s long hair was greying, his chin unshaven, and his few remaining teeth yellow; his breath was a mix of the rotting remnants of his previous meals and whatever concoction he had just been drinking. He planted a wet kiss on Llew’s lips, and she clamped her mouth tight.

“Get off me!” Llew’s arms and legs worked furiously, but he was stronger than he looked.

For a fraction of a second, Llew believed he had listened to her as his body moved away. But then arms looped under her armpits, helping her to her feet. She was pulled to the side of the road and was vaguely aware of someone ramming Japod into a wall.

She pulled her pants up, watching the old man take a hammering. His assailant had long hair and was wearing a wide-brimmed hat. The man who’d lifted her and now stood beside her was his curly-haired companion.

Before the old man lost consciousness entirely, the dark foreigner threw his limp body to the ground and turned away. He headed straight for the cart in which they had arrived.

“You alright?” Al asked.

“Fine.” Llew cleared her throat and forced her voice deeper. “Fine.” At least at her assumed age she could brush the slip off as her voice breaking. She crossed the road to the limp old man and kicked him in the gut.

“Slimy old coot. You don’t–” Kick “–do that to your mate’s kid.” She went for one last kick, but was spun around by the young man.

“Hey, hey,” said Al. “He’s down already. He’s no threat, now.”

Llew nodded, lowering her head to show her remorse. Living on the streets, she knew there was always a point at which the fight ended, and it usually came before someone died. But Japod’s attack had scared and angered her, especially coming so soon after her encounter with Renny. She hugged herself and then, realising it might not have looked manly enough, she dropped one arm to her side, still gripping the elbow with her other hand.

Even if the law man had given up on her for today, she was well aware that developing hips and breasts could not be covered forever. She needed to leave Cheer. And here and now, an opportunity had presented itself.

The men returned to their cart and Jonas urged the bay horse into life. It moved off at a walk. Llew walked alongside, wondering how she could get them to take her with them. Al must have caught a glimpse of her in the periphery, for he suddenly laughed, grinning over his shoulder. Jonas looked at her, turned away and urged the horse into a trot. Llew began to trot along behind, hoping he wouldn’t go to a canter. Al kept looking back at her, now and then saying something to Jonas.

Finally, Jonas reined in the horse. Llew ran into the back of the

suddenly stationary cart, and took a moment to lean on it, catching her breath.

Jonas jumped down off the cart and rounded on her.

“What d’you think you’re doin’?”

“Coming with you.” She fought to keep the pleading tone out of her voice.

Jonas shook his head. “No.”

“Come on, Jonas. Hear the kid out.” Al swung down from the cart and joined them.

“I ain’t no kid.” She crossed her arms, scowling at her supporter, who laughed. She narrowed her eyes further, to no effect, then returned her attention to Jonas. “You’re leaving Cheer, right? I want to leave Cheer.”

“Not our problem.”

“No. But all the same. I have a little money. Not enough to get me a ticket on a coach, but I could make myself useful, earn my passage with you.”

“Ain’t nothin’ we need from no thief.”

“I wasn’t always a thief. I used to help my pa in his smithy. I can help.” The selection of knives in Jonas’ vest caught Llew’s eye again. “I can fight.”

That got a brief laugh out of Jonas.

“I can!” She made fists, waving them in front of her just as she had many a time against boys she’d rough ’n tumbled with.

Al placed a hand over hers, pushing down.

“We could at least see what Aris has to say,” he said.

“No. This ain’t no job for a criminal, no matter how good his words

sound.”

A movement behind Jonas drew Llew’s attention. It was the Farry. She dived into the back of the low cart, pulling sacks and an old blanket about her.

“Get out,” said Jonas flatly.

“Please.” With the realisation that her safety was in the hands of someone who had every reason to turn her over to the law, she could think of nothing else to say. She threw everything she had into a pleading look.

Jonas looked down his nose at her, then along the road at the approaching law man. With a grunt, he flicked the blanket over her.

Llew waited to discover her fate. Maybe Jonas wasn’t an unfair man. She had deserved the fist to the gut. She didn’t deserve to hang.

