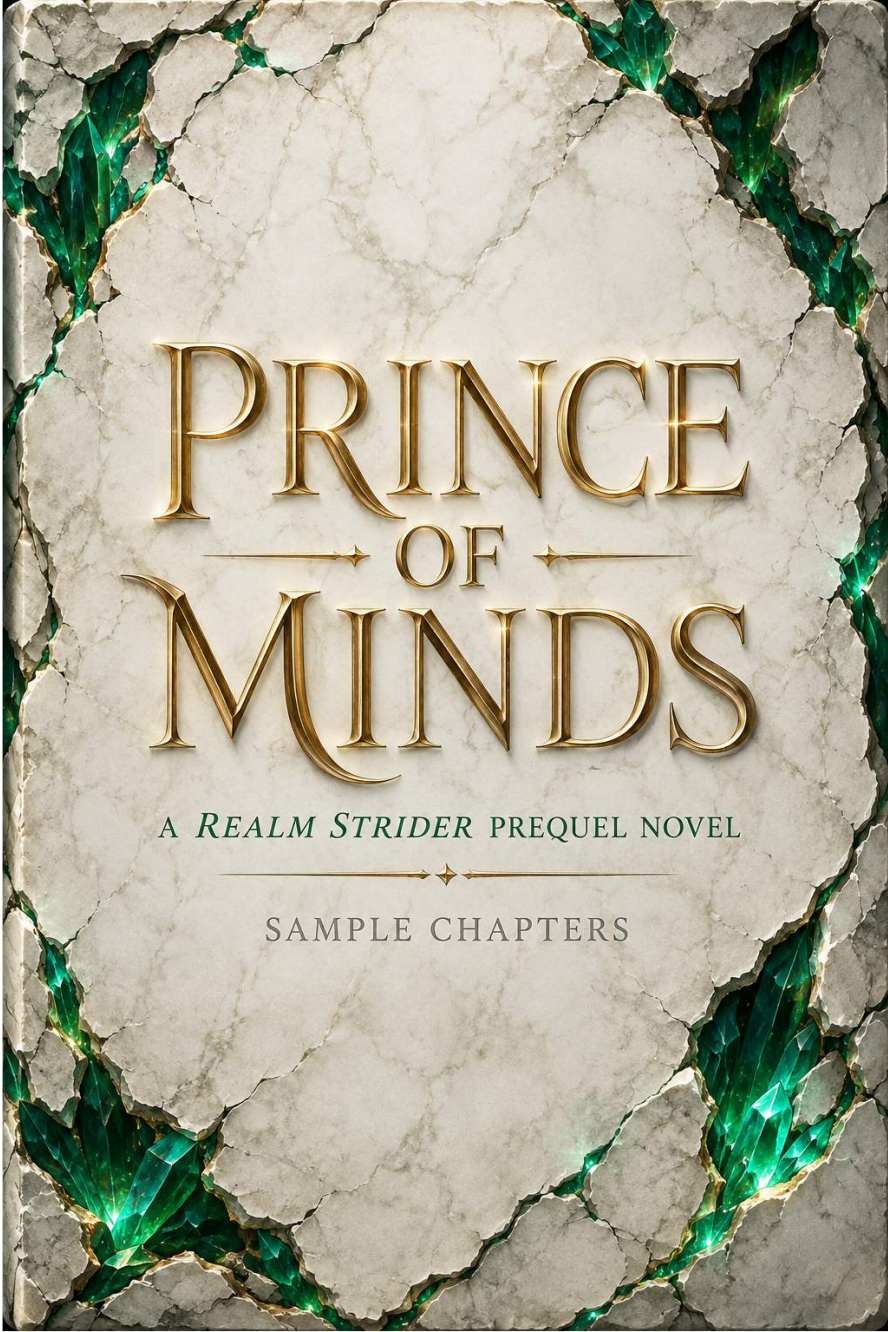




PRINCE OF MINDS

A *REALM STRIDER* PREQUEL NOVEL

SAMPLE CHAPTERS

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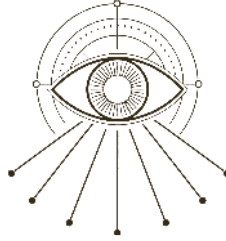
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First sample edition, 2026.

