

# The Ravellers Guild

by Rachel Emma Shaw

For my grandmothers.  
One taught me to love reading,  
the other to love writing.

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# Chapter One

No-one had bothered to explain the reason for the uncomfortable outfit, or why his mother cried when she kissed him goodbye. All his father had told him was not to disgrace the family – the same warning he had given a hundred times over.

The new clothes chafed, the tight fabric digging into his skin, making each step hurt. Despite all his mother's fussing, he knew he looked stupid. His father had become angry when he had said so though, all but dragging him from their rooms in the capital.

The pounding of his father's footsteps echoed down the hallway, a resonating drumming of boots on stone, interspersed by quick taps as Tahnner raced to keep up with him. The palace seemed unending, voices rebounding down the corridor, growing louder the closer they got. Rounding another bend they reached the source of the commotion.

He tried to stay as close to his father as possible as they passed through the gathered throng. A man moved in front of him, blocking his sight of his father. He called out but a large hand had already reached back into the crowd and tugged him forward. He emerged to find his father scowling down at him, his dark eyes narrowed.

"Smarten yourself up!" he hissed, too low for anyone else to hear over the noise in the chamber.

Tahnner flattened his hair with both hands, like his mother did whenever she called him scruffy. She always smiled when she said it though. He glanced around. They stood at the front of the crowd, before a throne flanked by two braziers brimming with flames, emitting even more heat into the already stuffy chamber.

The chatter died into muted whispers and Tahnner glanced up, searching out the cause. His gaze met a pair of dark-brown eyes, staring down at him from atop the throne, one

amused eyebrow raised as a crooked smile tugged at the corners of his mouth.

Tahnner stilled, his hands dropping to his side. He glanced at his father for direction, but his attention was fixed on the man standing close to the throne. Tahnner broke into a smile at the only face familiar to him in the entire chamber. His uncle Jareck winked, looking different then when he had last visited Turro over five seasons ago. He wore an armoured uniform which looked like a smarter version of those the soldiers had been wearing when Tahnner watched them practice in the courtyard that morning. Whatever the reason for his being in Girona, it seemed to suit him. He even had a new dagger, judging from the deep-red stones set into its hilt.

Jareck had often visited Turro when Tahnner was younger, sometimes staying for many seasons at a time. During the last trip, Jareck had sat with him in one of the groves and explained that he would be too busy to visit for a while. The time had come for him to do his bit for their family. He had teased Tahnner that his own time would come soon enough, then given him a toy horse carved from a gnarled branch of one of the Killenart trees Turro was famous for.

“Lord Rhanick,” the man sat atop the throne said, his rumbling voice rebounding off the chamber walls loud enough to reach even those in the corridor. “You are most welcome at my court. I hope the journey was not too long? I have been looking forward to hearing the tidings of the newest reaches of my empire.”

“I thank Your Majesty for extending the welcome,” Tahnner’s father said, bowing his head to the king.

“I see you did not travel alone this time. Your eldest?”

Tahnner fidgeted under the weight of the king’s stare. Despite the welcoming smile, there was something which made him uncomfortable, as if he noticed everything, right down to the wrinkles in Tahnner’s clothes.

King Sorentien Gallidon. He had learnt about him last season in his lessons and could recite every name in the royal line going back ten generations. He had been busy learning

about the various conquests of the Ilyian Empire, transforming a kingdom into an empire, when the lessons had been put on hold whilst his father brought them to the capital.

The king's dark eyes lingered on Tahnner expectantly and he wondered if he could take the opportunity to ask the king why his family had never adopted the title of emperor. The curiosity had bothered him since he had learnt of it. He opened his mouth to ask, but was cut off by his father.

"No Your Majesty, this is my youngest. Tahnner." The last word was almost a growl. He placed a hand on Tahnner's back as he spoke, forcing him down into a bow.

The motion jolted Tahnner into remembering his lessons on what was expected of him in the presence of Ilyia's royalty. He threw himself into the bow, sinking as far as his waist could bend. Laughter rippled through the room as his father grabbed him by the scruff and hauled him back up, the collar biting into his neck. He glanced up and found his father scowling down at him. He would be in trouble later.

"What brings you all the way to Girona, Lord Rhanick?" the king asked, drawing his father's attention away from him.

"A gift, Your Majesty," his father said with another bow. "A demonstration of House Turro's allegiance to the Ilyian Empire. I intend to indenture Tahnner to the ravellers guild for you so he might one day serve Your Majesty."

The relative silence of the crowd gathered behind them broke at the pronouncement and Tahnner felt eyes upon his back as people shuffled to get a better view as they whispered. He could not have been more shocked had his father just hit him over the head with the pommel of his sword. Indentured? He was a member of House Turro. Only servants were indentured. Lord Rhanick Turro would never permit a child of his to become a member of the indentured class. Why was he offering Tahnner up now?

As to being sold into the ravellers, the mere thought made him want to flee the palace! He had heard stories about the ravellers' guild, tales so scary that he had woken with nightmares for the rest of hiberna that year. According to his brother, everything the

ravellers said came true. If they predicted you would fall from your horse, then you would. If they said you would bear no children, then your line would end with you.

Their father had always hated ravellers, refusing to allow them succour in his halls when they passed through, usually on their way to the war. Thread cursed. That was how he referred to them- always with his fists clenched so tight they whitened about the knuckles. Tahnner had never seen the Threads, but even he knew that being cursed by them was not a good thing. If his father hated the ravellers then he couldn't send Tahnner to join them, could he?

"A raveller?" the king asked, a note of surprise in his voice as he drew the word out, running one finger across his bottom lip, his scrutinising gaze lingering on Tahnner.

"A gift, Your Majesty, in appreciation of all you have bestowed upon my house."

"Your last gift was more than satisfactory, Lord Rhanick. Jareck has been a welcome addition to my palace guards. There is no need to further demonstrate your loyalty, especially not in so... permanent a manner."

"The honour of our joining the Ilyian Empire can never be adequately repaid, Your Majesty," his father said, addressing the base of the throne, "but I hope providing you a personal Thread reader will suffice for now."

One side of the king's mouth turned up in a rueful smile and he shot a glance at a powerful-looking man standing beside the throne. Strands of the man's hair caught in the firelight, making his brown mane appear almost golden.

"What of you, Tahnner?" the king asked, returning his attention to him. "You cannot be much older than... twelve. If the Threads serve you well, you will have many years ahead of you. A raveller may never be released from their indenture. Do you wish to serve for the rest of your days?"

Tahnner started to shake his head, but stopped as his father gripped his arm, squeezing until it hurt. The words of duty to the family his father had instilled rang through his head

“Y-yes, Your Majesty,” Tahnner said in a small voice. The grip on his arm loosened. From the corner of his eye, he caught the pleased smile that settled on his father’s face.

“Very well then,” the king said. Something about the way he watched Tahnner, made him think that one person at least saw through the lie. Addressing Tahnner’s father again, the king said, “Have him taken to Pelston and notify the guild. Since I have other pressing matters to attend to, we shall discuss the situation in Daena tomorrow.” He turned back to Tahnner. “I look forward to the day you complete your training and return to Girona, Master Turro. See to it you make yourself worthy of serving your king.”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

His promise was muffled by the sound of a girl’s laughter as she danced into the chamber through the door behind the throne. She wore a long, rose dress and launched herself at the king. An exasperated boy a couple of years older than Tahnner chased after her. Both bore the same dark hair and eyes of the king.

The king nodded once at Lord Rhanick in dismissal as the girl reached his side and stood on her tip-toes, whispering something in his ear which brought a smile to his face. Tahnner wanted to ask if the newcomers were the crown prince and princess but his father turned him about by the shoulder before he had time to get the words out.

Exiting the room was harder than entering had been, the chamber even more packed as the onlookers jostled to stare at Tahnner and his father. It may have been his imagination but he had the impression there was more than curiosity in the hard stares of some members of the crowd.

“I can’t be a raveller,” he said the instant they were free. “They control the future. They’ll make me do things I don’t want to do. Rhaner said that-”

His father gave an exasperated sigh and said, “Have you still not learnt discretion when it comes to what your brother tells you? I had hoped you had learnt after the incident with the horse.”

“He told me that when that raveller passed through the village last evening, the raveller said that man would die and he did. He died the next day!”

“Ravellers don’t work like that,” his father snapped. “He didn’t die because they said he would. He was hung because the raveller discovered he was guilty. Now be quiet. I need to think. I’ve warned you before about keeping your questions to yourself. I haven’t the time to deal with your incessant curiosity right now.”

Tahnner fell silent. It was always best when his father’s voice turned sharp. He let his questions about the ravellers fade from the forefront of his mind. He had never been allowed outside when the Threads were out. His mother always said he was too young. He wished he knew more about them though. His father’s assurances that only the guilty were punished was of little comfort. He was always guilty of something or other. He had muddied his new clothes. He had stayed out playing too late or almost not been back home in time for sunset. If the ravellers only punished the guilty then Tahnner would be dead by the end of the season.

Once outside the palace, they climbed into the same carriage which had brought them from their Girona lodgings. He scrambled up the steps behind his father. When the carriage lurched into motion, he hung his head out of the window, enjoying the cool breeze upon his neck.

“Why must I go to the ravellers?” he asked as the carriage trundled the long winding descent down to the lower districts. “Can’t I do my part for the family by helping Uncle Jareck?”

His father made no reply. He never answered when he grew tired of Tahnner’s questions.

Close to the outskirts of Girona, Tahnner’s attention drifted off in the rocking of the carriage as it clattered down the stone paved streets. His mind teeming with questions. He was jolted from his musings by the carriage jerking to a sudden stop which flung both him and his father from their seats.

“Blast it, Grenalt!” his father called to their coachman as he resettled himself in his cushioned seat. “What is the meaning of this?”

“Sorry, Sir,” Grenalt’s disembodied voice replied. “Someone stepped in front of the carriage, spooked the horses. I think he might be a raver.”

“Then drive over them!” his father ordered, muttering to himself as he leant back in his seat. “The council must do something to address the problem. Their numbers have reached the point infestation.”

Tahnner leapt from his seat and threw himself at the window of the carriage. Sticking his head out he tried to see past the horses and the people blocking his view, he wanted to catch a glimpse of the raver. He could see nothing through the swarm of people and it wasn’t until the carriage lurched back into motion that he caught sight of the man lying on the ground, yelling at the empty space beside him. People swarmed around him, but all kept their distance from the filthy man.

“Why is that man a raver?” Tahnner asked, forgetting that he had been attempting to keep his questions to himself.

He had spoken the words aloud without expecting a reply. His questions often went unanswered. When his father eventually spoke, he almost wished this had been one of those times when he hadn’t bothered responding.

“His mind is lost in the Threads.”

The Threads.

“I don’t want to become a raveller,” Tahnner said, pleading with his eyes for his father to see how much the thought of it terrified him.

His father huffed and leant his head back against the carriage wall. “You were young when our House joined the Ilyian Empire,” he said. “Our position here is as fragile as it is new. Those who do not hate us because we were Daenan, hate us because of the favour we have gained since. We must all do our part to ensure the safety and prosperity of our family.

Always remember Tahnner, your loyalty is to House Turro, beyond all else. Do you understand me?"

"Yes, Sir."

The intensity of his father's stare scared him, he recognised that his father was quick to anger in his current mood. Despite the questions teeming in his head, the carriage left Girona in silence. He watched the city disappear behind them, longing to ask when he would see his mother again, when would he return to Turro, to his home. He always liked it when they journeyed from Turro lands. There was so much to see. He felt as if his head would crack open from his trying to remember it all. He loved returning home best though, to his pony and his books, where he could discover so much without ever leaving the comforts of his home.

At some point in the journey, he fell asleep, lulled by the swaying of the carriage on the road. He jolted awake at the sound of his father's voice.

"Pelston's guild is the best in the empire and your training will be of the highest quality, but that's not the only reason I'm sending you there. Do you recollect what I told you of House Draeman?"

"That Lord Draeman doesn't like us?"

"True enough," his father agreed, his lips twisting into what might have been a smile on someone else. "I have someone loyal working in Lord Draeman's household. He relayed information concerning Draeman's indenturing his youngest son to the Pelston ravellers. The various skills the ravellers possess means that one loyal to Lord Draeman could mean the end of our house. So I need you to learn everything that boy knows and more. Do you understand me Tahnner?"

"Why?"

Tahnner wanted to take back his question the instant he said it. His curiosity often ended him up in trouble. He prepared himself for the sharp words his father usually

snapped whenever Tahnner spoke out of turn.

“Because Lord Draeman blames me for the growing insignificance of his own house. He seeks to stop my own burgeoning influence in Girona and with the king.”

“Were they Daenan like we were before we became Ilyian?” Tahnner asked, wondering if that was why the Draeman’s had taken exception to their house.

His father’s laugh was mirthless. “House Draeman is a southern household, a fact you would have known had you paid more attention in your lessons.” He pursed his lips “Don’t look for acceptance in Pelston, Tahnner, you won’t find any. You were born in a country the empire has been at war with for more years than anyone has been alive. Until Daena falls, the last dregs claimed by Ilyia, we will not be accepted here. Remember that.”

The sun hovered close to the peaks of the western mountains when they arrived in Pelston. Had they been at home then his mother would have already insisted Tahnner be locked away for the night in a windowless room, all the better for protecting him from the Threads. The thought that he might get his first glimpse of them made his pulse race. His brother had seen them three years ago and was forever taunting Tahnner about it.

Pelston sat aside a large hill, bigger than any in Turro. His father had once told him that the flat land of the north east were crucial for making the sweet wine. Most years, the wine was the main source of their family’s income, but there had been one year, back before they had aligned with the empire, when they had been unable to sell any casks. His uncle Jareck had said that a country losing a war was less affluent than the one winning it. Tahnner had sneaked a sip of the sweet wine once, but it had stung his throat and had little appeal. He had told his father that he understood why no-one wanted to buy the wine, but all his comment had done was earn a smack across the head for opening one of the casks and spoiling it.

The carriage stopped a short journey up from the town. A building sat at the top of the hill, one that was the strangest Tahnner had ever seen. He counted six layers, stacked like a cake, round except for the thin square sections cutting through the centre and protruding

as arched walkways. The building had no windows, reminding him of the rooms his mother always locked him in overnight as protection from the Threads. The only holes in the walls were the archways at the far end of the protruding sections.

When they climbed out of the carriage, the driver pulled a large trunk from the back and the reality of how long Tahnner would be in Pelston hit him. The trunk was the one his mother had packed for him for their journey to Girona. His father must have had it loaded onto the carriage before they had left to see the king. He wanted to beg to be taken back to Girona. He wanted to jump back in the carriage. Only years of experience with getting on his father's nerves kept him quiet as his father strode off to the entrance of the unusual building. An old man dressed in a black hooded robe which concealed most of him, except for his wrinkled mouth and hands, answered the door, light pouring out from behind him.

Tahnner glanced at the light grey stone walls, almost golden under the torchlight. He had assumed the interior would be as round as the outside but the straight corridors surprised him. No decorations lined the walls. He had never been anywhere so plain and grand at the same time. Everywhere else he had lived had extra details bringing life to it, even the inns they stayed at on the road from Turro. The absence of anything but the torches was unnerving, emphasising how there was nowhere to hide.

"May I help you?" the raveller asked.

Tahnner had never seen a raveller so close before. Nerves shot through him. He wanted to both know more about the man but also get as far away from him as possible.

"I'm here to indenture my son," his father addressed the man, speaking in the same manner he used whenever traders came to Turro. His voice was filled with authority. "The king wishes him trained as his personal raveller."

The raveller watched them from under his hood, acting nothing like the traders did in the halls of Turro when they bowed down before Lord Rhanick. Without speaking, the raveller stepped back, permitting them entry into the guild. Tahnner wished the raveller had barred the door rather than let them in.

“I am Lord Rhanick Turro. This is my son, Tahnner. I expect him to receive the finest training whilst here. I hope I make myself clear, Raveller.”

The hooded head bobbed once before the raveller spoke. “In that case, I suggest you make your goodbyes now. The boy can go upstairs to begin his training while we sort out his paperwork. The guild keepers will need to be notified of his indenture.”

“Good,” Tahnner’s father said as he turned from the raveller. There was no hint of sorrow at abandoning his son in such a place as this. Instead, he bent down and whispered in his son’s ear, “Remember your loyalties.” Without saying any more, Lord Rhanick Turro turned and strode down the corridor after the old raveller.

Images of Turro filled Tahnner’s head, memories so strong he could almost smell the groves after a fresh rainfall. He was a member the Turros. It was his turn to do his bit for his family, even if it meant he might never see them again.

The sound of footsteps alerted him to another’s approach. He swung about to see another black-robed raveller, this one taller than the last and what little patches of skin were visible under the robe appeared unwrinkled.

“Follow me Tahnner,” the man said, leading the way towards a staircase.

Tahnner jumped at the sound of his name and all the terrible stories he had heard about the ravellers sprang back into his mind. He kept telling himself he had no current reason to feel guilty. There was nothing the ravellers could punish him for. It did little to help. He knew it was only a matter of time before he was guilty of something or other. It always was.

On the first floor, he was led down a long corridor. At the end he could see an archway opening to a view of the western mountains and realised they must be standing in one of the walkways protruding from the main part of the building.

The sun hung unnervingly close to the mountain tops. For as long as he could remember, he had wanted to see the Threads. When he had pictured it though, he had

always been with his family and felt the comfort of his mother's hands resting on his shoulders.

Laughter rang out from somewhere nearby, but Tahnner could see only the raveller who had escorted him, standing at the edge of the walkway, barely two steps from the end. The man looked back at him, a pedestal with a smooth green rock balanced on top separating them.

"Since you arrived before Setting," the raveller said, "I'll use the opportunity to assess your skill with the Threads. You'll learn quickly enough that we never waste a reading in Pelston. After Rising tomorrow you'll begin learning Thread Lore. We've little time now though, so tell me, have you spent much time reading the Threads?"

The raveller's questions made no sense. What little Tahnner had heard about the Threads had never been good. They were something best avoided. Why would anyone want to spend time reading them? For that matter, how could you even read Threads?