The sack closest to her nose smelled of dirt and potatoes. Something else nearby smelled sweet. Apples? She inhaled and her mouth watered, remembering that she had yet to eat. She forced it from her mind. For now, she could do nothing but be still.

“What happened here?”

“Old drunk walked in front of us. Spooked our horse,” said Jonas.

“Yeah. He just stumbled out of nowhere,” said Al.

“You two ain’t from around here.”

“No, sir. Over from Phyos,” said Al.

“What for?”

“Just helpin’ a friend,” said Jonas.

“Where you staying?”

“Postmaster Muor’s house.”

“Nice place.” The law man sounded impressed.

“Sure is,” said Alvaro.

“He’s a good man,” said the officer. Another pause, as though he were waiting for the boys to confirm. “Well, maybe the old drunk’ll learn for next time, huh?” The officer laughed, inviting the two young men to join him. They didn’t. “You wouldn’t happen to have seen a young lad about so tall, white shirt, grubby, would you?”

“Just that old boy,” said Al.

“If we see him, we’ll be sure to let you know,” said Jonas. “What did he do?”

“He’s wanted for questioning about a murder.”

“Murder?”

“Yeah. We have an eye witness saw him do it.”

Silence from Jonas and Al. Llew tensed. This was it. They were going to give her up. She’d swing from a rope by the end of the week. Or worse. There was always worse. Llew just didn’t have the imagination to fill in the blanks.

“Alright.” A hand slapped the side of the cart. “You boys stay out of trouble, okay?”

The distant sound of children playing reached Llew’s ears. A bird fluttered overhead. What would they do? They hadn’t revealed her so far. That was something to cling to.

The blanket was pulled back.

“Get out,” said Jonas.

“I didn’t do it. You have to believe me,” she pleaded with him, making no effort to keep her voice deep.

“I don’t gotta do nothin’.” He looked at her with his stony expression. “Out.”

She turned to Al. “I’m innocent.”

Al raised an eyebrow.

“Well, maybe not entirely innocent. But I didn’t kill anyone. On my mother’s honour.” They still looked unconvinced. “She was a good woman!”

Jonas grabbed the triceps of her arm closest to him, half lifting, half pushing her from the cart. Llew made herself as heavy as possible and dug in her heels, but it made little difference.

“You’re heading for the Postmaster’s, right?”

“So?”

“Well, if I’m going to leave Cheer, then I need to start at the Postmaster’s anyway. Maybe he’ll let me earn my ticket. At least take me that far.”

“You’re a thief and we ain’t got time to decide whether or not you’re a murderer. You can walk.”

She knew he wasn’t going to change his mind. Still, it didn’t mean she had to take his attitude. He turned his back on her and returned to his seat at the front of the cart.

“Sorry,” said Al, coming to the same conclusion. “Good luck.” He returned to his seat at the front of the cart and Jonas flicked the horse back into life, then with another flick calling up a trot.

Llew stood for a time, watching her brighter future disappear into the distance. “Fuck.”

“I knew I seen you come this way.”

She turned to the voice, then darted away, the law hot on her heels once more. Unfortunately, this time there were two of them, and one was young, tall, and fit. He had her on her belly in less than a minute.

“I knew we’d get yer.” The older officer knelt in front of her while the younger pulled her hands behind her and cuffed them. “No point running from the law, ya scoundrel. We always get our man.”

The younger officer wrenched her to her feet, one arm over her shoulder, cupping the opposite armpit. His hand slipped and he took an experimental squeeze.

“Or woman.” He tugged at her shirt, pulling several buttons free. “As the case may be.”

Llew felt the dry Cheer air on her exposed breast.

“Well, course she is,” the older officer said as though he’d known all along, eyeing her appreciatively and firing up goosebumps all over Llew’s skin. “A female hangin’ . . . *that’ll* draw a crowd.”

Chapter Four

Llew spent three days in a cell, with Kynas in the next one – long enough to make sure everyone knew there would be a hanging to come to town for. She refused to talk to him, no matter how much he apologised, and determinedly looked everywhere but through the bars at him. He knew her better than anyone, and the betrayal was all the worse for that.