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PROLOGUE

“In answer to the blood spilled by the blade Nadir and Gladeran’s folly, never again, by mortal device or Apostate hands, shall the Realms be bridged until the elected day of Eschaton. By the wisdom of Athair, in sight of His seven Priests, and by the sanction of the King of Caelus, the Rift Watch Order is established upon this keystone: safeguard the Realms.”

The Rift Watch Charter, clause 1



Taerin’s heart hammered in his ears. His pounding footfalls reverberated madly up the narrow spiral stairway. The sound mingled with the shouts of his pursuers, barking in their native tongue. Taerin despised that language.

Glancing at his prize, he saw blood staining the white parchment of the scroll—his blood. Trying hard not to break stride, he quickly tucked the paper cylinder in his satchel out of harm’s way. *It has to reach the Rift Watch Order intact*, Taerin thought. *Even if you don’t.*

The ascending stairs terminated in a locked steel door. He looked but there was no locking mechanism. It was reinforced with Veiscript etchings, carved along the surface

and into the frame. *We're better at keeping people in the palace than out*, he thought with a wry smirk.

Taerin pressed the gold-studs embedded in the knuckles of his leather glove against the doorframe. Shutting his eyes, he exhaled, then reached for the Vei. Time stretched and thought sharpened, whetted under the knowledge flooding his mind. The bands of tattooed script covering Taerin's shaved head pulsed gold, as if illumed from within by a dawning sun. Eyes still shut, he watched his vision fill with an overlay of bright amber words, some bright and clear, others distant and cloudy. Taerin smiled, taking in the footnotes of the physical reality surrounding him.

With accelerated intellect, he parsed the words over the warded door, rapidly deciphering the sequence. He ignored the approaching noise of the soldiers. He knew without even the need to calculate that he had exactly eighteen seconds. *More than enough time*, he thought with some satisfaction. Taerin recalled the words of his Luminary teacher. *All Veiscript, no matter how dense, hangs on one key phrase. Break that linchpin and the whole script unravels*. The atmosphere of hovering words unfocused line-by-line, until only one phrase remained in the metal frame.

"There you are, beautiful," Taerin whispered with a smile. He rapped a knuckle against the etched phrase. There was a snap and a crackle of sparks like fireworks as that one spot of metal instantly warped, glowing forge-hot.

Click, the door unlatched on its own. A gust of fresh night wind brushed Taerin's smooth-shaven face. No one seeing his face for the first time would call him young. His hooded eyes showed the evidence of many sleepless nights. But still they remained keen, with a fox-like spark even when they were not enhanced by Veicraft. The corners of his mouth slanted, such that even when neutral, he had the look of one with a comical secret. The unfortunate aberration had gotten him into almost as much trouble as his tattoos.

He stepped through the open door.

A soldier's strong hand seized him by the shoulder.

Calmly, Taerin reached up and touched the man's skin. He heard the sizzle of burning flesh close to his ear as the gold studs did their work.

The soldier released him immediately, letting out a cry of shock and pain.

Taerin spun around, catching the soldier's eye for an instant. He was like all Daegon foot soldiers—sickly pale skin contrasting with bright blue eyes and the greasy black hair that fell from beneath his pointed helmet, the crown emblazoned with the sapphire-eyed dragon of their empire. The soldier looked horrified at his burned hand, then up at Taerin with bewilderment.

The soldier's words issued out in hushed astonishment, "Mīnu ty takoa?"

“I don’t speak Daegon!” Taerin shouted. He landed a swift kick to the man’s chest, sending him hurtling backward down the stairs. The yells of his comrades intensified.

Taerin burst out onto the balcony of the high tower. The palace complex was the highest point in Del-Caeum, and this tower had to be one of the tallest in the complex. The moonlit city spread out below him like a toy model. Rolling hummocks of tiled rooftops and towers extended in all directions, punctuated by islands of tall trees—a proud hallmark of Del-Caeum, the once-capital city of Caelus.

To his left, within the hallowed walls of the palace, fire roared. A billowing canopy of black smoke filled the sky, its belly flashing crimson from the blaze within the high courts. Glittering cinders danced over the walls, each of them a tombstone to a centuries-old body of irretrievable knowledge.