"My mother never let me out for Rising or Setting," Tahnner said, feeling ashamed by the admission.

"Your father is Lord Rhanick Turro?" the raveller asked, appearing unconcerned by Tahnner's admission. "Your situation isn't unusual. It is often the same for those from wealthy families. You should know though, many here were not born into such privilege. Already some have more experience than you could gain from years of study."

Only a small part of Tahnner's attention was fixed on the raveller though, the rest was looking past him, to where the sun crept down behind the darkening mountains. Why was the raveller so calm? The sun hovered low, teetering on the point of plummeting on its final descent of the day. Tahnner had never been allowed to stay out with Setting so close. His body began to shake, but not from excitement.

"The Threads can be ... alarming the first time you see them," the raveller said, "It's important you focus. They can be as dangerous as they are useful. If you lose your mind in them, then you may never get it back."

If he lost his mind then he would be like the filthy raver in Girona that morning. Everyone had avoided him as if he carried the black pox. Tahnner could still hear the contempt that had been in his father's voice as he had spoken of the raver. Would he be as disgusted with his son if he ended up a raver too? How was he supposed to avoid it when he didn't even know what he was supposed to be doing?

"If you can," the raveller instructed, "focus on the stone's Threads. I will know your competence by how much you can inform me of where the stone originates from."

The raveller's words sounded like madness. The stone obviously came from the ground. He needed no Threads to tell him that.

What was he doing? He shouldn't be here. He should be in Turro, tucked away in his room, safe from the cursed Threads. He had to go. His father might not have finished finalising the paperwork yet. He had to find him, to beg him to take him back to Girona. There must be something else he could do for their family, something which didn't involve risking his mind. He opened his mouth to inform the raveller that he was leaving, his propensity for saying every thought in his head temporarily overriding his fear of the ravellers, but the transformation of the deep orange light of Setting as the sun dipped behind the mountains, dislodged all other thoughts from his mind.

Gold lines solidified where before there had been nothing but an empty yellow estevan sky. Undulating bands of golden Threads ebbed across the horizon and surged in their direction, hitting them in a burst of gilded light, obscuring everything else. The walls, floor, ceiling, even the mountains. All he could see was gold, even the edge of the ledge and the fall awaiting him if he stepped off. Everything disappeared, replaced by the heaving mass of light.

He cried out, turning to run from them but they were behind him too. Hands gripped him hard, forcing him back around, facing him towards where the Threads were brightest.

"Control yourself!" the raveller chided, but Tahnner couldn't focus on anything other than the gold Threads invading his mind.

“They’re in me!” he screamed, catching sight of the golden lines flowing through his hand as if he wasn’t there. “Make them stop! Make them stop!”

“Did nobody ever explain to you what the Threads were?” the raveller asked, his voice sounding strained as he fought to hold Tahnner in place.

“What are they? Make them go away! I shouldn’t be here! Please make it stop!”

Tahnner bucked, trying to dislodge the raveller’s grip. The raveller cursed behind him and strong arms yanked him backwards, away from where the Threads were at their brightest, pulling him to the round, windowless section of the guild. The Threads faded away the further they were from them. So too did the peals of laughter Tahnner had been too distressed to notice earlier.

“They were the Threads?” he choked out, staring down at his hands to be certain they were his own again, that no golden strands of light lingered within. “Where did they come from? How did they do ...that? What- What were-?”

“All good questions,” the raveller said, releasing Tahnner before setting off down another corridor. “Perhaps if you hadn’t panicked, you might have been granted an answer to one of them? Come along now.”

“They were everywhere,” Tahnner said, waving his hands through the air as he chased after the raveller.

“Is that all you saw?” the raveller asked, his voice clipped in the same way Tahnner’s father’s voice became whenever he was angry. “Foolish boy. Did you not think to warn me that you didn’t even know the basics of Thread reading? Surely you must understand the consequences had the reading gone wrong? Be glad you saw nothing else.”

Tahnner stared at the raveller’s back. What else was he supposed to have seen? They had taken over everything. Was that why his mother had always kept him away from them? He could see how dangerous they could be, what if he had fallen off the ledge because they had obscured his view?

“We’ll have to work on that tomorrow then,” the raveller said, “for now though, let’s just be glad you didn’t lose your mind to them. How is it that no-one has ever explained the Threads to you?”

Tahnner said nothing. It was just another question he had no answer to. Outside the ravellers, people feared the Threads the way his father did a bad harvest, but how he might have lost his mind to them though, he had no idea.

“Whilst you’re training here,” the raveller said, leading the way up another flight of stairs, “you’ll sleep on the third floor with the other boys. I’m taking you there now. You arrived after dinner, but I’m sure we can find something for you. We rise early here. I’ll observe you on the first floor balconies each day until I feel you’re proficient enough to join those on the second floor. I expect to find you waiting for me on the east balcony for Rising and the west for Setting. Although, I think it might be best if you skip Rising tomorrow. Best not to risk it again until you’ve at least been educated in the basics of Thread Lore.”

Shame flooded him as he trailed behind the raveller. His father was possibly still in the guild and already he was letting the family down. Had he been able to hear Tahnner’s panicked screams?

When they reached the third floor, the raveller led him to a ring shaped room with a series of neat beds lining the exterior wall. Torches provided the only light in the otherwise cave-like room. He hated the prospect of sleeping in this chamber until his training was complete. In comparison to his own room, this was barren. There were no books lining the walls, no woven carpets softening the floor, no keepsakes of his earlier years or his family.

“There is much work that needs attending to between Rising and Setting, as well as your studies of Thread Lore. I’m going to sort out a set of robes for you. The other boys will join you here soon enough. Since it’s estervan, Rising is early so be sure to catch as much sleep as you can before then. Also, don’t be late. I have better things to do when the Threads are out than chasing after wayward boys.”

He left, leaving Tahnner alone in the eerie room. The torchlight cast flickering shadows

along the walls, creating the illusion of his being watched. He leapt onto the bed and sat with his back against the cold stone as he waited for the others to arrive. The sound of chatter preceded the fourteen boys, all dressed in the same black robes. Older than Tahnner, they bounded into the chamber, their laughter stopping when they noticed him.

“You’re the one who was making all that noise?” an older boy asked, his hood pulled up over his head, “I thought it was a girl! Did the nasty Threads scare you?” he teased, drawing more laughter from the others.

“He should be,” one of the smaller boys said. “Especially after what I saw in his Threads.”

“Like you could see future Threads,” another called as he threw himself onto a bed.

“You’ll see my fist in your face if you don’t shut up,” the smaller boy protested. “I saw him fall from the balcony at Setting tomorrow!”

“Liar!” The word burst from Tahnner’s mouth before he could think better of it and he launched himself up, glowering at the boy.

“I saw it too,” another said, smirking as he flounced onto one of the beds. “You’re going to fall, the Threads say so.”

He needed to get away from them. He raced from the room, too absorbed in his anger to notice the girl carrying the plate of food until he crashed into her. Bread and cheese went flying through the air before they bounced down the flight of stairs.

“I’m sorry!” Tahnner called as he scrambled down the stairs after the runaway food.

“S’alright, it’s yours anyway. Tahnner, right?”

“Y-yes. How did you know?” he asked, suddenly all too aware of the girl’s black robes. “Did the Threads tell you?”

“No, but Haret did. Told me to bring some food up for you. I’m Senara.”

Peals of laughter rang out from within the boys sleeping chamber but he tried to ignore them, fixing his attention on Senara. She looked a year or so older than him, taller too. Strands of her light brown hair escaped the knot at the back of her head.

“Said you’d fall off the balcony?” she asked, taking him by surprise.

He felt his eyes go wide as panic flooded him. “You saw it in the Threads too?”

The girl laughed again, but the sound was softer, lacking the cruel edge of the boys jesting. “Narr, that’s what they always say to the newbies. Same trick was pulled on all of them. Besides, Threads don’t work like that anyway.”

“What do you mean?” he asked as he attempted to dust the dirt from the half loaf of bread she had brought him for dinner. Just looking at it made his stomach clench, shooting stabbing pains through his body. Was this to be all he could look forward to at meal times here in Pelston?

“It’s harder to read future Threads,” the girl said, “what with there being so many of them and all. Even if one did show you plummeting to your death, loads more don’t. How do you know which will happen? Those lot especially wouldn’t know, most can’t even Thread jump yet. Anyway, I’ve got to get to bed. See you around.”

She climbed the steps to the upper floors, leaving Tahnner alone on the stairwell. He didn’t feel like going back into the chamber so instead he sat in the corridor, eating his dinner until an older raveller arrived to douse the torches and chivvy him inside. He tried to ignore the other boy’s renewed laughter at his appearance and launched himself at his bed, yanking the covers up before he tried to block the memory of the invasive golden lines for long enough to fall asleep.

## Chapter Two

“Did you see anything yet?” Haret asked, staring out over the eastern balcony as the Threads faded with the dawn, his voice emotionless as he asked the same question he did every Rising and Setting.

He had tried lying to Haret for the first few days, pretending he had seen something in Threads. He had tried every place he could think of, but none had been the answer Haret wanted.

Estervan was almost over and Tahnner had still not seen anything in the Threads. He had stopped running from them though, but he doubted Herat considered that much of an improvement. At least his lessons on Thread Lore had taught him what they were and what they were supposed to show. The Threads were a library, a history of everything that had been or could ever be.

Not that any of that made a difference since he was deliberately avoiding seeing anything when the Threads were out. He had hoped that if he proved useless at reading them, then the ravellers might release him from his indenture. Senara thought it unlikely though, considering the guild mark already inked onto the left side of his chest. The mark of the ravellers. It resembled the Threads at Rising, a half sun with gold lines reaching outwards, marking him forever.

He was a failure to his family. It was his turn to do his part, to be like his uncle Jareck. He wanted to become the raveller his father desired him to be, but he was too afraid of losing his mind to the Threads to try.

“Nothing,” Tahnner answered, stifling a yawn as he scowled at the stone in front of him. Even late into estervan, Rising still meant the ravellers must awake at a cursed time of the

morning in order to be on the eastern balconies in time for the Threads. He had never been so excited for the colder seasons of autumnal and hibernal. At least then he wouldn't be dragged from his bed before even the birds had bothered to rise.

"In that case," Haret said, his gaze still fixed on some point in the distance, "you'd best hurry along downstairs and get started on your chores."

Tahnner made to leave, but stopped, needing to ask, "What if I never see anything? Has that ever happened?"

Haret turned to face him, his black robes a stark contrast to the warm estervan dawn behind him. "If it has, then it's a secret only the Threads know. There is, however, no Thread which will show you becoming the king's personal Thread reader if you don't master them. There are a lot worse positions for a raveller too. You might want to remember that next time you waste a reading, even your father might not be able to pull enough strings to save you from being stuck in some backwater place like this. Now run along. Every moment you slack off from your chores is one someone else will have to make up for you."

His words rang in Tahnner's ears as he hurried downstairs. When he reached the dugout pools of rainwater at the back of the guild, he found Senara already hard at work washing a dirty set of robes. He was glad he had been placed on robe duty with her; it made up for how much his arms ached at the end of each day from all the scrubbing he did. He had thought it exciting on the first day, he had never had to wash clothes back in Turro so enjoyed the novelty of the job. His hands had been soft to touch then. The soap had long since dried them up just like his enjoyment had.

Different tasks were assigned to other novices. Some of the oldest had the privilege of journeying down the hillside to the town of Pelston each day, fetching letters and whatever supplies the guild was unable to produce. Others tended to the animals, cleaned the guild or cooked the meals. It all felt a lot less glamorous than what Tahnner suspected most people imagined the life of a raveller to be like. Had he known that whilst in training, novice ravellers spread manure on crops, he doubted he would have been quite so intimidated by the ones he had seen in Turro.

Senara beamed at him as he reached her side. He mumbled back a greeting as he knelt beside her, folding the sleeves of his robes back to keep them from getting soaked in the water as he wondered what the chances were they would be moved to another chore before the colder seasons set in. He didn't fancy the task of washing clothes in an icy outdoor pool.

"Still nothing?" Senara asked, rubbing soap into the armpits of a set of robes. "You tried focusing on just one Thread this time?"

"It's Haret's fault," he muttered, pulling the next unwashed robe from the basket and submerging it into the cold water. "He just stands there. It's not like he even tries to help."

Senara's large brown eyes flickered up to watch him as her hands stilled, soapy bubbles dripping from her fingers. The look she gave him was solemn, making her look older than she had any right to be.

"It's not like there's much he can do," she said, returning her attention to the robes. "It's sort of up to you."

"Just because a bird has wings doesn't mean it knows how to fly," Tahnner muttered. That was an expression his mother had favoured, often saying it after he had done something particularly stupid, like when he had assumed that riding Rhaner's horse would be just like riding his pony. This time though, it would be his mind that would break and not his arm.

He had used to wonder why ravers were the way they were, why they wandered the streets oblivious to everything around them. Now though, he wished he was still oblivious, wished he didn't know what held them captive. How was he supposed to willingly throw his mind into reading the seething mass of Threads when he could get lost in them and never find his way out?

He had finished with the first robe and was reaching for the second when he noticed Senara's hands had stilled again, white suds pooling in the water below. He glanced up to see what had caught her attention and was unsurprised to find Fedan Draeman walking to

the vegetable plots with a couple of other boys.

“Have you ever actually spoken to him?” Tahnner asked, envy prickling at him as he wondered what it was about Fedan which always captured Senara's attention.

She blushed, returning her attention to the robe as she shook her head without saying anything. He often caught her watching Fedan. The two seemed engaged in some strange dance of avoidance, always going to great pains to stay as far from each other as possible.

“What do you expect? He’s a Draeman. My father says the Draemans are a cruel house. They can’t be trusted.”

Senara’s eyebrows shot up. “He can't know them then. They were always kind enough to me.”

“You know Fedan’s family?” Alarm prickled up his spine. He had never thought to ask what family Senara belonged to. Was she a family friend of the Draemans? Did she know of the animosity between his own and Fedan’s house?

Some of the plumpness in Senara’s lips disappeared as she pressed them together. “Used to,” she said after a moment, her gaze fixed on the robe. “Grew up on his family’s lands.”

“What?”

“My parents died when I was five. Black pox. The Draeman’s charity was all that kept me alive when the other townsfolk had enough of me. Thought I’d bring the plague back down on them.”

Tahnner frowned. He had seen beggars before. Turro was overrun with people displaced by the war, their clothes filthy and their faces haggard from years of struggling to stay alive. Senara’s face was too full to be one of a beggar, though. She laughed when he told her so.

“I’ve Fedan to thank for that, I guess,” she said. “He used to sneak out most days to

bring me food. We had this place down by the river. No-one knew about it. Used to play there all the time. He used to say I was more fun than his brothers.” Laughter filled her eyes as she spoke and Tahnnner longed to see it there more often, even if it was memories of Fedan which caused it. He liked the way it made her dark brown eyes sparkle and her freckles scrunch up.

“How did you end up here then?” he asked, holding back the question he really wanted the answer to because he didn’t want her smile to fade.

What he really wanted to know the answer to, was why did the ravellers take in a beggar? He was glad they had. Senara was the only person in Pelston whose company he enjoyed, especially since the other boys still mocked him for being stuck on the first floor after half a season. They were all second or third sons of Ilyia’s great houses just like he was. So why had the ravellers purchased the indenture of a girl living on the streets when they already those who came from families of influence?

Senara glanced up at where the sun climbed through the sky, its yellow light scattering through a wispy cloud. Without looking at him she said, “Read it in the Threads.”

“What?”

He was so shocked that the soapy robe slipped through his fingers and splashed into the pool.

“Lord Draeman sent for a Pelston raveller,” she said. “I read his Threads, knew he was indenturing Fedan and I asked the raveller if he would take me too. Haret tested my ability, then brought me here. Not much to it really.”

“Haret? Wait-? You mean you could read the Threads before you came here?” He could already imagine how his father would scold him if he learnt that a beggar girl had been better at reading the Threads than he would ever be.

“Course I could,” Senara said, her voice light again with the girlish laughter which suited her so well. “You tend to get woken by Rising when you don’t sleep with a roof over

your head.”

“I wish I had been a beggar,” Tahnner muttered without thinking. “At least that way I might be able to do something right around here.”

“No, you don’t. Same way you don’t wish you grew up with your stomach aching for food you’re afraid will never come.”

“I guess not,” Tahnner said, an embarrassed flush heating his neck as he stared at the sudsy robe, unable to meet Senara’s eyes.

They finished the rest of the washing in silence before heading inside for their mid-morning meal. When they reached the ground floor dining chamber, one of the older boys pulled him aside, handing him a letter before hurrying off to join his friends as they piled food on their plates.

He had never received anything at Pelston before. He took the letter to the nearest torch bracket, out of the way of prying eyes. Breaking the seal of House Turro, he unfolded it, hoping to find his mother’s handwriting within. His heart sank when he realised the letter was from his father, wanting to know what Tahnner had learnt, of the progress which he had none to report back. How long might he go without answering it before his father grew angry?

“Does it still itch?”

He jolted at the sound of Senara’s voice. She stood in front of him holding two plates laden high with food. She gestured with one of the plates to where his fingers absentmindedly scratched at the gold ravellers mark on his chest.

“Hmm? Oh, no.” He dropped his hand from his collar and screwed the letter up, stuffing it inside a pocket in his robe.

“You shouldn’t scratch it,” she said as she sat down at the table next to him, pushing one of the plates in his direction. “It’ll blotch and they’ll only have to redo it. The ink costs a fortune too, so they won’t be happy with you.”

"I'll stop," Tahnner murmured as he sat down, unable to wrench his gaze away from the amount on Senara's plate. "Are you afraid the ravellers will put you back on the streets?" he asked, gesturing at the small mountain of food. Senara ceased shovelling forkfuls into her mouth and glowered at him. "Sorry," he said quickly, "Sometimes I talk without thinking. My father always tells me off for it..."

His words trailed off as he realised Senara was laughing, the sound peeling off the walls of the cavernous dining chamber, drawing the attention of the other ravellers. An answering chuckle bubbled up in his stomach as he smiled back at Senara, liking the way the light of the torches danced in her eyes as she threw her head back to laugh.