There would be no trial for either of them; the accusation was enough. “Cleaning up the streets” they called it. In any case, since Kynas’ accusation someone had come forward about the body down the alleyway and had positively identified Llew as the killer. Or Kynas. They hadn’t quite been sure which of the two they had seen, but they had definitely seen one of them. Maybe. It didn’t matter. The gallows were going up before they’d even walked into the gaol.

As the sun cleared the tops of Cheer’s roofs on the morning of the fourth day, Llew and Kynas were dragged and pushed through a crowd of excited locals only too eager to spit at the filthy urchins as they passed. The two were forced up the steps onto the stage of the gallows. They stood trembling in the cold air while the charges against them were solemnly read out.

The Farries had dressed Llew in a long, heavy skirt a couple of sizes too big for her, and a thin, floaty blouse, which they had tied in at the back to emphasise what femininity she possessed. A girl being hanged drew a larger crowd than a boy. Rarity, she supposed, and some kind of thrill.

The charge of theft was fair – they had both been carrying stolen

purses at the time of their captures – but Llew took offence at being accused of stealing and killing livestock. She had a good relationship with a local farmer, and she caught fish, which she regularly swapped for a little beef. She didn't need to steal the beasts themselves.

Looking out over the crowd, she saw that very farmer watching from a few rows back. He looked less angry than the rest of the crowd; perhaps even a little saddened. Would someone actually miss her when she was gone? Llew gave a brief smile to him and he returned it with a pained look of his own. Suddenly he turned and pushed his way back through the crowd. There was no shortage of people to fill the space he left. Llew recognised a couple of men that her father used to drink the evenings away with. And there was Japod, his face still bruised. He grinned at her and she tore her eyes away from him. How could he smile to see his old friend's daughter about to be hanged?

But, as she unwittingly caught a glimpse of her gallows-mate out the corner of her eye, Llew wondered what friendship really meant. You found people as lonely as you to whittle away the hours with. If you trusted them, if you let your heart rest with them, they left, just as Llew's ma and pa had done. Sure, they were most likely dead, but that offered no added comfort, because they surely had left. And now Kynas had proved Llew right in her decision to hold back from giving her heart to another. That should have meant she was safe from him and his betrayal.

The crowd buzzed with excitement, jostling each other for the best view and sharing their opinions on the two thieves, murderers, and livestock

sodomites (how Llew earned that charge, she couldn't guess). People laughed, as though they weren't about to see two children – at seventeen, nearly eighteen, Llew would have been the first to proclaim her maturity, but now it seemed appropriate to lean the other way – lose their lives.

Charges and prayers read, the Farries turned to their captives and pressed them forward to the nooses. Then the hangman took over, guiding the first noose over Kynas' head and then turning to Llew.

Kynas blubbered, still desperately proclaiming his innocence. Llew was inclined to believe him, but she couldn't excuse him pointing the finger at her. She still refused to look at him. The rope settled about Llew's neck as she stared over the crowd. This was all becoming too real. Sure, she didn't like Kynas much anymore, but he didn't deserve to die. She couldn't look at him, but neither could she shut out his wails.

The trapdoor fell away and Kynas hit the end of the rope, rattling the entire platform.

For a moment, Llew thought her world had fallen away with him. Her only friend in all the world hung limply from a rope beside her. She was all alone. Renny had died alone, too.

Parts of the crowd fell silent, while a small section cheered and then grew expectant.

Llew's breathing grew fast as panic began to take hold. Her eyes swept the crowd. Would someone save her? Didn't anyone believe she was innocent? She didn't deserve to die! She'd stolen, a lot, but only to survive until the opportunity to live a more honest life presented itself. It wasn't her

fault that chance hadn't come. Someone, someone. Please.

But she had no one.

The lever was thrown and she fell.

* * *

Llew woke from a dreamless sleep. It took but a moment to realise she wasn't breathing, that she hadn't been breathing. Gasping for air now, she grabbed the rope around her throat, trying to ease the pressure; her own weight kept pulling her down. Her legs kicked at nothing and she began to swing gently.