Taerin frowned, forcing his mind not to linger on the immeasurable cost of the burning library. It had burned his heart to light those flames, rendering the knowledge of his own order to ash and embers. “Better burned than in the Daegon’s hands,” Taerin reminded himself.

Leaping up onto the stone railing, a thrill of vertigo tickled Taerin’s stomach. It was a two-hundred-foot drop to the pavement. Still mentally quickened by the Veicraft influence, Taerin assessed his options. His unique brand of Veicraft proved excellent for intelligence work, but was often lacking for physical feats like cliff diving. But those limitations had not stopped him before.

A massive blue and black banner lifted beneath him in the night breeze. He recalled having seen the long Daegon banner of triumph hanging against the surface of the tower while he was sneaking in earlier that evening.

Taerin groaned, throwing up his hands toward the stars in vexation. “Really? That’s it? A long drop with a short stop.”

The night sky said nothing, but the surrounding footnotes told him all he needed to know. Knowledge Veicraft could not save him here. *Not Abrian... but maybe another language*, he thought. *Lurgathian could work.*

Touching his coat pocket, he felt the resistance of the little hardbacked Veiscript codex—a treasured gift from his Luminary master. The exact command came to his mind hazily. It was complex and mechanical, as all commands were in that exhausting language. He had only seen it done a handful of times. He himself had never tried.

“I guess now’s as good a time as ever to get some practice,” he muttered.

Reaching out one hand, he traced the sigil in the air. Threads of emerald-green light followed his fingertips, forming an angular pattern of interlocking squares, joined at several points to form something like a star.

“Stop, in the name of the Emperor!” a soldier cried in the common tongue. In the corner of his eye, Taerin could see the glint of the man’s sword.

Taerin smiled as the sigil pulsed deep green in front of him—complete. Before the soldier could seize him, he had stepped over the edge.

Wind howled in his ears as the lift of freefall tickled his diaphragm. Terror contended with focus as he watched the long banner racing past him, praying the command would take effect.

Like the boneless arm of a tower-tall monstrosity, the massive banner curled up and outward, forming a kind of slide. Taerin felt the coarse cloth catch his weight, channeling his momentum outward. It was then he realized the banner was not as long as he thought. With the animated curvature, it now terminated high above the pavement, jutting out over rooftops.

Before Taerin could act, he found himself sailing through cool night air, thirty feet above the ground. His arcing path connected with the slant of a roof. With a jarring impact, Taerin’s body struck against the clay tiles.

They dislodged, beginning to carry him down with them.

He nimbly rolled clear, hearing the clay skate over the eaves and shatter in the alley below.

For a moment he lay panting. He gazed up at the tower he had fallen from. The fluttering Daegon banner was returning to its natural state, the blue eye of the imperial dragon glowering hatefully. A dozen vexed soldiers moved busily around the top of the tower, shouting and cursing in their tongue, staring fruitlessly into the night.

As the initial shock subsided into the thrill of survival, Taerin let out a laugh. He lifted the flap of his satchel. The scroll was still there, the sole survivor of his library arson. He unfolded the top fold of the paper carefully with his good hand.

This scroll was important, but he still could not puzzle out why. In the archives, it had stood out like a candle in the night—beckoning to him. Taerin knew when his Abrian footnotes blazed this intensely over an object, he should listen.

The words on the page were a dense scrawl of technical language, more than two hundred years old judging by the dated dialect. The emblem of the Rift Watch Order was stamped in the letterhead—a tree with seven branches, its trunk hedged by fortress walls. One word stuck out to him above the others, a dark, infamous word: *Nadir*.

“What am I supposed to make of this?” Taerin muttered. He glanced up at the watching stars. The thought occurred to him that, perhaps, the flare of Abrian was not an indicator to save the scroll but to destroy it. “Do you want me to burn it like the others?” He waited for a reply, reaching out. Nothing came. He rolled his eyes at the night sky. “Priests. Why can’t you ever just speak your mind?”

Rising shakily, Taerin made the mistake of leaning on his left arm. The wound was deeper than he had thought. He could tell it had cut to the bone. His sleeve was already dark with blood. Keeping his arm elevated, he searched the edges of the rooftop. He jumped down to a terrace, then down a flight of exterior stairs, and within a minute was walking alone on a gas-lit street.