"Guess I am," she said after a moment, still chuckling as she stared at her plate.

The rest of the day passed in the usual haze of lessons and chores, the letter weighing heavy in his pocket. When Setting approached, he reluctantly set off for the first floor whilst the other boys, Fedan Draeman included, continued up to the upper levels.

"I hope you're in the mood for perusing the Threads, Master Turro," Haret said, waving for Tahnner to position himself behind the stone once again. "If you don't start proving yourself, your position with the king will be given to another. I hear that more ravellers are always needed at the war front."

Tahnner said nothing, trying to ignore Haret's threat. He focused on the green stone atop the pedestal on the western balcony. Waiting.

The sun dipped below the horizon and the Threads burst into life, masses of gold infiltrating everything around him. He might not be as afraid of them as he had been, but he still flinched at the sight. The difference this time though was that he was unwilling to let another reading pass without making it to the next balcony. He needed something to report to his father, needed to prove that he could help their house.

He fixed his attention on the stone's Threads, trying to grasp individual strands in his mind, picking at random from the uncountable, seething mass of gold belonging to the stone alone. Each time he thought he held one in his mind, it would slip away like water

between his fingers.

Anger surged through him and he was filled with a familiar sense of disappointment, the same feeling he could feel seeping from Haret. He knew it was only in his mind, but he thought he felt a prickle from his father too, wherever he might be.

He threw his concentration back into the stone's Threads, hunting for something, any hint which might help him glean useful information from them. He could try another guess on Haret, but even if he happened upon the right answer, what good would that do? He wouldn't be able to be the king's raveller by using guesswork alone.

Images flashed through his mind. The shock caused his grip on the Threads to falter. He scrambled with the strands, trying to grasp them again but each image was more fleeting than the one before. There were too many of them. They swirled around him in a confusing tangle of gold. Each time he thought he grasped one, he only lost it again.

Countless. They stretched further than his mind could grasp. He tried to focus on the patterns, enjoying the way they grouped together. Suddenly he found his mind staring at ropes of Threads, all bound together, individual strands amplified and bursting into his mind with sudden clarity. For the first time, he experienced the sense of duality the ravellers taught in the lessons on Thread Lore. He understood the feeling of both being able to see with your eyes whilst also seeing the images held within the Threads. It was as if he would still be able to see even if his eyes were shut, so clear was the image in his mind.

In the Threads, he saw the western first floor balcony, exactly as it was in the present. He could even see himself, but it was as if he was watching someone else. He moved his hand and laughed as he saw himself repeat the action in the Threads.

"Aha," came Haret voice, trickling into his consciousness with a strange echo. "Some progress at last. Now, can you trace the stone's Threads back? I want you to tell me where it's come from."

The instructions finally made sense. As well as being able to see the present, he became aware of more, a Thread of images, one he could follow in either direction. He instantly

knew which direction contained the images of the future. If the Threads of the present were like a rope for his mind to grasp, then those of the future were like a single strand of silk fraying into a thousand more, each too difficult for him to hold in his mind. He focused on the past instead, working his way back along the rope of Threads, revelling in how irreversibly entwined they were. How easy it was for him to hold them in his mind!

Time dissolved as he traversed the Threads, watching as he disappeared and reappeared as he had been yesterday at Setting. It was as if he watched time itself backtrack, each image filling his mind recording a moment after the next.

His confidence grew and soon he peeled back through the months at a dizzying speed, too fast to notice much about the images filling his mind. At one point, he thought he glimpsed Fedan being tested on the balcony by Haret, but the image was gone too quickly to be sure.

“The stone belonged to a raveller who came here from Tarnac,” he announced as the images suddenly shifted. Instead of being on the western balcony, his mind was dragged from Pelston, reversing the journey the raveller had made to reach the guild.

“Well done-”

“It was given to him by his mother. She bought it from a travelling peddler. The peddler purchased it from a sailor who stole it from a man in Itrantus-”

“You’ve seen enough, Tahnner,” Haret said, a slight waver in his usually commanding tone. “You’ve passed the test. It’s time you return to your own Threads, the sun’s already over halfway set-”

“The Itrantian dug it up from within the mines. It was bigger then, before he broke this piece away with his pick. There are more Threads here, so many more, all tangled up together-”

“Tahnner- stop!”

He couldn’t understand Haret’s panic. His mind was filled with images of faraway

places, of Threads far removed from his own. Why had he been so afraid? The Threads should be celebrated! Through reading them, he had already glimpsed more of the world than he would have in the rest of his life. He could see that which no-one living knew of. How could he have been afraid? They were a gift!

“You will stop this now! Tahnnner! You’ve gone too far. The sun is almost set! You have to get back to your own Threads or you’ll be trapped there.”

He didn’t respond, barely even aware of Haret any more. The crack of a hand across his face dragged his attention back though. Haret's slap broke the trance the Threads held over him, also breaking the hold he had on the Threads.

His mind fumbled, losing its grip on those he had followed into the mines of Itrantus. Even as his eyes stared at Haret, he could feel the part of his mind still buried in Itrantus a hundred years ago. He couldn’t focus on his surroundings, not with his mind trapped as it was. Was this what it was like for a raver? Reality felt insignificant in comparison to images of the mine filling his head. He could barely focus on the small segment of sunlight lingering just above the horizon on the western balcony.

Panic filled him as he recollected the warnings. Don’t get too entangled in the Threads. Don’t entwine yourself so deeply that you won’t be able to return to your own Threads. He would be fated to spend his days with his mind trapped, unable to focus on anything in his surroundings if he couldn’t get back. All too acutely, he was aware of how far he would have to travel before the last of the sun vanished below the horizon, and he had lost the Threads he had followed there in the first place.

“I can’t. Haret-I can’t. I’m trapped-!”

The words tumbled from him as his mind fumbled with the countless Threads, searching for the ones he had followed. There were too many, all too similar for him to distinguish between them.

If he was a raver, he would never be able to do his part for his family. His brother had told him once that they locked ravers in the prisons to stop them from hurting themselves

and others. Would they lock him away when he failed to return to his own Threads?

“Tahnner?”

Haret’s voice was calm as he spoke. His hand gripped Tahnner’s wrist as the awareness of another mind entwined with the Itrantian mine’s Threads. Without understanding how, he knew Haret was there with him, his mind enmeshed in the same Threads, but where Tahnner’s mind flailed like a drowning man, Haret’s held the rope.

“Follow them back. Hurry now, we don’t have long.”

He flung his mind at the Threads Haret held, speeding through them so fast he could make out nothing in the blur of gold. He almost overshot the present, entangling himself in the future Threads. It was only Haret’s warning to slow down that stopped him.

He found his own Threads as the gold began fading away around them. As they disappeared, he refocused, feeling dizzy from the overload his mind had been subjected to in such a short period of time. He glanced up and winced at the scowl Haret shot him. He could recognise trouble when he was already halfway buried in it.

“By all the Threads... what were you thinking?” Haret’s shout echoed off the balcony walls loud enough for the ravellers on the upper floors to hear every word. “What’s the first rule of Thread reading? You’ve been here a month, I would have thought you would have learnt it by now.”

“Always ensure you have a way back to your own Threads before they fade,” Tahnner muttered to the floor.

“So you’re not an idiot then,” Haret muttered. “Just a fool. Have you ever seen a raver? That’s what you would have become if I hadn’t gotten you out!”

Tahnner said nothing. Ravers drew attention like dung drew flies, everyone in Ilyia had seen one. They were everywhere, walking through life oblivious to everything about them, always muttering conversations incomprehensible to any but themselves.

Haret raked his hands through his hair, his fingers curling into fists around the strands. Tahnner tensed as he waited for Haret to hit him like his father sometimes did, but the blow never came. All Haret did was squeeze his eyes shut and forced in a deep breath before warning him not to do anything so stupid again.

“Go to bed Tahnner,” Haret ordered, running a weary hand over his face. “Get some sleep and let the consequences of your actions sink in.”

“Yes, Sir,” he murmured, turning away, his mind still reeling from everything he had seen in the Threads. Itrantus was weeks south of Ilyia by ship, yet his mind had travelled there and back within the time it had taken the sun to set. The concept boggled him, but he already understood the consequences well enough. Haret had risked losing his own mind in order to save Tahnner’s.

A thought occurred to him and he turned back to where Haret stood, staring at the stone with an unfocused gaze. “Since I found out where the stone is from, does that mean I passed?” he asked. “Can I join the others tomorrow?”

Haret rubbed his fingers across his forehead as he shook his head, giving Tahnner the same look his mother had every time he injured himself chasing after his brother.

“Alright,” Haret said after a moment. “Join those on the second floor, but only if you promise not to let the Threads draw you in so deeply again. I might not be there to guide you out next time.”

“Thank you!” Tahnner called over his shoulder as he raced inside, eager to share his news with Senara and his father.

## Chapter Three

A foulness lurked within the western Threads, marring them with the seep of death soon to come. Tahnner's vision flooded with gold as he followed the beasts entwined in the Threads of two days hence. Three of them skulked down the mountain, their skeletal bodies protected from the snowy peaks by the shabby furs and broken feathers they garb themselves in. Bones belonging to Threads only knew what, clattered like the initial onslaught of an avalanche with every stride the wrogen took. At first, he had mistaken them for lyda, since the beasts each cloaked themselves in the shaggy, tawny pelts of one, rotting limbs sullyng as they trailed in the dirt and snow.

The Threads of the western mountains were thick woven bands, as unchanging as any he had ever seen. If he traced them back thousands of years then little altered. The mountain's future Threads were almost as ageless as those of its past, except for the fainter, gossamer thin Threads surrounding them, those belonging to the wild creatures that traversed the rocky terrain.

For over a year, he had focused on the lofty peaks of the Crag Lands at every Setting, alongside the other second floor Craggers, watching where the steep mountains rose in jagged peaks which only birds and beasts dared traverse. The other novices were always eager to progress from the Craggers and onto the upper floors, to the Seasoners or the Threaders, where the work was less monotonous. He doubted any were keen to leave the second floor today though, not when they had witnessed the first glimpse of a wrogen any raveller had seen in over four years.

Whilst the lyda only ventured down from the Crag Lands to snatch a meal from one of the few farms still attempting to make a living in the shadows of the mountains, wrogen were another matter. Ravellers had watched the western Crag Lands since the beasts had

first swarmed the mountainous city of Stonesfall, over four hundred years ago. From the reports of the other ravellers, wrogen only threatened Ilyia once in every handful of years, but even then, the extent of their atrocities never approached that of Stonesfall.

It was said that the bodies of the wrogen's dead were often left untouched. Tahnner had often wondered why even the scavengers would fear picking the meat from the bones of a wrogen's victim. Whatever drove them to kill, it appeared to be more than hunger alone.

Tahnner stared at the wrogen making for the farmsteads on the gentler slopes at the base of the mountains. He heard the mutters of the other novices and he felt their minds in the Threads alongside his, staring at the gruesome sight of monsters buried beneath the rotting carcasses of their kills.

He was almost glad when Setting faded and he was forced to return to his own Threads. He followed the others back inside as Fedan raced to warn a raveller of the imminent attack, as eager as always to impress. His enthusiasm to prove himself was sickening, especially since Fedan's skills with the Threads were mediocre at best, Tahnner doubted he would ever be raised from the ranks of the Craggers.

He trailed behind the others on the stairs as they joined those from the upper floors. It was easy to disappear into the crowd of black robes, even though he felt as different from them as he could be. By all intents and purposes, he should be the same as most novices. Many had grown up in families of equal, if not greater standing than his own. They had been sheltered from the Threads for most of their lives and looked upon the indentured classes as beneath them, although the ravellers were exempt from that stigma. Yet their comments made him uncomfortable. Their manners too abrasive, their natures too demanding. For those training in a guild that watched and learnt, they lacked curiosity. Nothing the ravellers learnt was ever utilised, besides the occasional warnings to the farmers and the Seasoners periodic predictions about the weather.

The wasted potential infuriated him. When he had complained about it to Senara, she had pointed out that the Threads were as visible to everyone else as much as they were to

the ravellers. She might be more skilled at reading them than most, but a fear of the Threads was one thing she had never been able to understand. He wanted to tell her that most Ilyians were too afraid to even look at them, let alone attempt to read them. Ravellers guarded their knowledge of Thread Lore as a mother lyda did her cubs, they were unwilling to share the secrets which gave their guild so much power in the empire. He didn't say anything though, not wishing to remind her of the time when he had been just as afraid and ignorant as the rest of Ilyia.

"You've got that look again," Senara said, her voice breaking through his musings as she sidled up beside him, separating herself from the other Seasoners. "It's the same look as when you said we should trace the guild's Threads back, looking to see if any raveler techniques had been lost over the years."

"At least we would have learnt something by doing it," Tahnner muttered, keeping his voice low so as not to attract the attention of others nearby.

"Like you could ever defy orders and read Threads you weren't instructed to." Her eyes were alight with her usual teasing smile, the one which made his heart flip in his chest, as if he had just somersaulted from one of the balconies. She shot him a sidelong look, full of mischief and the promise that if he ever attempted anything so foolhardy as defying orders, then she would be right beside him. "Anyway, speak for yourself. You might not be able to see anything of use unless it's as predictable as the sun's rising. I, however, just saw evernal beginning in forty-one days with vernal arriving nineteen days after."

"What?" Tahnner said, Senara's announcement about the onset of the seasons jolted him out of his musings. "Hibernal was only announced two days ago. No raveler can see two ahead with any accuracy."

Senara pulled a face. "They can't," she agreed, scowling at the backs of some of her fellow Seasoners as they strode down the corridor ahead of them. "But just because they're incompetent twits doesn't mean I have to be one too."

Tahnner laughed, enjoying the earnest way her eyes widened as she made her point. He

often wondered how Senara had avoided losing her mind in the years she had studied the Threads without the raveller's lore as guidance. Unlike the rest of them, Senara seemed to create her own rules for reading the Threads.

"Well, this incompetent twit just saw three wrogen, so-"

"I know, I overheard some of the other Craggers as I passed them upstairs. Do they really have teeth hanging from their mouths which are longer than Varian's arm?"

Tahnner exhaled a laugh. "Trust Varian's incompetence. I had thought that even he would be able to distinguish pelt from beast. The wrogen were wearing the bodies of dead lyda. I guess the furs must help protect them from the cold."

"Eww," Senara said, looking more curious than repulsed. She had never glimpsed the wrogen during her short time as a Cragger and he knew it still galled her. He had a suspicion she would be defying her Seasoner's orders tomorrow in order to hunt out the wrogen herself.

When they reached the large round dining room on the ground floor, they joined the back of the queue and waited to fill their plates. They were standing behind Fedan, but despite the many furtive glances he shot Senara, he never spoke to her. She kept her back to him the entire time, for which Tahnner was glad. He was still uncertain what issues lay between them, but as long as it resulted in his getting to spend more time with her then he was not about to complain.

Once their plates were filled, they sat at their usual table, a little removed from the others. He started to say more about the wrogen but she shushed him, her eyes unfocused and a mouthful of food forgotten halfway to her lips. He scowled at her, but then his ears heard what had caught her attention.

"-carriage's Threads. It'll be here any moment anyway, so you can eat your own words when it arrives," one of the other novices said to his companions sat at the table nearest them.

“You couldn’t see future Threads of a falling stone, let alone a carriage,” another novice said, causing shouts of laughter from the others at the table.

“You won’t see my fist coming if I punch you in the face at Rising,” the first boy grumbled back, causing Senara to snort.

“Behold- Ilyia’s finest Threads readers,” she muttered, returning her attention to her food. “Being a raveller used to be a privilege, but you wouldn’t guess it now would you?”

“Oh?” Tahnner asked, his mind more focused on the food before him than what Senara was saying.

“I saw the other day when I was following the third floor balcony’s Threads, went back a few hundred years and Thread jumped to this novice’s –”

“What?” Tahnner interrupted, his cutlery clanking on the table as he dropped it in surprise, splattering boiled vegetables everywhere. “You Thread jumped? You’re not serious? How didn’t you get stuck?”

Senara shrugged, looking as if she had not made a casual mention of the fact that she had managed something which even the most skilled ravellers only attempted when they must.

“No big a deal,” she said, diverting her attention back to the rapidly cooling food on her plate, “do it all the time.”

“But it’s dangerous! Your mind could have become lost.”

Senara stared at him as if he was the idiot. It was worrying. Every time she looked at him in that way, she would soon say something which proved how much more adept she was with the Threads than he. She was good enough to be sent to Girona’s Thread Court once her training was complete. All the major cities across the empire had Thread Courts, but Girona’s was by far the best, picking only the elite ravellers to join their ranks. If she was sent to Girona, then he hoped it would be easy enough for him to see her in-between his readings for the king. He hated the thought that once their training was complete, they

might not be able to spend much time in each other's company.

Perhaps it was Senara's influence, but he seemed to find reading patterns in the Threads easier than other novices. Their experiences appeared more akin to wading through a pool of golden mud twice a day than the sense of exploration he felt. Even so, compared to Senara, he was as useless as his brother Rhaner had been every time he used to challenge their uncle Jareck to a sparring session.

"Novices follow the same routines every day," she said, explaining as if she were talking to a small child. "I just followed the balcony's Threads then jumped back to my own. It was easy enough."

"Of courses, great mistress of the golden weave... easy." Tahnner shook his head as he tried to let her words sink in. Somehow Senara always seemed to find simple ways to circumvent what everyone else considered the utmost of complexity. She was either fearless or mad. He was certain that, had he tried it, Senara would currently be searching for a way to extract his mind from wherever he had lost it in the Threads.

"Anyway," she continued, dismissing his fears over her becoming a raver as if no more than his wondering whether it would rain, "believe it or not, ravellers used to read potential recruit's Threads before even considering indenturing them. They used to seek them out too, rather than waiting for them to be indentured. It's a shame they've stopped doing that, really. I wouldn't have to spend my time answering your stupid questions had they still bothered. You'd have never been let in."

Tahnner mimed flicking his food at her. Without thinking he said, "If they wouldn't let me in, then you wouldn't be here either since Fedan has nowhere near enough skill to have been admitted."