Someone gasped and someone – the same or another – ran off.

Consciousness faded and everything went black again.

* * *

When she stirred, she had a vague recollection of having done so before. She fought down her panic and managed to squeeze her fingers between the rope and her throat and raised herself enough to take a ragged breath, but her arms failed and she came down on her fingers. She was able to take shallow breaths but her fingertips were being rapidly suffocated.

A woman's scream alerted her to the fact she was in full public view. *Great.* Even if she got herself down, there was every chance she'd be right back here soon after – or disposed of in some other, more certain way. An image of a chopping block and an axe flashed through her mind. *Oh gods!*

Through sheer force of will she forced her arms once more to raise her body, and, trembling under the strain, she eased the rope forward from her throat toward her chin. She rested her fingers, grabbing the sides of the noose

and leaning her head back into the spiral knot, redistributing her weight. This wasn't going to be pretty.

The hushed silence told her that people were more fascinated by her efforts than they were interested in alerting anyone official.

She didn't know how long she'd been gone. As she focused her efforts on freeing herself, some part of her mind turned over the fact that she'd already died once before. Now she could make it, what? Three times? Three times in how many days? The sun was high. Lunch time. She'd been hung in the morning. Was this the same day? The next day? A week later?

As far as she could tell, it had taken her a couple of hours or so to come back after the glass bottle incident. She didn't know how long a broken neck would take to heal.

Her arms rested as much as they could under the circumstances, then she returned to her efforts to slide the rope to her chin. Her neck ached, the rope burned her cheeks and jaw, and trapped blood threatened to pop the tips of her fingers. But none of that mattered when giving up would mean suffocating to death... again.

The flutter of wings and the scratch of claws on metal drew Llew's attention to the roof of the building that cast a shadow over her, shielding her from the afternoon sun. A swamp hawk perched there, inspecting her, its head moving in staccato tilts and turns. She bared her teeth and hissed at the bird. It continued to peer at her with idle curiosity. The best way to lose the scavenger's interest was to get free and on the move.

This was it – her moment of freedom likely followed by a more

permanent death. She closed her eyes and said a silent prayer to whatever god might listen to an orphan in such a godforsaken place. The ignorance of others and her own luck had so far kept her alive. She just needed them to hold out until... well, until she was away from Cheer. She was almost certain there was more to life out there, somewhere.

She took a breath, steeling herself for the drop, and wiggled, rolled and pressed the rope over the curve of her chin. It burned up the back of her head and caught under her nose. Pain seared through her top lip and up her sinuses into her forehead, and her legs thrashed, seeking ground; she wasn't there yet. The rope was slipping, if slowly. With a flick of her thumbs she forced it from under her nose. Her brow caught on it briefly, then she slid free.

Landing on something soft she leapt up, adrenaline flooding her bloodstream, fearing she had landed on an over-enthusiastic onlooker, only to find a pile of feathers, fur, and flies. A selection of the local carrion eaters: swamp hawks, rats, and flies.

Bile rose in her throat, and her skin crawled. Llew turned from the pile of death – her saviours, evidently. Her body ached and her tired muscles trembled. She would have collapsed from the fatigue and revulsion, but coming face to face with her audience, she was reminded she was not out of danger just yet.

The woman right in front of her looked as terrified as Llew felt. Llew poked out her tongue, screwed up her face and made an unintelligible sound. The woman shrieked and ran, her male companion following after, looking as shocked as she did. No one in the square seemed to know what to do about

this girl who had come back to life. They simply stared.

Llew didn't much know what to do either. But standing around was only going to get her caught and killed. Again. Taking advantage of their inaction, Llew leapt from the platform and ran. And kept on running.

She reached the outskirts of town and ran on dry grass verges, her bare feet grabbing a little life energy – or ghi as she called it – from the ground below to heal the rope burns and bruises with each stride. She checked over her shoulder for signs of pursuit. It seemed no one was after her yet. She supposed they would have to think about what to do with someone who could come back from the dead. At least it gave her time.