He could not help but grin at his good fortune. That unorthodox escape had landed him just outside the palace complex, which meant his road from here to the rendezvous was an open door. *But don't let your guard down yet*, he warned himself. *They know you're out here. Every patrol in the city will be looking for a tattooed baldy like you.* He lifted his hood, hoping that would make his profile less conspicuous.

The upper city was a dense network of elegant architecture. It had been the gem in the crown of Caelus before the invasion. Now it was a lusterless corpse of its former glory. Evidence of the ruinous siege scarred the beautiful streets and byways. Rubble and waste cluttered the silent lanes. Windows were boarded up and every third building a crumbled heap of bricks. The reek of smoke and death had only recently faded, but he knew their memory would permanently live in his mind.

Taerin halted. He could hear steel-shod feet approaching from the next bend in the street. Pulling his cloak tighter, he ducked into a narrow alley. He shrank into a shadow, waiting for the patrol to pass. An eerie intuition told him he was still too exposed. Looking along the slender backstreet, he saw the far dead-end wall was half ruined. The gaping hollow of a dark house interior lay beyond.

He vaulted the wall, finding himself in the burned-out mansion of some long-vacated noble family. Shouts and calls from the patrol outside drove him deeper in. With any luck, he could bypass the main street through the house.

With his gloved hand, he traced a sigil of fire. A little candle-wick flame sprang up from his forefinger, lighting his way. The blackened remains of fine furnishings and ghostly remnants of domestic habitation gave Taerin the uncanny impression of being an intruder. Shadows danced behind every object, the dim light only intensifying the yawning darkness of every empty doorway.

Soon he found what must have once been the entry foyer. He halted, gazing with dismay at the collapsed exit, buried under an avalanche of bricks. He knew it would not be long before the patrols began searching the surrounding buildings. *There has to be another way out*, he thought.

Behind him in the foyer, a floorboard creaked.

Taerin whirled, flaring his small flame into a blaze in his palm, ready to attack. Nothing could have prepared his mind for what he saw.

A little boy in fire-scorched bed clothes stood in the middle of the floor. He gazed up at Taerin with an empty expression. He cocked his head to one side. The light of Taerin's fire illuminated the whole room a warm red-gold, except for the child, who seemed lit by a pale green light of his own. Taerin's throat went dry.

"Who are you?" he breathed.

The boy blinked, and a third eye opened in the center of his forehead.

Taerin uttered a sound of disgust, taking a step backward. The child vanished in a curl of shadowy smoke.

Horror cut Taerin's reason into disjointed shreds. He darted through the nearest open doorway. He fled, desperately searching for any way out. A long, destroyed banquet room presented itself under the light of his fire. There was a door at the far end.

As his feet raced for the door, the room warped and elongated. Misjudging his distance, Taerin slammed into a half-burnt wall, crashing through the fragile material into the next room.

He shot to his feet, finding himself in a blackened hallway with walls still hanging with scorched oil portraits. As he fled along the passage, the faces in the paintings glared back at him hatefully. Third eyes opened in their foreheads, pulsing deep emerald green. The hallway convulsed and contorted like the heaving movement of a swallowing throat.

The passage terminated in a collapsed ceiling, heaped with bricks and crossed with burned beams. With nightmare intuition, Taerin knew what he would see if he turned. Like a cornered animal, Taerin pivoted to face the pale child. The boy looked up at him, three eyes glowing a sickly green. His thin lips curled in a mocking smile. The boy lifted a charred and withered hand, pointing to Taerin's satchel.

"That's mine," he spoke in a hollow voice.

It's just an illusion, Taerin's mind cried. Break out of it.

Recalling his training, he rapidly traced a Sulvanarian sigil—the language of mind. Like Lurgathian, it was not his forte, but he had learned from the best. The Vei command hung in silver threads like moonlight between him and the boy. The shape pulsed as it completed.

Like waking from a dream, the scene reverted. The boy was gone. The uncanny terror, and the distortion of the hallway, both evaporated. Taerin was standing alone in an ordinary passage. Taerin's breath shook as he reached again for the scroll in his satchel. He drew it out, hands trembling.