"What's that supposed to mean?" The laughter disappeared from Senara's eyes as she stared at him, even the reflection of the torches lining the walls failed to warm the icy stare.

"Just that you're only here because Fedan's father indentured him- ow!" He rubbed the painful spot on his leg where she had kicked him. "What was that for?"

“I came here for me, not for him.”

Tahnner grunted in noncommittal agreement, devoting his attention to the remainder of his food. He knew he should have learnt by now to hold his tongue about anything concerning Fedan.

They ate in silence for the rest of their meal. He had almost finished when a loud reverberating knock from the front entrance, rang out through the dining chamber. From the far side of the room, the same wizened raveller who had answered the door the day Tahnner had arrived, rose from where he dined with Haret and the other fully trained ravellers and shuffled towards the entrance. He was the one who took care of the paperwork for all new novices, corresponding with the guild keepers in Girona, informing them of the latest indentures and requesting a keeper be sent to Pelston to mark the new novices with the symbol of the ravellers guild.

“Looks like there was a carriage after all,” Tahnner murmured as the old raveller disappeared from view.

“Haret won’t like having three illiterates stuck with him on the first floor,” Senara said, her attention fixed on scraping the last morsels from her plate. Even though hers was always fuller than his, she somehow always managed to finish first.

Since his indenture, seven others had arrived to be trained, two of whom were still stuck on the first floor balcony, proving to be even more incompetent with Thread reading than Tahnner had. He had yet to discover what Haret had done to deserve the most tedious task the guild had to offer, and that included Tahnner’s current chore of sweeping the floors of the lower levels.

“I hope this one's not as bad as the two with him now-”

Senara stopped speaking as the entrance to the dining room darkened with the older raveller’s return. He was flanked by a scowling man dressed in black robes, but Tahnner didn’t recognise him. He knew the look of superiority which the man wore though as he strode into the room.

“Raveller?” he asked Senara, “Where do you think he’s-”

“Tahnner Turro?” the man asked, his words reverberating through the dining chamber like a command. “Make yourself known and don’t keep me waiting.”

Tahnner winced as all eyes in the room turned to him. He had no need of announcing himself since all the staring faces pointed him out well enough. When he made no move to stand though, Senara’s foot kicked his leg under the table again, spurring him up. The stranger’s eyes turned to him and all of a sudden, Tahnner was reminded of all the times he had displeased his father before he had been brought to Pelston.

“Come with me,” the stranger said, leaving the dining chamber again without waiting to see if Tahnner followed.

He shot Senara an uncertain glance before following the man, his mind flying through one idea after another as to why a raveller might have come to Pelston to seek him out. Wherever he had journeyed from, the man must have missed Setting at least in order to reach Pelston at this hour. A fully trained raveller’s time was worth a small fortune, so whatever the reason for his journey, it had to be serious if it warranted missing a reading.

As Tahnner hurried from the dining room, heavy footsteps echoed upon the stone slabs behind him. Half-turning, he spotted Haret, a dark scowl on his face as he followed Tahnner down the corridor. Haret shot him a reassuring smile before gesturing for him to hurry after the stranger.

The man was young, perhaps in his mid-twenties. He seemed to know where he was going though, leading them up to the sixth floor without waiting for anyone to direct him. Perhaps the stranger had once trained in Pelston.

Since he had never been allowed past the third floor before, he felt his eyes go wide at seeing the rooms frequented by only the fully trained ravellers and the more experienced novices. Four desks faced each other in the centre, positioned around a single large torch which illuminated the room all the way to the reams of yellowed papers lining the outer wall, stacked and arranged in neat rows as far from the open flame as was possible.

“Some Threads never change,” the stranger said, staring around the workroom.

Humbled by his surrounding, Tahnner stared at the years of knowledge accrued by the ravellers. How much of it had been rendered useless by the passage of time? Surely there must be better uses for it other than being stored in an old tower on a hilltop?

“Still here Haret?” the stranger asked, jerking Tahnner from his musings. “Either they’ve forgotten about you or they’ve decided the empire is best served by your drifting into obscurity? I know which one I hope to be true.”

“Why are you here Kheelan? The boy has a long way to go before his training is complete.”

Kheelan dismissed Haret’s comment with a wave of his hand. “I’m not here about his indenture. The king has plenty of ravellers at his disposal, he’s no need of another, despite Lord Rhanick’s incessant reminders. Besides, I’m certain the king will have no use of one trained by your incompetence.”

Haret’s eyes took on a hard glint which Tahnner had never seen before, not even on the day he had almost caused them both to be lost in the stone’s Threads. They were filled with a rage Kheelan seemed determined to stoke.

“Why are you here? Last I remember, you swore never to deign to set foot in Pelston again. It was the one perk of my banishment here. I would prefer you not to take that from me too.”

“Believe me, your company is even less appealing,” Kheelan drawled, turning from Haret. “You, boy? You are Lord Rhanick Turro’s son, are you not?”

“Y-yes, Sir.”

“Do you communicate with your father?”

“Yes, Sir,” Tahnner answered again, uncertain of the direction of the questions.

“And your uncle?”

“I –what?” Jareck? What had he to do with anything? He had not seen his uncle since he had left for Pelston.

“Jareck Turro, your uncle, second in command of the palace guards,” Kheelan said, speaking the words as he closed the distance between them, only stopping when he towered over Tahnner. “Have you heard any news concerning him recently?” Kheelan scrutinized Tahnner as he spoke, his gaze scouring over him, leaving his skin feeling raw in its wake.

“I’ve not heard from him since I came here.” He glanced to Haret for support but the raveller’s gaze was fixed on Kheelan. “Isn’t he in Girona?”

Kheelan stared at him, but said nothing. Tahnner felt as if the raveller was trying to read his Threads even though it wasn’t Rising or Setting.

“We don’t know,” Kheelan said after a long moment, releasing Tahnner from his fixed stare and heaving a tired sigh. He turned his back on them and paced to the far side of the room then trailed his fingers along the papers arrayed upon the wall. “He disappeared on the night of the attack, accompanied by Councillor Berlioz, the captain of the guards and a choice few of his men.”

“What attack?” Haret asked, his voice sharp as he frowned at Kheelan.

The raveller’s head whipped around until he faced Haret, his eyebrows raised in incredulity. He looked as if laughter was on the verge of spilling from his lips.

“You can’t be serious?” Kheelan’s gaze darted between Haret and Tahnner as they exchanged puzzled glances. “I knew Pelston was a forgotten backwater, but I had thought that at least this news would reach you.”

“Kheelan?” Haret growled. “If you want the boy’s help then you need to explain-”

“Yes, yes. Thank you, Raveller Haret,” Kheelan shot back, silencing him with a glare. He took in a deep breath before turning to address Tahnner. “Six days ago, there was an attack upon the king, the prince and princess. The king survived, but both the prince and princess

were killed. I am here because the task of discovering the identity of the culprits has, naturally, fallen to the ravellers.”

Killed? The word rang through Tahnner’s mind. The boy and girl he had seen the day he met the king? What could they have done to merit being murdered? Had it been a Daenan plot, an attempt to throw the empire into chaos?

“You have the bodies, don’t you?” Haret asked, resting one hand on Tahnner’s shoulder. “Why come here to bother our novices. I’m sure there are plenty of other ways you can find the murderer’s Threads from Girona.”

“Not when the king has banned all ravellers from half the palace,” Kheelan grumbled. “Besides, what with the fire, we have no idea what’s become of the bodies.” He sighed, pulling a sheet from the top of a pile and blowing off a layer of dust before examining it. “He has decreed the throne room and all of the private residences be out of bounds of Thread exploration, including the royal chambers and the guard’s quarters. Any raveler caught breaking the law is to be hung from the palace walls. Any unsolicited reading of a royal’s Threads will be met with the same penalty.”

“What?” Haret’s fingers dug into Tahnner’s shoulder without him seeming to realise it. “He can do that? Why would he even want to? He must know it will hinder the attacker’s identity being discovered?”

“The king has been... unwell. There is talk his mind is lost but...”

Lost. A raver’s mind was lost, doomed to wander the empire, unable to see the world around them because of the reality they lived in their heads. Most stumbled into their own deaths soon enough, but for the king to be a raver... Tahnner had never even considered that it was possible, after all, that was the reason the king had others to read the Threads for him.

Tahnner had learnt in his lessons about why people lost their minds in the Threads. For some it was an accident, caused by incompetence when reading, being unable to return to their own before the Threads faded. For others though, it was deliberate. Tahnner had not

been able to believe it when the raveller had told him. He still remembered the confusion and fear from when he had almost lost his own mind in Itrantus. He couldn't understand why someone might voluntarily seek out the chaos of it.

The raveller had only looked at him with distant eyes and asked, "Have you never lost anyone? I think there are many people in this world willing to sacrifice sanity for the relief of being lost in the memories of loved ones."

Kheelan replaced the paper and turned back to face Tahnner. "Your uncle and the others fled the palace on the night of the attack. We can only assume they played some role in the events that night. It was well known that Councillor Berlioz was a Daenan sympathiser, the connection to your uncle can therefore not be ignored."

Tahnner wanted to interrupt, to protest that Jareck was no Daenan sympathiser, the Turro's were not like Fedan's family. The bite of Haret's fingernails in his shoulder kept him quiet though.

"Since we have been banned from examining their Threads," Kheelan continued to say, "we have been left unable to track them down. What's more, they have demonstrated an ... alarming ability to avoid our readings."

"That still doesn't explain why you have come here, Kheelan. Wherever Tahnner's uncle has gone, it isn't to Pelston."

"No, but perhaps there is something here which might explain how the councillor and Jareck Turro have been so skilled at avoiding being found by their Threads? It would take someone with training to manage what they have-"

Tahnner felt a cold shiver ripple through him despite the lack of windows in the guild. Kheelan's eyes bored into him, his head cocked to the right as he studied Tahnner. Should he tell them what his father had told him about the Draemans being Daenan sympathisers? If anyone had been sharing information about the raveller's secrets then it was Fedan. He was always so eager to learn more about Thread lore, always asking questions.

“More likely they learnt it from the councillor,” Haret interjected. “There have always been rumours he was as good with the Threads as any raveller-”

“Let’s leave out the ten year old gossip shall we?” Kheelan snapped. “I doubt you learnt much of use in the season before you were banished from Girona. Now boy, is there anything you can think of that might help us find your uncle? Anything to help us track his Threads? Any secrets you might have shared with him?”

“No, Sir,” Tahnner said, loyalty to his family surging through him as he tried not to let his guilt show over the letters he had written to his father over the last year.

Kheelan bent down, close enough for Tahnner to smell the faint remains of the sickly perfume which lingered about the older raveller. “Think harder, young novice,” he said, tugging one side of Tahnner’s robes straight. “If you don’t, then I’ll have to drag you out to the balcony at Rising and go through your Threads until I find what I need.”

“Make all the threats you want, Kheelan, you’ll do no such thing,” Haret tugged Tahnner back and positioning himself between them. “As usual, you’ve overstepped your authority. You might have some power in Girona, but you’ve no right to threaten anyone here.”

“My orders-” Kheelan began, but Haret cut him off.

“Come from who? The king? It doesn’t sound like he’s on the best of terms with the Thread Court at the moment. Your influence ended the moment you stepped outside Girona’s walls. What do you care anyway? If the king doesn’t want the culprits found, then it’s no concern of ours. Unless you’re making a move to become head raveller in Girona and need the recognition?”

Kheelan said nothing, the only sign that Haret had hit the mark was how the other raveller’s eyes narrowed as he glared at Haret.

“Ah, that’s it, isn’t it?” Haret chuckled to himself. “Look Kheelan, I realise you’ve come here prove something, but there’s nothing we can help you with. You’ll have to find someone else to use in your quest for power this time.”

“You always were too narrow-minded. You never could understand anything other than what you saw in those damned Threads.” Kheelan was a little taller than Haret, a fact he used to full advantage as he stepped closer to him. “You’ll end up making your own noose with them if you don’t open your eyes to the world around you for once.” With that, Kheelan left, his black robes billowing behind him, the pounding of his feet reverberating through the halls as he stormed down the stairs.

“You should go and join the others,” Haret said as the footsteps faded away. “Don’t let him catch you alone. I’ll see to it that he’s removed from Pelston by Rising.”

“Yes, Sir,” Tahnner said, making to leave but turning back to face the raveller as a thought occurred to him. “Sir? Why are you in Pelston?”

It seemed obvious to him now that Haret was too good a raveller to be wasted here, he wondered why he had not thought to question the raveller’s presence before. Harte was better with the Threads than most of the others. The skills he had demonstrated in rescuing Tahnner proved as much. Even Senara had been impressed by the feat. Why someone with so much skill was being wasted in Pelston was anyone’s guess. Tahnner had heard stories from the other novices about the luxuries Thread Court ravellers lived, their expensive quarters were a far cry from modest old Pelston, where they worked for everything they had.

The corner of Haret’s mouth twitched into a small smile, dying in almost the same moment it formed. “Ravellers are entrusted with a great responsibility, Tahnner. Never forget that people rely on you to read the truth from the Threads, but sometimes it isn’t the truth they want. Now go on downstairs. You shouldn’t be up here. I’m sure Senara is awaiting your report.”

“Yes, Sir,” Tahnner said again, turning to go but finding himself unable to. “Sir? Isn’t there a better use for all of this?” he asked, gesturing at the papers piled high around the room.

Haret said nothing, he only rubbed at the tired lines on his forehead. He suddenly

looked a lot older than the twenty something years Tahnner guessed him to be.

“There are a great many things in this world for which there are better uses, but don’t delude yourself into thinking anyone is interested in them. Now go downstairs, before I change my mind and let Kheelan pry into every secret you’ve ever had.”

## Chapter Four

"Why do we bother wasting so much time worrying about the weather," Senara asked, twirling a pen about her fingers. Her long, light brown hair loose and draping around her face, shading it from the torchlight. "Today, sun. Tomorrow, rain. Would the empire collapse if it had to figure out when to plant root crops for itself?"

"The seasons do change each year," Tahnner pointed out, not looking up from the papers he was busy inscribing with his morning report.

"Doesn't mean they're not predictable."

"First you tell me Pelston has nothing new to teach you, now you're calling the Threads predictable. Next you'll inform me you no longer require Rising or Setting to see them," Tahnner smirked down at the papers, checking over what he had written about the snowstorms he had seen coming to the north on the twelfth day of Hiberna. "When do you desire we commence worshipping you, oh great and powerful Thread reader?"

Senara huffed and crumpled up a sheet of paper. The crunching sound alerted Tahnner to the need to duck a moment before the ball hurtled at his head.

"Threads are the same for beggars and kings alike," she grumbled. "Not my fault no-one else seems to know how to use them. What's that word you call them again?"

"Pervasive? Infallible? Exhaustive?"

"Maybe... anyway, it's people reading them that get them wrong."

"Yes..." Tahnner said, drawing the word out as he re-dipped his pen in the ink pot, trying to compose his argument. It was always difficult to win an argument against Senara's

logic. To her, the world was either one way or another, a Thread came true or it didn't. Everything else was insignificant. "They aren't as predictable as you're suggesting though."

"For you anyway. My time could be a lot better spent. Setting take it," she cursed. Tahnner glanced up to find her pouting as her pen clattered across the floor. She glowered at the pen then her stool scraped across the stones as she stood to retrieve it.

Tahnner chuckled, returning his attention to the report he had been labouring over for half the morning. In the six years he had been at Pelston, Senara's confidence in her own ability to navigate the Threads had only burgeoned, a feat he would have once considered impossible. Now though, he often had the impression that Pelston was fast becoming a shackle to her, blistering more every day.

"You should be careful what you wish for, not even you know what all the Threads can have in store."

Tahnner spun on his stool at the sound of Haret's voice. The older raveller stood in the doorway, a humourless smile twisting the corner of his mouth.

"Sir?"

"The dispatch orders have arrived."

Senara's gaze met Tahnner's, a slight frown forming in the centre of her brow. They had watched the orders come in twice a year, filled with instructions for where the newest fully-trained ravellers were to be dispersed across Ilyia, to Thread Courts in all major towns and cities. Ravellers trained in Pelston supplied half the empire. As a future raveller for the king though, he had always known he was destined for Girona. If not for Senara, he never would have cared about the dispatches. Her future was the only one which still hung in the balance.

They had known the dispatches were due soon, the threat suspended over them for the last few weeks, souring both of their moods. Senara had kept threatening to disregard her orders in order to search out the Threads of whoever was supposed to be delivering the

decision from Girona.

“Where?” Senara asked, the usual mixture of mockery and merriment which lilted her tone was gone and, although she tried to hide it, he could hear the quaver in her voice.

Say Girona. Please say Girona. He stared at Haret, willing the older raveller to speak the words he longed to hear. He would give anything for her to be sent there with him. He needed no Threads to know the chances he would ever see her again if she was sent elsewhere, were small at the least.

“North, to the Daenan frontline.”

Haret’s words were like a stone hitting water, distorting everything around them, knocking Tahnner’s world off kilter as everything changed in great looming swells.

“The Council has decreed a contingent of ravellers should assist the army. They’re hoping it will speed the war up. I’m sorry, Senara.”

She stood unmoving, as if the mere mention of the northern frontier had been enough to freeze her to her bones. Even if half the reports of the war were exaggerated, then it still sounded like a miserable place, littered with seized villages, ruined fields and seasons so cold that hibernation seemed the only way to survive them. If the war didn’t kill her, then the cold would.

Senara said nothing. She just stared at the ground with eyes too distant to see anything. He wished she would do something, anything. Rail against it. Beg Haret to change the orders. Someone else should be sent in her stead. She didn’t belong with the army, she should be in Girona, with him.

“What-” Senara began, but her voice was so hoarse that she had to stop and clear her throat before continuing, “What about Fedan?”

Tahnner choked at the question. Fedan. The boy had been as good as a stranger to her for the last six years, yet still he was all she cared about. Even now, when their every plan had been destroyed, she was still worrying about him.

Torchlight shimmered in her eyes as she stared at Haret, beseeching him to give her that one thing. The ache in Tahnner's chest threatened to burst something vital as he watched her. Her tears were from her fear of losing Fedan, rather than the certainty she would be separated from him. It broke something inside him, something he couldn't name and hadn't noticed growing over the years, but that was now so much a part of him that he doubted he could live without it.