Her toes slapped the hard-packed sand roads that led to her Spot, and then she pushed through the tussocks. Someone coughed and she skipped behind a tree. Her approach hadn't been silent, but neither was Big River.

Peering around the tree, she saw a man sitting upstream from her hovel, his line in the water. She moved to confront him – fishing holes were like gold seams in Cheer, and this one was hers – but some small part of her made her grip the trunk and stop before she was halfway past. She looked in the direction of her small shelter, hidden behind more grasses and lupins, and knew she couldn't return. If she went out there the man would see her. A large contingent of Cheer locals had seen her hang, and it wouldn't take long for word to spread that she had lived and escaped. She couldn't stay in Cheer. If she left immediately she might have a chance. While news of her feat might spread far and wide, hopefully a detailed description wouldn't.

She owned very little, and yet it had been hers. To leave it left a pit in

her stomach, but still she turned away, pushing back through the tussocks, back to the road.

She had always thought travelling alone would be dangerous, but what did she have to lose now? If she were attacked, she would heal. If she starved, she would heal. If she poisoned herself trying to stave off hunger, she would heal. Why hadn't her parents told her this? All her father had ever told her was to keep it to herself, keep it secret. She knew she could fix the odd bump and bruise. Had they thought that if she knew she could come back from the dead she would make a habit of it? Having gone through it twice, no, three times in, perhaps, five days she knew it wasn't something she would care to repeat any time soon.

Calculating north, she ran with the simple aim of getting out of Cheer. There was no longer a place for her there and, if she was honest with herself, there hadn't been since the night her father left.

She found a new, clean shirt and pair of trousers on a farmhouse washing line. Feeling almost normal, she continued north for as long as her feet would carry her – which turned out to be a long way with bare feet brushing through fields of lush, vibrant grass. She was dimly aware of the almost constant tingling in her soles as her muscles were continually refreshed. Her stomach continued to grumble, though. Hunger wasn't an illness or injury.

The outer regions of Cheer were turning to wine country now that gold was no longer so easy to come by, and she eased the ache in her gut with a couple of handfuls of grapes. And then she found the Great North Road. The

road continued on a predominantly straight heading between fields turned to wineries, and others turned to cattle or sheep farms, and finally into the as yet uncleared Aghacian forests.

She slept off the road amongst trees after the sun dipped below the horizon. In summer, the twilight would linger well into the night, but autumn brought dark evenings and cold nights. She woke shivering in the dark and dawdled onward, figuring she may as well warm her muscles by walking rather than lie sleepless in the early morning cold.

Cheer lay behind a series of hills, yet Llew felt she'd hardly made any headway. There was so much farther to go. So many miles of road, so many hours of hunger and thirst. Aghacia was a long, narrow country and Llew knew little of it, having only vague memories of arriving with her father some eleven years earlier. Cheer was a long way from anywhere.

It was getting to midday when she heard horses approaching from behind. Her pulse quickened and she scanned the area for cover. There were always trees by the side of the road and she readied herself to dart amongst them. Then, glancing over her shoulder, she relaxed. It was a carriage with a small escort of riders. Not the Farries, then. If she stuck to her path, hopefully they would just ride past her.

The front riders caught up to and passed her. She kept her head down, still feeling too close to Cheer to be safe from scrutiny. But the carriage pulled up just ahead of her.

“You alright, son?” The driver was a man a little past his middle years. Beside him sat a prim woman in a chaste, yet flattering dress, with her hair

scooped up at the back of her head. A pretty blonde girl about Llew's age, dressed as properly as the older woman but with a more relaxed air, completed the trio.

Llew cleared her throat and made her usual octave drop. "I'm fine." She kept walking.

The carriage moved forward with her.

"It's just that there ain't much but road for miles. You sure you wouldn't be wanting a ride?"

Llew stopped.

"You mean it, mister? You'd take me with you?"

The rider behind the carriage moved into view. *Uh oh*. It was the man Llew had stolen the knife from several days before. And, judging from his expression, he remembered her too.

"Hey! You're that kid from the other day." One of the leading riders rode back. "Remember him, Jonas?" Al. That was it. His name was Al.