"What is this?" he said. He eyed the parchment like a serpent in his hand. A mingled desire to fling the thing away and keep it safe played on his mind. A third impulse joined in, stronger than the others. His eyes flicked to the fire still dancing in his palm. "I should have burned you with the others."

As Taerin's hand moved to touch the scroll to the flame, a sound caught his ear—a faint snarl from overhead. Taerin glanced up. In the blackness of the open ceiling, his firelight illuminated the impossible shape of spidery pale limbs extending from the arms of a levitating, black-cloaked figure.

A nest of barbed tendrils struck down at his head like vipers. The world vanished from Taerin's eyes. Sensation shattered in a mental scream, eclipsing every thought and feeling.

The inner shriek terminated abruptly as Taerin's eyes opened. He was lying face down on cold cobblestones, his head throbbing like it would split. A fragile hope tried to persuade him he was somewhere safe. But as he lifted his head, that hope vanished. He knew exactly where he was.

High stone fortress walls soared up into a creeping green mist. Shattered stone bricks lay heaped around the court, each of them crawling with intricate text, every line intimately familiar to Taerin.

Amid the ruin lay two warped gates of steel, broken off their titan hinges. In the gaping archway left behind, tendrils of smoke coiled around a looming shadow. A man advanced through the open gate, the shadows peeling away to reveal his form. Charcoal black scholar's robes wrapped the impossibly tall man, two enormous jet-black feathered wings framing his form. An almond-shaped halo of gleaming gold surrounded his timeless and striking three-eyed face, the inverted parody of some angelic vision.

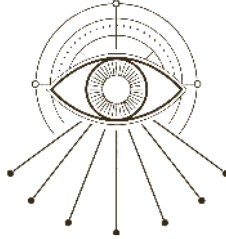
Taerin's mind screamed as the man's placid expression curled into a capricious smile. The look alone was like needles in his brain. He tried to pull his eyes away from the man's burning green irises, but they drew him in with a gravity he could not resist. The pupils flashed, tunnels gazing into twisting corridors of madness.

His lips curled back over perfect white teeth as he spoke in an incorporeal voice, "Would you burn something so precious, son of Arbol?" He stretched out his long, pale hands toward Taerin with benevolent grace. "I thought you claimed to be a defender of the truth."

From the sickly fog above, chains shot down, grappling Taerin's wrists and ankles. They jerked him upward with savage force, suspending his body like a marionette. The foul vision approached with soundless steps, holding Taerin's tormented eyes locked in his gaze.

One last lucid impulse to resist flared in Taerin's head. The fog stirred slightly as he spat in the false-god's face. "Kill me now. I know your ways. You cannot corrupt a servant of the truth."

"Kill you?" the false-god said with a grimace of distaste. "What good is one more meaningless corpse? Besides, what happens next would be impossible without you."



CHAPTER 1

THE RUNOFF CAPTIVE

“**K**ind as doves and hard as ice. Humble as beggars and wise as princes. Clever as foxes and loyal as hounds. Dead to the world and living for its life. Safeguarding the Realms, revering the Priests, honoring the King of Caelus, upholding the Order. This is the charge and measure of a Rift Watcher.”

The Rift Watch Charter, clause 4



Gaedia walked beside her brother and kept her eyes on the pavement. She labored to shut out the roar and bustle of the city. But she knew averting her eyes would not stop the mental bombardment. It would take something stronger.

A churning miasma of collective emotions hung like a storm over the streets. Stabbing bolts of resonating feelings pierced clear through the muddy mass, reminding Gaedia what she had in common with every sallow face they passed. They were the conquered, mere Caelan remains under the Daegon imperial boot. Every soaring tower, proud edifice, and heraldic statue of the great city of Del-Caeum served as a mocking reminder of this fact.

Do not fight the flow of emotion, Gaedia reminded herself. *You are not a lake, you are a river. Pass these feelings downstream and carry on.* She heaved in a deep breath through the nose, ignoring the pervasive odor of decay and filth that clung to the street. Like a

frightened child reaching for her mother's hand, Gaedia reached out to her Vei Soul—the one who could help her.

Her mind reached above the canopy of emotion and troubled thought, into the expanse beyond—and waited for a response. She had learned over her years of training that reaching to take hold of the Priests, like seizing goods from a pantry, had poor results. They were minds, not commodities, and required patience. Perhaps that is why so many had stopped believing. Veicraft was not a faucet to draw power from—it was closer to a conversation.