A crunching sound alerted him to the papers he still clasped in his hand. The records he had laboured over for so long, were now beyond useless, all scrunched and smeared with ink.

"Girona," Haret said, ignoring the work Tahnner had destroyed, "to join the Thread Court-"

"Him?" Tahnner scoffed, his voice ringing through the windowless chamber louder than he had intended it to. "Fedan's a second rate raveller at best and you know it. He-"

"-isn't your concern," Haret's voice was filled with a steel he rarely showed as he scowled at Tahnner.

"But he doesn't deserve it! Only the best get sent to Girona's Thread Court. Fedan's not good enough for some backwater town, let alone the capital! Senara is the best, Fedan should be the one sent to the war instead of her-"

"It's not my decision to make." The older raveller's voice was back to the world weary tone Tahnner was so used to hearing from him, resigned to everything.

The need to argue the point surged through him, but Haret held up his hand, silencing him. "No," he said, "I will hear no more on this because there is nothing I can do to change it, if I could, then don't you think I would do something about my own orders to be sent with her?"

His words echoed until they were consumed by papers and stone. Silence fell in the wake of his pronouncement as all arguments fled from Tahnner's mind. In all the time he

had been in Pelston, he had never known dispatch orders to arrive for any but the newly trained ravellers. Whatever Haret's past crimes, it seemed that those ravellers in Girona that controlled the rest of the guild, were not finished punishing him yet.

"It's because Fedan's a Draeman, isn't it? That's why he's not being sent north like you two," Tahnner shot the accusation at Haret even though he knew the raveler was blameless. "His family influenced the decision, didn't they? Senara has no-one, so they don't mind sending her to the heart of a war. The whole system is-"

"Then do something about it, Tahnner!" Haret's voice cut through the air like a crack of a whip. The rest of Tahnner's righteous fury died on his lips as he gawked at the normally solemn raveler. "Fedan isn't the only one with familial influence working for him." The words stung despite the calm way they were uttered. "You forget who it is you'll serve and who it was that got you there. So instead of whining, why don't you try doing something about it? Now pack your things. I've had enough of discussing what cannot be changed. We leave tomorrow."

He strode from the room, his footstep fading away as he disappeared from view. A hot flush crept up Tahnner's cheeks as he stared at the floor, unwilling to meet Senara's eyes for fear of what he might see there.

"I'm sorry," he said, addressing his feet. "I didn't mean-"

"It's fine," she said, swiping at her eyes before following Haret from the room. "I have to go."

"Senara- Wait!"

He hurried after her, leaving his crumpled, half-written report scrunched up on the table. He chased her down a flight of stairs. She was almost inside the girl's dormitory when he caught up with her. When she stopped at the entrance, he sighed with relief. He had no desire to spend his last night in Pelston cleaning out the privy for being caught in the girl's chamber.

"I'm fine, Tahnner. Don't worry about me."

"I know that." He shot her a weak smile. "The war will be over in no time with you there to help. It's me I'm worried about, I don't know what I'll do without you."

A small smile flicked across her face, but it soon vanished. Was she thinking of Fedan again? The thought tore through Tahnner and he wanted to shake her, to wake her from whatever hold the other raveller held over her.

"I'm going to help destroy the country you were born in, doesn't that bother you?"

It was a mark of how little Tahnner had considered Daena over the last six years that the thought had not crossed his mind. He had been young when his house had joined the Ilyian Empire. Most days he forgot that he had ever once been Daenan. Now though, he resented it, thinking of it only as the place responsible for Senara's being stolen from him.

"You know I've not considered myself Daenan for years," he said, raking his hair from where it had fallen in front of his eyes when he chased her down the stairs.

Senara pursed her lips, staring at him with the same intensity she always had whenever she was wishing the Threads were visible more than twice a day. "Did you ever asked your father why he abandoned his country?"

"Why do you care so much?" Tahnner asked, hurt by the accusation in her question. "It's not as if Daena's ever had much hope of surviving. It was doomed long before my father changed our allegiances. You've seen the old maps upstairs. The country was already a fraction of what it once was before Turro joined Ilyian. My father did what he had to do to save his people."

"I didn't know your father could read the Threads?" Senara's calm, outward appearance belied the sharp edge to her voice. "Good at predicting the future is he?"

"I only meant that it's inevitable-"

"Then you're a fool who should try examining his own Threads once in awhile."

“What?” Tahnner asked, taken aback. “You’ve read my Threads?”

He was unsure if the prospect alarmed him or not. There was little he kept secret from Senara, but the thought was still unsettling nonetheless. It was considered the height of ill-manners to delve into the Threads of another raveler without their permission.

“You’ve never read mine?” she asked, her eyebrows raised in a disbelieving arch.

“No!” Not directly at any rate. Although he had treasured all the times he had found her in Fedan’s accidentally, whenever he had been searching for evidence of House Draeman’s misdeeds.

Her lips twisted in a rueful smile. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have snapped at you like that. Your father’s decisions aren’t yours. I’m just angry that I’m not going to Girona.”

“I hate this,” Tahnner said, trying to memorise every freckle scattered across her nose and cheeks. They had faded somewhat over the years, but they still made him want to trace them with his fingertip every time he saw them, carving the pattern into his memory. “When I reach Girona, I’ll convince them to bring you there too. I’ll have the ear of the king. I’ll be able to ensure they bring you back from the war. It’s so far away from here that you probably won’t even have reached the frontlines before the order arrives.”

Senara attempted a smile, but it lacked her usual levity. She brushed back an errant lock of hair from his face, a sadness marring the same gesture she had made countless times over the years.

He wanted to lean into the tender warmth of her palm, to reach out his hand and feel the soft silk of her hair as he ran it through his fingers. He wanted to meld their lips together in a kiss that would show her everything he had been unable to tell her for six years.

He did nothing though. How could he? He already knew she didn’t feel the same way, at least not for him.

Senara’s fingers stilled in his hair and he shifted, uncomfortable with the intensity of

her stare. He was about to back away when her hand dropped and she spun, racing into the girl's chamber, calling out for him to wait there. When she returned, she grasped a small knife in her hand, so old and rusted that he wondered if she kept it as a keepsake since the blade wasn't sharp enough to cut anything other than air.

Before he managed any more than a shout of protest though, Senara had raised the knife and began hacking at a lock of his hair, the motion jerking and painful, so much so that he felt certain she was wrenching more strands from his head than she was severing. When she was finished, she did the same to her own, grimacing with every catch of the blade against her hair.

"Senara... what are you doing?"

The thought that perhaps she wanted something to remember him by caused his heart leap in his chest. Sentimentality though, had never been something Senara had mastered. He supposed it had something to do with her having grown up alone, living in too desperate need of practicalities such as food and clothes to have anything to get sentimental about.

"It's for the Threads," she muttered, examining the severed locks.

"Well I'm certain they'll appreciate the sacrificial offering of my hair..." Tahnner said, feeling at the damage. The strands stuck out even worse than the rest of his untidy mop. He could well imagine his mother's opinion on his perpetual state of disarray. The thought of her made him sad. He had heard from her less than a dozen times since arriving in Pelston, but he hoped he would have the opportunity to see her again in Girona soon though.

"I'm not going to burn it," Senara said, waving the lock of her own hair in front of his face. "This way, if you've got something that belonged to me then you'll be able to check I'm alright and everything." She held out the lock of her hair, but pulled it back before his fingers could close about it. "You have to promise you won't abuse it though. I don't want you searching through my Threads where you've got no business looking."

She held out the lock again, as if she were honouring him with a great privilege. Tahnner could only stare at it though, feeling as confused as he had been the day when

Haret had first told him to read the Threads.

Senara let out an exasperated sigh then explained, "Keep it with you. If you lock it away in something dark. If you only get it out to use it then it'll be easier to find my Threads than following your own back. Use it to Thread jump to mine. Whenever something happens and I want to share it with you, I'll send you some new strands. You can trace them back and that way you'll sort of be there with me, whatever happens."

Something inside him tore open as pain spilled out, seeping into every part of him. He imagined not seeing her each day, not laughing at her jokes or teasing her about the way she hummed out of tune.

"I'm going to go bald," he said, holding the hair as if it was worth more than all of Turro. "There's going to be so much I'll want to share with you."

The next day after Rising, Tahnner, Fedan and a boy who was being dispatched to the Thread Court in Eanadir, dragged their trunks down to where Senara and Haret already waited outside the guild. Since each of their records of indenture would need updating by the guild keepers, all of them were bound for Girona first, before being sent on to their separate locations. It meant adding a couple of extra days of travel to Senara and Haret's journey, but Tahnner was grateful. He was far from ready to say goodbye.

He sat beside Senara in the carriage, Haret on his other side. Neither said much, both choosing to stare out of the window. Memories of the journey to Pelston six years ago sprung to his mind as they began the long, winding descent. That carriage had been a lot more comfortable than the perfunctory one they were in now, which jarred as the wheels hit every rock on the road's surface. His emotions too were nothing like they had been on that last journey. He was not afraid as he had been back then.

No-one spoke, so the company proved as solitary as the journey had been with his father. Senara stared out the window, but Tahnner knew she was blind to everything they passed. When her calloused fingers reached out and grasped his, his heart lurched in his chest. He gave them a reassuring squeeze, noticing the way Fedan's eyes fixed on where

Senara's hand joined with Tahnner's. As if he felt Tahnner's gaze upon him, Fedan met his stare before his eyes swept across to watch Senara, his expression unreadable. Tahnner squeezed her hand tighter, reassuring himself he had not already lost her to the other side of the empire.

The dry estervan heat made the journey uncomfortable. He was almost relieved when Girona appeared in the distance, looking like a small mound of gold as sunlight reflected off the various gilded objects ornamenting the city. The outer wall loomed over them when they reached the entrance, the towering doors just as daunting as he remembered their being.

He wished it had been hibernal, full of short days and early Settings. Had they made the journey during in the darker seasons then Setting would have occurred whilst they were still on the road. As it was though, the sun hovered some distance above the western horizon as they queued in the heat, awaiting entrance into the capital.

Every Setting since he had joined the ravellers, someone had dictated what his goal would be from each reading. Find out where the stone originated from. Watch the western horizon for wrogen. When will be the best time to plant root and leaf crops? Had Setting passed during the journey from Pelston, then he might have used the Threads in whatever manner he desired. One final bout of freedom before control over his readings was handed to the king. He could have sifted through Senara's futures, trying to learn of anything which might help her in the north, even if the chance of it coming true was almost negligible. He might have searched for his family's Threads. He both longed to see his mother again and feared how much she might have changed in six years. He had been so afraid he was forgetting what she looked like, that on a day the ravellers had predicted the weather too unstable for Thread reading, he had tried to follow his own Threads back, searching out his mother's. He had been too afraid of losing his mind to linger long enough to find her in them though.

When they made it to the front of the queue, the carriage was inspected by the city guards. Having spent so long in Pelston, he had almost forgotten how the rest of the empire

viewed ravellers, one look at the guard's face though as he noticed the black robes of the carriage's occupants, was enough to bring back memories of every superstitious nonsense he had ever been told.

Haret handed over their papers and instructed them to show their guild marks to the guards. They had barely tugged down the left shoulder of their robes before the guard was waving them through.

The noisy essence of the capital hit them the instant they passed through the thick gates, every sound amplified as it echoed off the low arches sheltering the walkways of the lower quarters. People shouted to the guards, telling them to hurry up with the checks so they could get out of the city before nightfall. Others swarmed around the queued folk, trying to sell them everything from cups of water to silks for shading themselves from the burn of the estervan sun. The chaos of it all made Tahnner wish he were back in Pelston, with its quiet calm and unadorned beauty.

As the carriage rolled up a winding road, through the streets to the heart of the city, he stared out the window at the houses stacked haphazardly on the outskirts. He wondered how he had never before noticed how the city was a monument to the Threads. Gold decorated the houses, worked into the designs with more accomplishment the further they journeyed into the wealthier districts.

They stopped at the guild keepers first, an ominous building carved directly into the rock face about halfway up the city. A keeper noticed their presence the instance they entered the building and they were soon engulfed in a flurry of activity. The indentured people the keepers had been attending to were abandoned as they saw to ravellers. Keepers updated their records and papers of indenture, requesting all the relevant information from them. Tahnner felt uncomfortable with the attention. The last time he had been so fussed over, he had been in Turro. The swarm of activity felt both familiar and strange to him, like old clothes which he had used to wear often, but now found no longer fit. He glanced over at Senara and was unsurprised to find her looking just as uncomfortable. He was all too glad when they were finished with the guild keepers and back in the carriage, away from

the wide, staring eyes of the people of Girona.

The roads from the guild keepers to the upper levels were steeper than the climb from the lower districts. It was the Thread Court and not the Palace though which sat atop the city, watching over Girona with an unobstructed view of Rising and Setting, able to see down into the lives of all the citizens. Not even the rulers of an empire were greater than the Threads.

Tahnner had never forgotten the round, windowless tower of sandy brown stone that was Girona's Thread Court, although he had expected it to appear less domineering to him now than it had back then.

The carriage drew to a stop outside the tower, but neither Tahnner nor Fedan moved. The Thread Court was the elitist institution the empire could boast, a place of justice and of learning, but all Tahnner could think about was that in eighteen years he had only ever managed to make one friend, one person who understood his uncontrollable curiosity, one person who felt the same. His excitement for entering into the Thread Court paled in comparison to the pain of losing her.

Senara had the mind of the boldest captain, hungry to explore what others couldn't even contemplate the existence of. Where Tahnner abided by the rules, he doubted she even knew of their existence. He couldn't bring himself to step out of the carriage, away from the world of boundless knowledge and unfettered curiosity which she inspired. She was like the Threads the first time he had seen them, blinding and all consuming. She dragged him into a world as full of wonders as it was terrors, but what would his life return to without her? He couldn't go back to being the lonely boy his mother had locked away in windowless rooms every night.

He turned, needing to tell Senara how much her friendship was worth, of everything she meant to him, but when his gaze lifted to hers, he found Fedan and Senara staring at each other as if trying to sear the image of each other into their vision.

Tahnner shoved his way out of the carriage. Stepping out into the balmy city street, he

tried to ignore the heavy feeling, the struggle as he left a crucial part of himself behind.

He had already retrieved both of their trunks by the time Fedan exited the carriage. The vehicle leapt into motion an instant later and he could hear the clatter of the wheels upon the uneven stones as he kept his eyes fixed on the Thread Court, unable to bear the sight of Senara disappearing from view. Beside him, Fedan stared after the carriage, his eyes transfixed long after it had trundled out of sight.

“We should go in,” Tahnner said, his voice clipped as he let the bitterness he felt pour into each word.

Fedan said nothing, still staring after the carriage.

“Suit yourself,” Tahnner muttered, setting off in the direction of the Thread Court. He stopped as he met with resistance and turned to find Fedan grasping his robes.

“It’s not as bad as they say, is it?” he asked, fixing Tahnner with pleading eyes. “Daena, I mean. I’ve heard... stories. My father told me-”

“Don’t pretend you’re worried about what will happen to her,” Tahnner snapped. “If you cared at all then you wouldn’t have ignored her for the last six years.”

He wanted to hit Fedan, wanted to cause him a fraction of the pain he had wrought in Tahnner over the years, a pain made all the worse by Fedan’s indifference. Senara would have given the ingrate everything. All he ever had to do was ask. Tahnner had received less from Senara in six years spent adoring her than Fedan had thrown away every single day in Pelston.

“I- I didn’t. I didn’t ignore her-”

“And I can see the Threads in moonlight,” Tahnner said, hefting his trunk up and climbing the steps to the Thread Court. He had always considered Fedan an idiot for not reciprocating the way Senara felt about him, but trying to argue it felt more pointless than debating theology with a raver.

“Setting isn’t far away.”

Fedan’s words reached him as he climbed the top step. He turned to find Fedan staring down the western slope of Girona to where a warm orange light crested the distant Crag Land mountains, bathing the rooftops of the houses of the lower levels.

“The Thread Court Ravellers might not be expecting us until later,” Fedan said, turning back to face Tahnner, his eyes filled with desperation. “We could tell them the carriage wheel broke, or that we had troubles getting into the city.”

Tahnner stared down at Fedan, at his hunger to glimpse whatever he could grasp of Senara’s future. He recognised it because the same need coursed through him, urging him to abandon his duties to the ravellers, to his family, to race down the hillside after her.

He could ignore his obligation to the ravellers. He might hide out somewhere in the city and await Setting, submerging himself in his desperate search for solace in Senara’s Threads, for whatever comfort he could find. If he did so though, then Fedan would do the same. Whether it was more due to disgust at the idea of letting Fedan loose upon Senara’s Threads or from his own unwillingness to do anything for a Draeman, he turned from Fedan and walked inside the Thread Court to announce their arrival, into the place that featured in the nightmares of so many Ilyians.

## Chapter Five

The inside of the Thread Court was almost as busy as the bustling streets outside. There was only one other black-robed raveller in sight. He sat behind a large desk near the entrance, surrounded by a queue of waiting people, wafting a sheet of paper in an attempt to dispel the warm estervan heat that had built up in the windowless room. The stuffy room and Tahnner's weighty robes soon caused his skin to prickle as sweat trickled down his back. The unabashed stares the room's occupants directed his way enhanced his discomfort.

Hands grasped him from behind, tugging at his raveller's robes.

"What-"

"Please?" a raspy voice asked. "Please- My boy, you must find him. Please- I can pay, I can. I-"

As Tahnner turned to investigate who clutched his robes, he caught sight of Fedan entering the guild before a wide-eyed woman stepped between them, clasping at the front of Tahnner's robes, the whites of her eyes yellowed and lined with red.

"I'm sorry?" Tahnner asked, stepping back to extricate himself from the woman's grip. "Do I know you?"

"You! Boy!"

He turned around to find the now irate-looking raveller, scowling at them from behind the desk, his make-shift fan stilled in mid-air.

"What are you doing down here? Get yourselves upstairs now, are you trying cause a

disturbance?" the raveller huffed his breath out in an exasperated sigh as he returned his attention to the man in front of him.