Jonas grunted and gave Llew a none too impressed look.

"You know him?" the girl in the carriage asked.

"Kinda. He stole Jonas' knife at the market the other day."

"You let him steal your knife?" The older man gave Jonas an incredulous look.

"I didn't let him—"

"What you doin' all the way out here?" Al asked.

"I told you I wanted to leave Cheer. So I'm leaving Cheer."

"Just how far were you hoping to get with bare feet and..." The older

man looked her up and down. "...no provisions?"

Llew shrugged. "Figured I'd walk. There's gotta be a few towns between here and Ryaen." Ryaen was the only Aghacian city with a port. Cheer should have had one, but an unfortunate tide just out from the peninsula made it a dangerous stretch of sea. Too dangerous for the few flakes of gold coming out these days.

The older man smiled. "A few, sure. But we're not due to reach the next till tomorrow, and we got horses." His head dipped. "And footwear. Come on." He patted the carriage platform behind him. "We're all headed the same way."

It hardly needed saying. Cheer was at one end of Aghacia; ocean to the south and east, hills and mountains that dropped off to the sea to the west. The only way to get anywhere was to take the North Road, upon which they were currently standing.

"I don't think that's a good idea, Aris." Jonas brought his bay and white-patched horse forward. "We don't know nothin' about him—"

"Look at him. Clothes too big, no shoes, planning to walk the length of the country." Aris waved an arm up and down, drawing everyone's attention to Llew's attire. "What more is there to know?"

"I just think we should be careful, is all. Anya's gotta be delivered safely—"

The girl in the carriage laughed. The woman beside her scowled. "Sorry, Emylia, but I think Jonas underestimates me. I think I could defend myself from a boy *that* small."

Everyone, apart from Jonas apparently, could understand a young lad wanting more from life than Cheer had to offer. It was agreed that extra hands could be put to use. So Llew clambered up into the carriage, and they set off. As he snapped the reins to make the horses walk, Aris explained that they were escorting Anya to her future husband.

“This is so exciting!” Anya exclaimed. “We’re barely out of Cheer and we’ve already picked up a straggler. What’s your name?”

“Llew.”

“Nice to meet you, Llew. My name is Anya, this is Emylia, and Aris.”

The woman nodded to Llew with a tight yet friendly smile, and the man offered his hand. Llew shook it and smiled at him. “Up the front,” Anya continued, “are Cassidy and Alvaro. They’re cousins from Rakun – where we’re going. The blond one is Cassidy. And behind is Jonas, who I believe you’ve met...”

“Yes, I, ah, ran into Al– Alvaro and Jonas the other day...”

“How poetic!” Anya said with a sparkle in her eyes. “I guess it was fate.”

“So, tell me, Llew. Where are your people?” Aris asked over his shoulder.

Llew shrugged. “They’re dead.”

“That’s terrible!” Anya’s perfectly clean and delicate hands flew to her lips.

“Ah.” Aris nodded, ignoring the girl’s outburst. “That’d explain the thieving, then. You lookin’ to make an honest living?”

“If I can.” Llew said, repeating more hopefully, “If I can.”

* * *

A gentle breeze blew across the landscape. They remained close to the coast, and the hiss and crash of waves were constant companions. Now and then, the salty smell reached them across open fields.

They stopped at a creek by the roadside to eat lunch, water the horses, and refill canteens. Llew gratefully accepted a share in the fresh bread rolls and fruit on offer.

“So, what’s your special skill?” Anya asked, joining Llew by the creek as she filled one of the spare canteens.

“Sorry?”

“Well, you see, Cassidy is a superb shot with a bow and arrow,” she began, swivelling so that she could point out each of their companions. “My father insisted they prove to him that I was in good hands. He’s good with a sword, too, but it was Alvaro who shone in the mini-tournament they put on for me.” She beamed. “And Jonas has an uncanny knack for knife-throwing. Actually, his knives sliced each of Cassidy’s perfect shots.” Anya looked around, seeking out the dark young man. It wasn’t hard – he hadn’t let Llew out of his sight since she’d joined them, and he wasn’t hiding the fact.