"Excuse me? Sir?" Fedan called out, struggling to make his way through the crowd towards the man. "Where-"

The raveller jabbed a finger towards the ceiling without diverting his attention from the man before him. Fedan turned back with a questioning glance, but Tahnner ignored him and set off towards the winding staircase at the far side of the tower.

When he reached the first floor landing he stopped, unsure where the raveller had been directing them to. Fedan caught up with him and Tahnner was struck by the strange sense of unity he seemed to feel with the other boy. It might be down to nothing more than that Fedan was the only one familiar to him in the entire guild, but he didn't like the sensation.

The door to the first floor landing opened and a familiar voice drawled, "If it isn't Pelston's latest protégé."

Kheelan, the raveller who had badgered Tahnner for information about his uncle all those years ago, stepped forward, blocking the doorway. Although the raveller's expression was less severe than it had been back then, there was still no happiness in the wry twist of his lips as he leant back against the doorframe.

"Welcome to Girona, boys. I'm sure you'll prefer it to that backwater, but you won't be here long if you're anything like the idiot who trained you. I wouldn't bother to unpack."

Without saying any more, Kheelan brushed passed them, almost knocking Tahnner back down the stairs. Judging from the way the raveller's eyes swept over him with a look of disinterest, he gathered that the raveller had forgotten all about him, or at least he hoped he had.

Laughter burst through the entrance to the first floor. Tahnner met Fedan's questioning gaze before entering the long rectangular room with closed doors lining its walls. The chamber was extravagant with beautiful paintings hanging from its windowless walls, lit by

the warm glow of oil lamps which looked more like intricate pieces of art than functioning necessities. A number of ravellers reclined on expensive-looking plush chairs.

A heavy spiced tang of smoke assaulted him as he stepped inside, causing him to cough. He tried to smother the sound as Fedan entered after him, muttering a muffled expletive at the sight before them. Neither moved as they struggled to absorb the opulence. A door to their left burst open and Tahnner's mind blanked as a woman who was naked from the waist up bounded out, shrieking at a dishevelled raveller with skewed robes who fell out the door after her. Tahnner barely saw the raveller though because his gaze was fixed on the woman's bare chest as she turned and fled through the room, accompanied by the raucous laughter of the other ravellers lazing about. Even after the woman had gone, Tahnner couldn't stop staring at empty doorway.

"New arrivals!" called out a dishevelled raveller, wrenching Tahnner from his reverie. "Welcome to Girona!" He attempted a bow even though he was sitting. "Threads, look at them," he said to a companion, another man with whose robes were hanging off his shoulder. "We weren't ever so staid were we? Just looking at them makes all the mirth in me splutter out."

His companion laughed and proceeded to take a long draw on a pipe, the apparent source of the heavy, spiced smoke filling the air.

"We are sorry for disturbing you, Sir," Fedan said, his voice sounding strained, as if he was trying not to cough again. "We were looking for someone who might know what our orders-"

Laughter broke out amongst the older ravellers and smoke huffed from the nose of the man breathing in the white fumes. They shared mocking glances with each other before the first man addressed them again.

"Your orders are to shut up and get to work extracting whatever they stuck up your arse in Pelston. Setting's ages away. If you go upstairs now then you'll only end up getting mobbed by the crowd. Come over here. Join us! You'll be here for the rest of your lives, so

I'd like to find out if we're going to get along."

He shot them a grin before returning his attention to the pipe being passed around. Tahnner glanced at Fedan and was reassured by the uneasy look on the other raveller's face. After spending the last six years with his life revolving around Rising and Setting, he had developed a sensitivity for knowing when the Threads were drawing close. Even being indoors in a windowless room as they were, he could feel the gentle tug of them building around him. Had they been in Pelston, they would have already positioned themselves to the best advantage for watching the sun's descent. The unconcerned attitudes of the other ravellers was unnerving.

They made their hesitant way over to join the men, the taste of the smoke heavy in the air and growing thicker the closer they got. Neither Tahnner nor Fedan sat, instead they hovered on the fringes of where the ravellers lounged, deep in conversation. The half-dressed man who had spilled from the side room joined them, causing the conversation to turn in a direction which had Tahnner flushing with embarrassment. Soon though, a low ringing sound echoed through the room, causing the ravellers to heave reluctant sighs as they dragged themselves to their feet.

"This way, boys," the first raveller called to them as he straightened his robes and led the way back out of the door.

More ravellers joined them as they climbed the six spiralling flights to the top floor. Tahnner reached the roof without his breathing becoming laboured, unlike the other ravellers who puffed and muttered curses under their breaths.

"Excuse me, Sir?" Tahnner asked the raveller who had spoken to them downstairs. "Do you know what the particulars of my orders are? I'm to be the king's personal raveller. Is there somewhere I must to report to?"

The raveller laughed. "I wouldn't say that too loudly if I were you. The last of the king's personal ravellers didn't meet with all that happy an ending. Your best bet would be to not mention it and hope no-one remembers."

“You don’t understand. I have to. It’s what I’ve trained for. My- my father- it’s why I was sent to Pelston in the first place.”

“And I was sold because my father had too many sons and not enough land.” The raveller frowned, glancing over his shoulder at where the sun approached the western horizon. “Look, you’ve been in Pelston for a while so you’ll have to trust me when I say that the king is not someone you want to work for. He’s had ravellers killed before and he’s done far worse to others. Haven’t you heard the rumours of how he killed his brother and sister?”

Tahnner couldn’t understand it. The description of the king sounded nothing like the man he had met six years ago. That king had been worthy of the respect of his empire. How could he have changed so much since then?

The raveller shook his head and muttered to himself as he hurried to stand on one of the fifteen raised pedestals in the centre of the Thread Court’s rooftop. A crowd had gathered at the perimeter of the roof, kept away from the ravellers by a number of blank faced guards.

Tahnner blinked a couple of times in disbelief as he stared at the grey-garbed honouri. He had never seen so many in one place before. The members of the honouri guild were the deadliest protection you could purchase, if you had enough money. Each grey-garbed man keeping the crowd at bay, stood blank-faced, intimidating the masses by doing nothing more than being there.

“You- boy? Come over here!” The raveller Tahnner had spoken to called out to Fedan from atop his pedestal.

Fedan frowned, but made his way over to join the raveller, leaving Tahnner alone. He glanced around at the other ravellers. There were two ravellers waiting beside each of the pedestals, conversing with various civilians who, from their clothing, Tahnner guessed to be some of Ilyia’s elite. Ignoring the rabble at their backs, the finely dressed petitioners spoke with their assigned ravellers, gesturing as they held out various objects for examination.

Poorer Thread Courts were often unable to afford the luxury of sparing two ravellers on the same task, but the practice was common in Girona. That way, each raveler assigned to find the truth of a matter would be supported by a witness, whilst also receiving the added benefit of having another raveler there in case they ran into trouble in the Threads.

Each of the fifteen ravellers on the pedestals was already partnered with another. Except for one. Tahnner felt a wave of uneasiness as he spotted Kheelan watching him from where he waited atop his raised dais, nodding at what an old man in a heavily embroidered tunic said. Kheelan waved his hand, indicating for Tahnner to stop dallying and join him, shooting him an impatient glare before returning his attention to the old man. When Tahnner reached them, he realised that the patron was explaining about his missing ship which should have arrived in Wenadir three weeks past. The man wrung his fingers before handing over a small piece of wood to Kheelan which Tahnner guessed came from the ship.

“Please? That cargo is all I have left.”

Kheelan nodded then glanced at Tahnner, raising one eyebrow in a silent question. Tahnner nodded, trying to convey that he understood what was expected of him. He felt a rush of excitement at the prospect of achieving something worthwhile from the Threads for once.

Glancing over the western side of the Thread Court, he received his first glimpse of the thousands of rooftops below. Even from high above, he felt surrounded by the bustle of city life. He could imagine the vendors on the streets and bawdy laughter exploding from the many inns which they had passed on their journey through the city. The sight was distracting. For the first time, he longed for the simplicity of Pelston, with its empty corridors and vast, bare horizons. How much easier would it be to concentrate on the Threads without the distractions of the city?

As the golden haze of Threads suffused his vision, Tahnner focused on blocking out all but those of the strip of wood Kheelan held, even as his hand slipped into his pocket, feeling the edges of the small box which he kept Senara’s lock of hair in. He pushed down the desire to pull it out and fixed his attention on the Threads of the strip of wood, following

them back through the months, not slowing down until he reached the time when the small strip had been taken from a broken board on the hull, an insurance in case the owner might ever need the help of a raveller.

He felt the draw of the Threads and wanted to explore all the journeys the ship had made, but forced himself to jump to those of the plank next to it, latching onto them with his mind and following them forward. He sped through the weeks, witnessing the ship's journey to Itrantus and the vernal storms which had plagued its passage.

He navigated his mind back to his own Threads before the last of the gold disappeared. As he pulled his mind back out, he felt a wave of embarrassment as he glanced at the scores of men and women staring at the ravellers and the Threads, their eyes wide and as tempered by fright as they were filled with wonder. The attention made him uncomfortable, unused as he was to the Threads being a performance. His eyes met Kheelan's. The older raveller was watching him, a mocking smile playing about his mouth before he turned his back on Tahnner and gestured for the old man to step forward.

"Your ship was blown off course south of Ellethe by a storm two weeks ago," Kheelan explained, handing back the fragment of wood to the old man. The merchant took the timber and placed a chinking pouch into Kheelan's hand as he waited for more information with rapt attention. "The ship is stranded off Ilyia's southern coast, I'll have a map brought up and I'll mark its location for you."

"You mean it's not sunk?" the old man asked, a whimper of happiness slipping out. "The cargo? What about the cargo?"

Kheelan paused, already half-turned from the old man. A frown flashed across his face and it was clear the raveller had not thought to check the condition of the cargo.

"The majority is currently undamaged," Tahnner said, drawing the surprised attention of the two men. "There has been a little water damage to some of the silks and the sailors who survived the wreckage broke into a couple of barrels of Itrantian liquor, but otherwise the cargo is salvageable."

The old man beamed a watery smile, his hands clasped together before him as he began stammering his thanks to Tahnner. The weight of Kheelan's stare prickled the back of Tahnner's neck and he turned to meet the other raveller's gaze. Kheelan watched him with an unreadable expression, ignoring the pleas of the onlookers as they begged to know what the Threads had shown, their cries taking on a fanatical edge. As Kheelan turned and made for the staircase, Tahnner wondered if the older raveller had been impressed by the multiple Thread jumps which Tahnner had performed in order to check the condition of the cargo.

"Sir?" Tahnner called out. "Where should I make a record of what I saw?"

Kheelan stopped in his tracks, shaking his head. "Haret's student through and through," he muttered before disappearing down the stairs and out of sight.

Tahnner turned to find another raveller to ask but a hand clapped him on the back. It belonged to the dishevelled-looking raveller who had greeted them downstairs. Fedan stood beside him, his face lit in an excited grin.

"We don't bother with all that here," the raveller said, urging Tahnner towards the stairs, away from the shouts of the crowd which were growing louder with every moment. "Most readings are personal so there's little point recording them. On the rare occasion we do anything official then the scribes record it for us."

"But what about everything we learn in the Threads? Have you considered the uses for all we can-?"

"My dear boy! Uses? Cast such thoughts from your mind, leave it free for far more important matters." The raveller wiggled his eyebrows as he spoke, leading them down the spiralling staircase. He wobbled as if his excessive paunches would topple him off balance at any moment. "My name is Bertren by the way. First class raveller and philanderer extraordinaire."

He gave a mocking bow before showing them around the rest of the guild, explaining that outside of Rising and Setting, the rest of the time was their own. To Tahnner, the lack of

restrictions felt both freeing and daunting all at once.

All the rooms of the Thread Court were lavish, each filled with more trinkets and fineries than Tahnner knew existed. The memory of the coin pouch the patron had passed to Kheelan after the reading returned to his mind and he wondered just how much money the ravellers earned from the Threads.

“What about those who can’t afford a reading?” he asked. “When do we help them?”

Bertren barked a laugh. “We don’t,” he said, opening the door to the first floor, “it’s not our problem if they can’t pay.”

“It’s not their fault they’re poor,” Fedan protested, “Only reading for the rich is unfair-”

“What’s not fair,” Bertren said, turning back around to face Fedan, “is that we are the ones bound to reading the damned things. The least the Threads can do is keep us well-kept in the meantime.”

Fedan opened his mouth to protest but Bertren stopped him, “Dear boy, I wouldn’t go spreading that opinion around too loudly if I were you. Relax a little. Try enjoying the benefits of being a renowned Thread Court raveller. It’s better than being trapped somewhere like Pelston.”

“Haret,” Tahnner said without realising he had spoken aloud.

Bertren’s gaze flicked to him, his eyebrows furrowed as he nodded, the joviality vanishing from his face. “Know him, do you? Mmm. He was here once, before he got himself transferred for defying orders. It wouldn’t have been so bad had he not implicated Evenard in matters which our devoted councillor would rather the Threads forgot. Now, I don’t believe alcohol is permitted in Pelston. So, if you would follow me this way, I’d be delighted to show you where we keep our supply.”

It was several days before Tahnner became used to the jaunty nature of the Thread Court. Everything felt so different from the years of long hours toiling away in Pelston. He kept forgetting that the two places were part of the same guild. He worked with Kheelan at

every Thread reading, but managed to avoid the older raveller elsewhere.

On the fifth day, Tahnner and Fedan left the Thread Court to explore some of the upper squares in the city. He had an uneasy feeling about the fanatical way people gathered to witness the ravellers' proclamations every day. It left him with a desire to escape the Thread Court for as long as he could before having to return in time for Setting. It sickened him that people flocked there to queue all day long just for the chance a raveller might take pity on them and read their Threads.

"The ravellers used to be better, you know," Fedan said as they exited the Thread Court. "Once, back in Pelston, Haret told me we used to exist to serve the people and not the highest bidder."

"Bertren says the fanatics would be better off being banned from the Thread Court," Tahnner said, gesturing to the queue of sweltering people. "He might be right. At least that way they wouldn't waste their time hoping for something that's never going to happen."

"You don't really think-"

Fedan's words were cut off as a pair of hands grabbed his black robes. The same old woman who had accosted Tahnner the other day, with deep lines of exhaustion etched into her face, pulled Fedan towards her. Her grip looked weak and Fedan should have had no problem breaking free, but for some reason he made no effort to remove her. Instead he seemed entranced as he listened to the woman's pleas for help. Tahnner grabbed Fedan's arm, jerking him away to leave the woman to her long day of queueing.

Fedan seemed out of sorts for the rest of the morning. When they returned to the Thread Court rooftop in time for Setting, Bertren waved at Fedan, signalling for him to wait a moment whilst he finished conversing with another raveller. Fedan barely seemed to notice though, his attention already fixed on the crowd gathered on the rooftop.

Bertren joined them a few moments later, running a nervous hand through his hair.

"Listen Tahnner," he said, "Kheelan's been requested for a private reading so he won't

be here for Setting. I wouldn't normally ask this of someone who's only recently finished training, but how would you feel about taking point? Kheelan said you're decent enough with the Threads and we've already promised a reading to Lord Hinnaren. I'll assign Fedan to you as well so you won't be going solo. How about it then?"

He stared at Tahnner, waiting for an answer and pride filled him at Kheelan's complement. He glanced to Fedan to see what he thought, but the raveller was still staring at the crowd, transfixed.

"Erm, yeah, sure," Tahnner said, excitement surging through him. Here was a chance for him to show the other ravellers how good he was at reading the Threads. He might not be at Senara's level, but he was certain he was better than at least half the Thread Court's ravellers, even though they had years more experience than he did.

"That a boy!" Bertren said, clapping Tahnner's shoulder before he left to assume his solitary position on a pedestal to await the Threads.

Tahnner turned to Fedan, expecting to see excitement mirrored upon the other boy's face, but Fedan was still staring into the crowd.

"Come on," Tahnner snapped, making his way over to the pedestal Kheelan usually occupied. He wished Bertren hadn't bothered pairing Fedan with him, he could handle it on his own and didn't need the help.

"Wait- Tahnner!"

"What?" he turned back around, sneering at Fedan. "Don't tell me, scared you'll get lost in the Threads? Don't ruin this for me-"

"It's not that," Fedan said in a low voice, glancing around. "It's just... this is a chance to do some good."

"You think I don't know that? That's why we've spent the last six years training to-"

"I don't mean it like that," Fedan said, glancing around again. "Think about it, we could

use this opportunity to read the Threads for someone who really needs it.”

Tahnner felt his mouth fall open. He stared at Fedan, trying to figure out if he had misheard him. His gaze slid past the raveller to the crowd behind him, landing on the familiar face of a haggard old woman, her bloodshot eyes fixed on the back of Fedan’s head. It was the same woman who had accosted Fedan outside the Thread Court after Rising that morning.

“No,” Tahnner said, holding up his hands as if that would stop Fedan explaining his hair-brained idea. “Don’t even say it. No. You heard what happened to Haret. He tried to be a man of the people and look where that got him. I don’t know about you, but I don’t fancy being sent back Pelston.”

He turned but Fedan jerked him back around by his robes. “Tahnner stop! Just listen for a moment.” Fedan’s eyes were wide as he pleaded and unease crept back into Tahnner’s stomach. Fedan’s gaze had taken on that same frantic look that lingered in the eyes of so many who crowded onto the Thread Court’s rooftop each day.

“Please? You’re good with the Threads. Better than I’ll ever be. You don’t need me to watch out for you during a reading. If you do it without me, then I can help her and no-one has to know. We’ll still get the credit for doing what we’ve been paid for and we can help someone who really needs it!”

“If anyone is watching us then they’ll know-”

“They’ll know I didn’t follow orders. Not you. Please? Let me do this. I can’t- I can’t stand by and do nothing when I can help.”

Before Tahnner could argue further, Bertren waved for them to take up their positions. Tahnner did his best to ignore the furtive, questioning glances Fedan kept shooting his way as Lord Hinnaren explained what he desired from his reading. He was so distracted that he had to request for Lord Hinnaren to repeat his explanation about the investment he wished verifying. When Tahnner eventually had enough information, Lord Hinnaren stepped back, looking so bored by the entire proceeding that Tahnner couldn’t help but wonder why he

had bothered paying so much for a Thread reading if the outcome meant so little to him?

He climbed onto the pedestal and felt as if every pair of eyes in Girona were upon him, as if they all knew his guilt for even considering Fedan's suggestion. His father had sent him to the ravellers so he might serve his king and do well by his family. He might have failed in the first part, but here was his chance to build a reputation for himself at the Thread Court. It was his opportunity to show how capable he was. It was also an opportunity to temporarily appease the growing need inside of him. A need to do something more with the Threads, to try to bridge the ever growing breach between everything they could be and what little they were used for.

As the sun began to dip beneath the horizon, Tahnner met Fedan's stare and saw the excitement burning within. Without saying anything, he nodded and Fedan's face broke into a nervous smile as the Threads suffused about them, intensifying until Tahnner saw nothing but the golden haze. Beside him, Fedan threw himself into the old woman's Threads, searching out a way to help her with whatever problem she had confided to him earlier.

Spurred on by Fedan's recklessness, Tahnner focused on finding the Threads Lord Hinnaren was interested in, easily discovering the trickery the Lord's partners intended to bring upon him. He extracted himself from the Threads and watched Fedan as the golden lines faded from view. Panic hit him as he realised that Fedan was still entrenched. If Fedan became lost in the woman's Threads and ended up a raver, then it would draw the attention of the other ravellers to what they had been doing.

He was about to throw himself back into the Threads after Fedan when raveller's eyes refocused and a smile burst across his face. He met Tahnner's gaze and the exhilaration spread like a contagion.

"We should request being paired together again," Tahnner murmured.

Fedan nodded, his enthusiastic smile fixed as he turned to catch the eyes of the old woman. He gave her a small nod and Tahnner watched as the woman broke down,

collapsing into the other members of the crowd.

As a distraction from the commotion, Tahnner turned to the still bored-looking Lord Hinnaren and explained the details of what he had read in the Threads. The Lord's eyes widened and he turned an angry shade of red at the news. In a loud voice, he applauded Tahnner for his reading then handed him the payment before turning and pushing his way through the crowd. Tahnner caught Bertren's gaze and returned the raveller's grin, feeling as though the smile would stay fixed on his face forever.

He still felt that way as he made to step down from the pedestal, but his elation dropped away as he stumbled at the sight of the familiar censorious eyes observing him from within the crowd. Lord Rhanick Turro stood watching him, a small smile curving the corner of his mouth as he surveyed his son.

## Chapter Six

Tahnner froze atop the pedestal. The other ravellers had already descended their perches, leaving him alone, raised above the near frantic crowd of people still lingering on the Thread Court's rooftop.

In the six years since he had last seen his father, the only thing about Rhanick Turro which had changed was the expression he wore as he watched his son. Tahnner guessed it to be pride, but having never seen it on his father before, he had little to base his assumption on. Joy swelled in his chest despite everything and his legs were unwilling to move for fear he would cause the look of pride to vanish, perhaps never to return.

His father carved his way through the crowd towards him, making Tahnner feel like a wiry sapling next to an old oak, one with roots so firm they might never be uprooted. He stepped down from the pedestal to stand before his father, the sense of accomplishment he had burgeoned only moments before slipping through his fingers like the Threads after Setting. Years' worth of questions teemed inside his mind, spilling over one another in his need for answers, too entangled to settle on one for long enough to ask it. He longed to know of everything he had missed since leaving for Pelston. How was his mother? His Brother? How had Turro fared as the war raged around it? Did his father regret the necessity of indenturing his youngest son?

"You're looking well," his father said, raking his gaze over him. "I'm glad you've made the most of the opportunity I acquired for you. Why are you here and not at the palace?" He glanced around at the other people on the rooftop with a look of disdain. Fedan was still talking with the old woman. His presence causing a stir with the fanatics which the honouri were having to control. He caught Tahnner's eye, but the excited gleam drained away as he noticed Tahnner's father.

“So you stay here between the king’s summons? I suppose it gives you more opportunity to keep an eye on that Draeman boy at any rate. That is him right? He has the look of his father about him.” He glanced in Fedan’s direction again, his eyes narrowed in a sneer. “Anyway, I’m not here about that. I have a... delicate situation for which I require your expertise. I’m concerned my -” he paused for a moment, as if searching out the right word, “-business partner has betrayed me. I need to know whether it’s worthwhile my paying for a Reading to discover the truth of the matter. The fee is rather exorbitant, so before I commit, I wish to know the... limitations of what the raveller might discover. You understand my predicament?”

“Do you want me to request the Reading? I could let them know you’re my father. They might reduce the price-”

“No, boy” his father said, laying his hand on Tahnner’s shoulder. “To do so might jeopardise your position. No, I couldn’t let you do that. Instead, perhaps you might explain a few intricacies of Thread reading? Enough to help me decide whether or not I should bother.”

“Of course,” Tahnner said, earning an approving smile from his father. “What do you need the ravellers to find out?”

“I believe my business partner is responsible for spoiling last season’s batch of wine. We found a pouch of something that may have been sprinkled into the casks. If I were to bring the pouch, would a raveller be able to tell if he was involved?”

“Not unless he sabotaged the wines,” Tahnner answered, thinking the matter through as he would do for any patron at a Reading.

“What do mean?” his father asked, staring at him with rapt attention.

“Well... he would have to have handled the pouch at some point for a raveller to track its Threads back to him. Other than that, the raveller could Thread jump from the pouch to those of the saboteur to find who hired him, but there is no guarantee that way.”

His father stared at him, seeming to be trying to work the matter through in his mind. It struck Tahnner once again just how ignorant so many were of the Threads. How different his own would have been had he not been forced to devote his life to their study. He would never have bothered dragging himself out of bed in time for Rising each day were it not for Pelston. Instead, he would probably still be in Turro, spending his mornings tucked beneath the warm bedsheets. He might have happily lived in ignorance of all the wonders the Threads contained. Whether it would have been a blessing or a curse, only the Threads knew. They were like reading the first chapter in a story, consuming him with the desire to learn everything else the book contained. He wanted to know the histories the Threads held, to experience the lives of others through their golden strands. He wanted to answer as many questions as he could before he died and his essence was released as his body burnt upon a pyre.

“Thread jumping?” his father asked, rolling the term about in his mouth as he had used to do when trying a new batch of Turro’s sweet wine, as if tasting the words would help him understand them better. “You mean a raveller can only see the culpability of those directly involved?”

“Depending on the skill of the raveller,” Tahnner said, thinking of Senara. “Unless they know exactly who or when they are searching, then they would have to sift through who knows how many conversations before they found the right one.”

His father nodded, his eyes unfocused. “I see,” he said after a moment. “Yes, it is rather complicated when you put it like that. Perhaps I will have to find another way then. Well then,” he said, half-turning from Tahnner, “I’ll return if I need further-”

“Father- Wait. I...what I mean is, a friend of mine from Pelston was sent to read for the army. She doesn’t belong to one of the great houses, so has no-one to speak for her. Could you use your influence and get her reassigned here? She’s a first rate raveller, the best I’ve ever known. She would-”

“I’m sorry, boy, but there is nothing I can do. From what I’ve heard, the war efforts are not going well. They need every raveller they can get. Listen, I have to go, there is much I

must do. Be sure to keep an eye on that Draeman boy. Send word if his father shows up here or if you catch wind of anything they might be up to.”

He bid Tahnner farewell, leaving him with the guilt of having failed Senara. Fedan joined him when his father was gone, but all traces of their earlier comradery had vanished. The honouri had cleared the crowd from the rooftop, so Tahnner and Fedan were alone with the darkening sky.

Fedan broke the silence, explaining that the old woman had been trying to learn what had become of her son, a soldier in the Daenan war who had never returned. Fedan he had found the location of her son’s body so the woman might retrieve it and have it burnt. Tahnner forced a smile, but the conversation with his father had distracted him too much for him to manage more than that.

“Come on,” Fedan said, pulling Tahnner’s robe and leading him towards the staircase. “We shouldn’t be up here now.”

Tahnner flinched at Fedan’s touch and a hurt expression flashed across the other boy’s face. He muttered something, shaking his head before hurrying from the rooftop, leaving Tahnner alone with only the stars for company.

He avoided Fedan as much as he could for the next few days. Kheelan was present for Rising to next day so there was no reason for him to speak with Fedan then.

Almost a week after that eventful Setting, Tahnner was shaken awake by rough hands. He was used to rising early but this time he felt as if he had barely drifted asleep. No gongs sounded through the Court, alerting sleeping ravellers to the approaching Threads and something in him told him Rising was still some time away even as Kheelan treated him to a personal wake up call.

“Get up,” Kheelan ordered, throwing a set of robes upon Tahnner.

“What is it? What’s wrong?” he asked, struggling to find the arm holes in the dim light of Kheelan’s candle.

“The council has requested two ravellers attend them at Rising. I’m taking you. Now hurry up, they never request us for trivialities.”

Tahnner scrambled with his robes, pride burgeoning in his chest at Kheelan’s having selected him to meet with Ilyia’s ruling council. Besides the king, no-one had more power than they did.

As soon as he was dressed, Kheelan marched them from the Thread Court, leading Tahnner across the empty squares of the upper districts and on to the palace. They strode down the long cavernous corridors he remembered traversing as a child, back when he had to run to keep up with his father. This time though, he managed to keep abreast of Kheelan. Instead of making for the throne room, Kheelan led them to another part of the palace, one Tahnner had never visited before. They strode into a long windowless chamber, lit by many burning fires. The room was busy with a flurry of activity despite how early it was. Several people stood shouting over one another near the centre.

“-Good riddance if you ask me,” a sneering man proclaimed, shouting down the others nearby, “He’s been sympathetic to Daena from the start-”

“Be quiet, Evenard,” a woman snapped. She wore the same embroidered, stiff-necked, dark-turquoise robe as the man did, but her hair was scraped back in a hasty bun with strands falling loose, unlike his which was elegantly coiffed as it fell past his shoulders. “If you mention Daena again then there will be more than one body on the Pyre tonight.”

"Threats is it, Tarasien? I want it known that-"

"We shall discuss the matter later, Evenard," she said, grinding out the man's name as she gestured to Kheelan and Tahnner, drawing the focus of the room to them. All conversations ceased as faces turned in their direction, filled with expectation.

Through the shifting bodies, Tahnner caught sight of what had dragged so many from their beds that early in the morning. Lying on the floor was an old man, staring upwards with empty eyes and a knife protruding from in his chest. Blood pooled beneath him, clotting in his long grey hair. Although Tahnner was unfamiliar with the old man, he could

hazard a guess who he was from the turquoise robes which the pooling blood was currently staining a dark brown.

Kheelan jerked to a stop at the sight of the body. "Councillor Nadien?" he asked to no-one in particular. He turned to the female councillor and demanded, "What happened?"

It was Councillor Evenard though, who answered. In a snide drawl he said, "That is rather the reason for your being summoned here, raveller."

"Thank you for coming, Kheelan," Councillor Tarasien said, turning from Councillor Evenard with a look of long sufferance. She gestured to the body of Councillor Nadien, "We need your assistance. I've seen to it nobody has touched him since he was discovered, but whoever the perpetrator, they slipped from the palace before an alarm could be raised."

Kheelan nodded, his attention still fixed on the body. Appearing deep in thought, he ran his fingers through his hair before he seemed to catch himself in the act and snapped into the appearance of the professional raveller.

"We can bring the knife. It will be easier than taking the body. Leave a guard here though, just in case."

He stooped to take the knife before exiting the chamber, Tahnner and the curious crowd, including all the councillors, following after him. Kheelan seemed to know where he was going as he directed them to a small courtyard with an unobstructed view of the reddening eastern horizon. He held the bloodied knife in his hand, turning it over, his attention elsewhere as the sky lightened about them. When Tahnner asked him what his instructions were, Kheelan jolted and almost cut himself. He held the knife out in front of them and murmured a few directions for Tahnner to follow just before the sun peaked above the horizon.

As the Threads surged into view, Tahnner focused on those of the knife, tracing them back. Councillor Nadien's murder was upon him almost instantly and what he saw made his stomach twist so much that he was grateful he had yet to eat breakfast.

He had never seen anyone die before and he watched Councillor Nadien's last moments with fascination as the black-swathed assassin appeared before the old man, crumpling him as she plunged the blade into his chest.

Kheelan had instructed him to follow the assassin's Threads, in order that he might search out her current location. He knew he should Thread jump to hers before she slipped from the room, but he was unable to tear himself from the sight of Councillor Nadien's wet, laboured breathing as he struggled through his last moments of life. He felt a pull to linger, to stay with the dying man. Councillor Nadien had died alone, but somehow Tahnner felt he might ease the old man's pain, even if it was only as a witness to his last moments.

He watched until the end. When it was done and Councillor Nadien had drawn his last, ragged breath, Tahnner retraced the Threads back and jumped to those of the assassin, tracing hers forward just as Kheelan had instructed. He found her current Threads with ease and watched as she jolted about on horseback, tearing through the countryside at an alarming pace. Although he didn't recognise where she was, he could tell she was travelling south from the location of the sun.

The Threads began to fade about him so he retraced his route. He blinked a couple of times as he pulled his mind free, refocusing on the expectant faces around them. Although some had shut their eyes, protecting their minds from the dangers of the Threads, most stared at the ravellers, their gazes filled with the same excitement as the fanatics who flocked to the Thread Court. The empire's nobles might view the Threads as they might their servants, something which only existed for their advantage, but even they were not exempt from the excitement which the gold could induce.

"Is she still in the city?" Kheelan asked, his pupils constricting and he shook off the last of the Threads.

"No. We could send riders after her, but she's travelling swiftly."

"No, forget about her. This will all be sorted before we could catch up with her. Besides, under guild law it's the one who contracted her who is culpable."

Tahnner blinked a couple of times as he stared at the last strands of gold extinguishing about them. He had never before thought to contemplate the legality of the illicit guild, but now that Kheelan mentioned it, it made a strange sense that the crimes of the trained thieves and assassins would be exempt from persecution. They were after all, merely the tool implementing the deed, as much as he was for reading the Threads.

“The Councillor was killed by an illicit assassin,” Kheelan announced to the crowd. “I was able to learn who hired her.”

Tahnner blinked in surprise. Could it have been so easy? He knew little of these things, but the idea that the identity of the orchestrator could be tracked so effortlessly seemed ludicrous to him.

He bit back his question as to how Kheelan had managed it as the raveller continued speaking, “The man has a house in the craftsmen’s district. Councillor Tarasien, if it is your wish, might I lead you there...?”

“Yes, thank you, Kheelan,” the woman said. “I’ll have a guard escort us.” To the others she said, “I request you make your way back to your apartments and keep what you’ve heard to yourselves. I would prefer it if this matter is kept contained whilst the ravellers identify the culprit. If you wish to pay your respects, Councillor Nadien will be burnt at Setting in full state.”

Murmurs met her pronouncement, but Tahnner noticed that there were few amongst the faces who appeared upset by the passing of the longest serving councillor. Indeed, Councillor Evenard looked downright bored as he sidled over to Councillor Tarasien, insisting he be permitted to accompany her.

Two honouri were summoned to escort them from the palace. Their presence increased Tahnner’s nervousness, despite their being there to guard them. They wore the same blank expressions as the ones who guarded the Thread Court, their eyes roaming with relentless assessment as they descended Girona’s levels to the craftsman’s district.

When they reached the small and abandoned looking house, the locked door proved no

problem to the honouri. One of them pulled the handle from the door in a single wrench before proceeding to break it until all that remained was splintered wood. An honouri was dispatched to search the residence, but he soon returned to inform them that it was vacant. The rest searched the house for anything which might lead them to the man Kheelan had found in the Threads.

Tahnner stared about the dusty room. Small piles of shavings littered the corners and broken tools lay scattered about, neglected and forgotten. Why a carpenter would want to orchestrate the murder of a councillor was beyond him. He had no idea how even a successful carpenter might be able to afford an illicit assassin, let alone the mediocre one who must have worked in this small apartment.

He said as much to Kheelan, but the raveller only grunted, his attention focused on a small work bench at the far end of the room. Soft rays of mid-morning light streamed in through a small, dirty window, illuminating the papers lying on the desk. Kheelan picked up the letters and began rifling through them, stopping at one in particular and holding it up to the light.

“What is it?” Councillor Evenard snapped, his hungry eyes resting on Kheelan. As he passed the letter to the councillor, Tahnner caught sight of a broken seal and felt a glimmer of recognition before Councillor Evenard snatched it away.

“Well then,” the councillor said after a brief perusal, then passing it Councillor Tarasien. “I rather think this settles the matter.”

“By the Threads...” she said, holding her hand to her mouth as she read the letter. “He would not... it cannot be true.”

“Yet it is, Rennesia,” Councillor Evenard said, plucking the letter from her weak grip then folding it up and tucking it into his pocket. “I suppose he’ll want a trial though.” Turning to address Kheelan, he said, “Prepare the Thread Court. Setting, tonight. I think it only fitting that the culprit be apprehended in the same moment we commit Nadien’s body to the Threads. Lord Draeman must be made accountable for his actions.”

Tahnner had been staring about the carpenter's shop as the councillor spoke, an uneasy feeling he was unable to put his finger on dancing at the edge of his awareness. Councillor Evenard's words broke through his musing though.

Lord Draeman was Fedan's father.

Kheelan bowed his head before dragging a dazed Tahnner from the room and leading him back towards the Thread Court. He hired a carriage to carry them back up through the city. It was rickety and uncomfortable, but Kheelan seemed in too much of a hurry to locate one that was more suited to the luxury Girona's Thread Court ravellers were accustomed too.

"Fedan is Lord Draeman's son," Tahnner told Kheelan as the carriage was dragged up the cobbled streets. He was unsure how he expected the older raveller to react to the information, but Kheelan just said nothing, staring out the carriage window as if Tahnner had not spoken.

Tahnner's head was a chaotic mess. He knew little about Lord Draeman, nothing of why he might have ordered the councillor's murder. All he knew was what the accusation would do to Fedan. He cursed the carriage for travelling both too fast and too slow all at once. He wanted to find Fedan, to warn him of all that had happened, but the thought of having to explain it all to him though made him want to heave.