Every time she looked up he was there. When she went off for a privacy stop, he was barely out of view – although he was polite enough not to watch. He didn’t trust her, and Llew hoped that was all. She had stolen from him, after all, so she could understand his concerns.

“So, my little menagerie has an archer, a swordsman and a knife-

thrower.” Anya looked Llew up and down. “And what is it that you can do?”

“Fishing?” Llew cursed herself for such a lame answer. She’d been caught off guard and replied with the first thing that came to mind – an archer, a swordsman, a knife-thrower, and a fisher?

Anya clapped her hands with delight. “Oh, that’s wonderful! You can catch us some fresh dinners. It’ll make a nice change from the travel rations.”

Llew blinked. She’d expected a demand for a talent in weaponry. In truth, she had some – you didn’t work for a blacksmith and go on to survive the streets without picking up a few essential skills – but she doubted she compared well with Alvaro, Cassidy or Jonas.

“I’ll need a hook, I–” *Stop. Just stop, now.* “I don’t have a hook.” Why was she continuing along this line? She should have been proclaiming her skill with a sword, a sling, whatever they needed. Something useful. These people had money and ample supplies, and it wasn’t as if they had the time to sit around waiting for dinner to bite. *Fishing. Sure, Llew. They’ll be happy to have you along. You’ll be so useful.*

“Perhaps we can get you one when we stop at Orn. I’m sure they’ll have a store.”

Llew nodded absently and Anya headed back to the carriage. Llew didn’t know what to make of the other girl. She was talkative, bubbly and... *nice.* It wasn’t a normal state for the girls living on the streets of Cheer.

“Damn shame, ain’t it?”

“What?” Llew couldn’t believe she’d been taken by surprise again. She stood and turned to follow Cassidy’s gaze. He was watching Anya chat

animatedly with Aris and Emylia.

“A girl like that. Off the market already. Marryin’ a guy more’n ten years her senior, too.”

Llew looked at Cassidy. Her lips began to curl up in a smile, and then she remembered her role – as a fellow young male – and the smile disappeared.

“Yeah.” She cleared her throat. “Damn shame.” Anya’s laughter jangled like a cow bell back through the air to them, accompanied by the deeper tones of Aris. Anya was as comfortable in the presence of her elders as she was with Llew, a stranger.

Normally, she would have been wary of these people. What did they have to gain by taking her with them? Very little. In Llew’s world that equated not to generosity, but ignorance. Giving without expecting in return? Unheard of. In accepting their help without negotiating terms, she had put herself in a vulnerable position. And yet it felt like the right thing to do. She probably wouldn’t have accepted the ride from these people if it hadn’t been for Anya. She trusted Llew not to take advantage of their generosity, and Llew realised that faith was catching.

Cassidy’s clear blue eyes settled on her. “Of course, men like you an’ me never get girls like that. They keep to their own kind and we keep to ours.”

He wasn’t wrong. But Cassidy didn’t look like much of a street rat.

“And what’s your kind?”

Cassidy’s face lit up in a grin. “Generous.”

* * *

Revera shifted under Braph, her saddle and his trousers creaking. She was growing restless. If she had any notion how to read the signals flying along the telegraph semaphore line, she would have been as riveted as him. Semaphore towers. Braph shook his head. Aghacia was so far behind the times. Turhmos already had a wired telegraph system, and in having such had a far greater level of security over the information crossing the nation. Aghacia still relied on optical signals, which any damned fool could read. Braph wasn't a fool, and he was certain he knew more about the information currently heading up the length of Aghacia than the sender or receiver.

News was spreading of a witch surviving a hanging in Cheer, at the far south of the country, where Braph was headed. But not only had the girl survived, she had also killed. She was still there, then, or at least had been until this news had got out. He doubted she would still be in Cheer now. That wasn't a bad thing. The shape of Aghacia meant that the chances of Braph and the girl crossing paths was high, and Braph was by no means saddened at the prospect of not returning to Cheer.

The only question remaining, then, was whether or not the girl had actually died and lived, or if she had merely failed to die in the first place and healed. Either way, Braph wanted to see it for himself.