The carriage rolled to a stop outside the Thread Court and Kheelan spoke for the first time as Tahnner made to climb down. "You can't tell him," he said, causing Tahnner to sit back down opposite him, trying to find the words to express the silent protests cleaving through him. "By now, the city guards will have been dispatched to arrest Lord Draeman and there is nothing Fedan can do to help him. All you'll achieve is make him worry for the rest of the day. It would be kinder not to say anything. You will stay with me today and help me prepare for the trial. You did well this morning, Tahnner. Stick with me and I'm sure you'll go far. Your father was right about you."

Kheelan climbed down from the carriage and hurried up the steps, leaving Tahnner

stunned and unable to move. It was only when the carriage jerked beneath him that he was dislodged from his thoughts, the driver impatient to be off in search of another paying customer.

He entered the guild to find Kheelan issuing orders to the raveller behind the desk before informing those queueing that Setting would be a private event tonight. The crowd groaned but Kheelan ignored them, hurrying towards the staircase.

“Why did you send them away?” Tahnner asked, running to catch up with Kheelan.

“Protocol,” Kheelan said, turning onto the first floor landing where several ravellers lounged, drinking their day away. “When the Court is called upon to determine guilt, all ravellers must be involved. The spectators will all be nobles. There’ll be no room for the usual rabble.”

Tahnner hung back as Kheelan strode into the centre of the room. Fedan was there, sitting near Bertren and looking ill at ease with the lazy antics of the other ravellers. Fedan spotted him and grinned, opening his mouth to say something, but he was cut off by Kheelan.

“The council will be attending Setting,” Kheelan announced, kicking the cushion one of the older ravellers was napping on. “We must make everything ready for them. Bertren, see to it the honouri are informed and have them secure the building for the councillors. The rest of you, begin setting up the rooftop for this evening.”

Tahnner felt Fedan trying to catch his eye but he looked away, guilt slicing into him as he did so. Kheelan kept him busy with tasks which kept him apart from Fedan for the rest of the day. It was only when all the ravellers were called up to the rooftop that he caught sight of Fedan again. The sun hovered above the western horizon in the cloudless blue of estervan. There was little to worry the ravellers that the trial might be called off due to inclement weather, but Tahnner was uncertain if that was good news.

A crowd had already formed atop the rooftop. As Kheelan had predicted, it was made up of Girona’s elite. Tahnner spotted his father at one point before Lord Rhanick was

swallowed up by the crowd.

“Do we know what this is all about yet?” Fedan asked, sidling over to join Tahnner.

He was spared answering by the arrival of the councillors. Murmurs of apprehension raced through the crowd at the sight of the man accompanying them, King Sorentien Gallidon. He was the reason everybody stepped as far back as the small rooftop would permit them. Had Tahnner not heard the announcement, then he would not have recognised the weathered face. Although it had been only six years since he had last seen the king, judging from the haggard man before him he could have sworn it had been three times that.

The king twitched as he made his way through the crowd, muttering to himself like one of the ravers Tahnner had seen wandering Girona’s lower districts, too lost in the Threads to know what they did. How had nobody done anything to help him? He had ravellers at his disposal. Why had none of them found a way to extract him from the Threaded cage his mind was clearly lost in? Why were the ravellers permitted to waste precious readings on the petty matters of the nobles when their king needed their attention?

He was about to say something to Fedan when he noticed the man following close behind the king, walking with a long, curved axe in one hand, the wicked blade gleaming as it caught the sunlight.

Fedan’s fingers clenched around his arm in a death grip and Tahnner knew what Fedan had sighted behind the executioner. He dragged his gaze up to see the handsome man he knew must be Lord Draeman. He was escorted across the roof by two honouri, his frantic eyes searching out Fedan’s across the crowd, silently pleading with his son for help.

“Tahnner, what is this-?” Fedan said, but his words were drowned out by Councillor Evenard as he addressed the crowd.

“Lord Ergamon Draeman, you have been brought here to determine your culpability in the murder of Councillor Nadien. You are accused of orchestrating his assassination.”

“You have the wrong man, Evenard!” Lord Draeman called out, straining against the honouri holding him in place.

“As is custom in these matters,” Councillor Evenard said, continuing as if there had been no interruption. “The ravellers will determine the truth of the matter.”

“Tahnner?” Fedan’s voice quavered as he jerked on the sleeve of Tahnner’s robe, his eyes fixed on his father. “What’s happening? My father wouldn’t kill Councillor Nadien. They’ve been friends for years. He wouldn’t kill him-”

Fedan was elbowed by the raveller standing on his other side as another hissed at him to be quiet. A queasy feeling churned in Tahnner’s stomach as he forced himself not to meet Fedan’s pleading eyes and focus on Councillor Evenard.

“The penalty for the murder of a sitting councillor is death. Should you be found guilty, you shall be executed after the Threads of Setting have faded, your body left to rot, your mind never to be granted the release gifted to the dead upon the Setting pyres.”

“What is your evidence?” Lord Draeman called out, straightening himself up and somehow managing to appear imperious despite the rope binding his wrists together.

“You deny your signature and seal are upon the letter arranging the assassination?” Councillor Evenard asked, pulling out the incriminating document from his breast pocket.

The councillor proceeded to read the contents of the letter and Tahnner became aware of a shift in the sentiments of the crowd. Where before they had appeared only curious, now Tahnner could hear the disgruntled mutterings and see the dark looks directed towards Lord Draeman. Councillor Nadien’s assassination had been one of cold calculation and the crowd was eager for justice in the matter.

“I never signed that!” Lord Draeman roared above the murmurings. “That is not my signature! Have the ravellers check, they will see my innocence in the Threads. That letter is a forgery!”

“That, Lord Draeman,” Councillor Evenard said, staring down at him from the raised

dais he stood atop, "is exactly what we shall do. If they discover the signature a forgery, then you shall go free. If however, the signature is yours, you shall be executed." Directing his next words to Kheelan, he asked, "Are your ravellers ready?"

Kheelan glanced at the descending sun before saying, "Soon. It won't be long now."

He moved through the other ravellers, instructing them as to which Threads to focus on at Setting. When he was done, he assumed his place as they lined up at the easternmost edge of the rooftop, staring westwards to where Councillor Evenard stood holding the letter to the best advantage for reading its Threads.

"Tahnner?" Fedan whispered in voice too quiet to draw anyone else's attention. "My father didn't do this. You have to help me prove his innocence."

For a moment Tahnner said nothing, all too aware of the eyes of the crowd watching him and the other ravellers. "I can only tell the truth," he whispered back. "As should we all. The Threads will reveal whether he's innocent. I can do no more."

Fedan made a choking sound and doubts raced through Tahnner's mind as he felt the first stirrings of the Threads about them. There was something which felt wrong. Oddities which, despite the evidence pointing to Lord Draeman, still made Tahnner feel uneasy. Why had a professional assassin neglected to take the weapon with her when she had fled? Surely she had known it might be used by the ravellers to discover who had ordered the murder? Had Councillor Nadien simply disappeared then the ravellers would have had a much trickier time discovering what had become of him. Did the illicit know so little about the Threads that they had not considered the matter?

As the gold solidified about him, his gaze slipped past Councillor Evenard and the letter he held out for the ravellers. He felt the others fix their attention upon it as they had been instructed to do by Kheelan, but something about the sly look in Councillor Evenard's eyes made Tahnner not trust the slip of paper. It felt wrong to determine whether or not a man might live or die according to one letter. Instead, he focused on Lord Draeman's Threads, tracing them backwards, pausing every time he found Lord Draeman signing his name to a

letter. Mostly he dictated them to his scribe, only signing them upon their completion. He searched through letter after letter, but not one of them ordered anything even slightly nefarious, let alone an assassination.

From somewhere to his left, he heard Kheelan speak the first pronouncement on Lord Draeman's fate. His heart began pounding as, in an authoritative tone, Kheelan announced "I confirm that Lord Draeman signed the letter."

As if Kheelan was the first stone to begin the avalanche, the rest of the ravellers began to make their pronouncements in a cascade of condemnation. One after another they repeated the words, sealing Lord Draeman's fate.

Tahnner had just about given up searching, his mind still entrenched in the Threads, when he noticed the nervous way Lord Draeman's scribe handed a document to him, a letter Lord Draeman had been dictating concerning a matter of his household. The scribe's hand shook, but Lord Draeman seemed oblivious to it as he took the letter and scrawled his signature upon it.

Tahnner knew what the letter really contained even before he examined it. A quick check proved it to be the one ordering the councillor's assassination. That was what the other ravellers had seen, but although Lord Draeman had signed the letter, he had not known its true contents.

As the understanding hit him, Tahnner wished himself still oblivious, suddenly knowing what he would see if he Thread jumped to those of the scribe. Memories of a conversation from years ago rang through his head as ominously as the bell which summoned the ravellers to read the Threads. He knew who it was who paid people to infiltrate and spy upon Lord Draeman's household.

"Lord Draeman, you are found guilty by the ravellers of having orchestrated the murder of Councillor Nadien."

With his mind still buried in the Threads, Tahnner was only distantly aware of Councillor Evenard's pronouncement. He heard the shouts coming from Fedan as he tried

to break free of the ravellers holding him back. He felt his body being knocked by the commotion but it was as if he stood surrounded by a wall of water, protecting him from the full force of his reality.

His mind focused on the scribe's Threads, tracing them back as he remembered the words his father had told him in the carriage all those years ago. He watched as the scribe met with Lord Rhanick Turro, receiving orders for inscribing the incriminating letter and attaining Lord Draeman's signature.

From some place far away, he heard Lord Draeman's protests of innocence as Councillor Evenard passed judgement. There were screams from within the crowd too, the cries of a woman. A deadened part of Tahnner's mind guessed her to be Fedan's mother. He couldn't focus on them though, already his mind fumbled in the Threads. He wanted to help. He needed to, but he was unable to do so, trapped as he was by the cold certainty which his mind had grasped even as the rest of his world was thrown into chaos.

If he spoke the truth then it would be his father who would be found guilty, his father's neck the executioner would sever with his axe.

Senara's voice filled his head as he grappled with loyalty to his family or the Threads. The Threads are only as reliable as those who read them. Her words caused a burst of shame to surge through him. She would not let an innocent man die because of blind loyalty.

He dragged his mind from the Threads, retracing the scribe's before jumping back to Lord Draeman's. His mind was still filled with a golden haze as the Threads began fading around him. He threw himself through them faster, hearing Fedan's hoarse scream of protest as his mind burst from the Threads. Still reeling, he tried refocusing on his reality as he cried out, needing to stop the evil which was about to take place. His words were drowned out by the loud cheering of the crowd though, and a sudden whooshing sound, followed by a heavy thump.

Tahnner's eyes fixed on his father from across the crowd, watching the malicious gleam

as Lord Rhanick Turro stared at the headless body of his old rival, triumph lighting his face.

## Chapter Seven

Fedan was absent from Rising and Setting for the next week. No-one protested his non-attendance despite it being against the laws of the ravellers. Wherever he had gone, it was somewhere other than the Thread Court. Tahnner knew this because he had searched the place several times looking for him. Fedan's appearance at Rising on the seventh day was marked by the obvious glances of the other ravellers.

His face was drawn with all the signs of fitful, sleepless nights. Tahnner tried catching his attention, but his eyes were downcast, remaining fixed on the tiles of the roof beneath them until the last possible moment before the Threads rose up with the dawn. When the readings were finished, Tahnner hurried to catch up with Fedan as the other boy hurried towards the stairs, clearly eager to get as far from there as quickly as possible.

"I'm sorry," Tahnner said as he reached Fedan, spurred on by more guilt than he had ever felt. "I tried, I really did. I know your father was innocent. I'm so sorry. I was too slow to stop it. I should have- should have been better. Senara would have been. I'm so, so sorry."

Fedan's eyes were like empty shells and his pain tore through Tahnner. He wished Fedan would rail at him. Hit him. Break down. Anything but the blank mask of muted agony which he had shrouded himself in.

"Please- you have to believe me-"

"Believe you?" Fedan's cold, cruel voice cut through Tahnner like dawn does the night. "But I do believe you, Tahnner. I know you knew my father was innocent and yet did nothing to save him. I believe you because you are a Turro," he spat the word like a curse, sneering his top lip up as he glared at Tahnner. "I believe you because you are just like your father. I'm sure he is proud of the monster he's created."

“Wait-” Tahnner grabbed at Fedan’s robe as he tried to pass, needing him to understand. “I’m not like him!”

Fedan yanked his arm from Tahnner’s grasp, his mask slipping, revealing a face raw with a pain so intense that Tahnner flinched back at the sight.

“Then why did your father bribe Kheelan to take you with him that day? Don’t bother lying. You’re not the only one who can read the Threads. How did you do it? Are all the ravellers as persuadable as Kheelan or did you trick them somehow? I had thought they had enough wealth here to drown themselves in but apparently not-”

“Fedan?” Kheelan interrupted, approaching them with a wary gravity in each step he took. Tahnner expected Kheelan to say something sympathetic to Fedan’s loss, but instead he said, “Listen, new orders have come through from the council.” Tahnner flinched at the words. Less than three days after Councillor Nadien’s body had been discovered, news reached him that his father had been voted into the empty seat. His insides now churned at every reminder of the power his father now wielded. “More ravellers are required on the Daenan border. You should head downstairs and pack your things, a carriage will be waiting for you at midday. It will take you to the guild keepers so your papers can be updated then on to the barracks. You’re to leave with the next dispatch of soldiers.”

Fedan only nodded at the news, accepting it with his blank mask back in place, hiding any emotion he felt at being sent to war. He stayed that way, unmoving, even after Kheelan had left. Tahnner opened his mouth to say something, but the words died at the look of contempt Fedan levelled at him.

“I hope you end up hanging yourself with whatever web of Threaded lies you and your family are spinning. Enjoy Girona, Tahnner. I’m sure you will. Betrayers and scum have a nasty habit of flourishing here.”

Fedan pushed past him, leaving Tahnner alone on the rooftop, watching the person he considered the closest he had to a friend in the entire city, disappear down the steps. He wished he had been sent away too. At least the war had Senara. Girona had only the corrupt

and power hungry.

The next few days passed by in a blur of solitude and loneliness. Although surrounded by the bustle of the Thread Court and the half-mad city which near-worshipped it, Tahnner spent his days ignoring everything that he couldn't avoid in his need for isolation.

Each raveller had a favourite Rising or Setting, one they looked forward to witnessing more than the rest. Even ravellers old enough to have seen so many that they all blurred together in a great golden haze, still found themselves partial to one or another. Some smiled when they caught sight of pink rays dusting the horizon at Rising, other's hearts sang at the sight of the deep estervan reds of Setting. Tahnner's favourite had used to be when the sky rioted with colour, each determined to leave their mark before night stole them away.

Now though, he longed for wispy morning clouds at Rising, stained pink as they blocked the dawning sun. He ached for storm clouds to conceal Setting, for readings to be cancelled because the risk was viewed as too great to the minds of the Thread Court ravellers.

He longed for those days in particular, because then he might stow away by himself, Senara's lock of hair in hand and his time his own. He didn't care about the risk to his own mind that came with attempting to read the Threads in such inclement weather. All he wanted was to catch a glimpse of Senara in whatever stolen moments he could.

He had to wait a month before a typically warm late estervan day faltered and dark grey clouds filled the sky. He spent the afternoon watching the rain lash down upon the rooftop of the Thread Court as he waited, yearning for the storm to linger long enough for the reading that evening to be cancelled. The rain had long since seeped through to his undergarments as he stared at the western horizon, praying to the Threads for a glimpse of sunlight.

Even through the churning mass of storm clouds, he knew when Setting approached. He pulled the lock of Senara's hair out and held it before him, the soaked light brown

strands sticking to his fingers in the rain. In that moment, he didn't care if he lost his mind to the Threads. All he wanted was to look upon Senara's face again and to be comforted by her presence.

A ray of sunlight hit the lock and Tahnner latched onto it with all his mind, sifting through Threads of the rainwater until he found hers. Without wasting any time, he threw his mind backwards through her Threads, peeling back the days since they had left Pelston. He could have wept from happiness when he caught sight of her as she had been when she had cut her hair and given it to him. He might have cried, but he was unable to tell tears from the rain drops pouring down his cheeks.

He leapt to Senara's Threads, throwing his mind into her life since leaving Pelston, watching her long journey north with Haret and the soldiers. He followed her to the present and almost lost his grip as he collided with Senara's consciousness.

His insides clenched as he saw who stood next to her in clothes worn and travel-stained. Jealousy surged through Tahnner as he stared at Fedan, his guilty heart breaking at how Senara's joy was mirrored in Fedan's eyes.

Thank you for reading The Ravellers Guild, I hope you enjoyed it! This novella is a prequel to The Threads series, coming soon.

If you liked the story, then be sure to sign up to my [newsletter](#) to receive updates about future publications and to receive your copy of the second prequel novella, The Guild Keepers Law, which is coming out in 2017 and will only be available to those on my mailing list, so subscribe to make sure you don't miss out!

If you wish to leave a review for The Ravellers Guild then head over to Goodreads/Amazon, it won't take more than a couple of minutes and will help get the story out to more people.

For more content on the Threads Series, then head over to my website where you will find maps of the Ilyian Empire and more great content!

[www.rachelemmashaw.com](http://www.rachelemmashaw.com)

Finally, thank you to all the wonderful people who helped bring this story to the page. It would be in a far shabbier state without your input!

## The Guild Keepers Law

Some people are content with the life the Threads give them. Freemen enjoy the luxuries of choice, whilst indenture can find security in the protection of a guild. Netti had never felt the same assurances. She didn't care for her freedom being stolen from her.

Taken from Chalil as a child, she was forced to serve the Ilyian Empire. Not a day has passed when she has not resented her artesian training, longing instead for the white shores of her homeland and the family she was taken from.

Her situation becomes more precarious though, when Councillor Evenard, one of the most powerful men in Girona, notices her and elects to hire out her for his own ends.

How will she fair indentured to one of the people responsible for the enslavement of her people?