A pleasantly firm mental resistance met Gaedia's reach. She let out a sigh of relief as the building pressure of collecting emotion passed through—taken out of her hands. Only then did Gaedia realize how tight her chest had been. She slowly released her clenched fists, her palms smarting from the bite of her fingernails.

"Are you alright?" Telbajorn whispered in her mind as they walked. *"You cannot soak up the emotions of the whole city. Let it pass through to Sulva."* He always sounded cool and collected, even when speaking telepathically. Gaedia wondered if the ability to remain steady under pressure came as a package deal with every older brother.

"Already done, Tel," Gaedia replied. She looked up at her brother. Telbajorn had a stork-like figure, slender and uncommonly tall and straight. His shoulder-length red hair contrasted sharply with his pale face, set with a hawkish nose and glacial-green eyes. It was his eyes that distinguished his face from being absurd or common. There was a keen owl-like intelligence behind his piercing gaze, as if he knew Gaedia's thoughts before she was conscious of them. That look had often been a comfort to her.

If Telbajorn was the sun, then Gaedia was the moon. Snowy whiteness pervaded her albino appearance, bleaching her skin, eyes, and hair to share in collective paleness. She had seldom felt the temptation to begrudge her condition. An uncommon appearance had seldom troubled her, and her mind was usually too busy dwelling on others to trouble with self-scrutiny. Her form was dainty, even delicate, standing a half-head shorter than most of her peers, serving to exaggerate her brother's height beside her.

"You don't have to worry about me. Just stay focused on the mission." Gaedia said in her brother's mind.

For the first time since they entered the city that morning, Gaedia lifted her head and took in her surroundings. The lower city had suffered the worst in the siege. Roofless houses, scorched stone, and the crumbled stumps of towers stood like crestfallen monuments to the crushing defeat. The Daegon blue-eyed dragon hung everywhere she looked, watching the milling crowds.

Gaedia could remember when the archways and towers hung with garlands and rang with festal music. Despite the significant morning crowd around them, it was eerily quiet.

Shuffling feet and sparse coughing reverberated like shouts. No two men walking together exchanged a word above a whisper. Life in the capital city of Caelus had never been easy for her, but these streets had become home. Defilement felt too weak a word for what had become of the beloved heart of the kingdom.

A shout barked in the Daegon tongue made the entire crowd lurch like startled sheep. The dull thud of an impact and the halted crowd accelerated. As the people cleared from the scene, Gaedia could see two imperial soldiers standing in the mouth of an alleyway. Their pointed blue-steel helmets stood tall, their slate-blue surcoats draped over their chainmail. Curved swords with long hilts and dragon-headed pommels swung at their sides. They were bending over a ragged man, curling up against the filthy alley wall in an effort to protect his body from further blows.

"It is outlawed to beg of soldiers, rat," one soldier snarled in broken common-speak. He kicked at the huddled man, drawing from him a stifled cry of pain.

"Keep walking, Gaedia," Telbajorn spoke in her mind. He took her by the wrist, pulling gently. *"We cannot afford to get involved."*

"We're Rift Watchers, we're supposed to get involved," Gaedia snapped back. She wrenched her arm free, but did not advance. She stood still, watching as the crowd flowed around her, like a river around a stone.

The second soldier jerked the long-bearded beggar onto his wobbly feet. The poor man looked weak and half-starved, his crooked arms and legs reduced to willow-wands. The first soldier produced a menacing iron rod, tipped with some red, crystalline substance. Gaedia's lips twisted in a grimace at the infamous Marstone—the empire's weapon of choice. Spiraling runes etched into the iron pulsed deep orange as the crystal head flared with a small shower of sparks.

Gaedia took a step forward, then felt Telbajorn's grip on her wrist, no longer gentle.

"Stop. Think for a moment. Two more dead Rift Watchers won't help anyone." Telbajorn's voice poured reason back into her mind. She stood, fidgeting as she waited.

The beggar was turned and thrust against the wall, his thin shirt ripped from his back. With cruel relish, the soldier pressed the burning iron rod between the man's shoulder blades. The shrill hiss of burning flesh was instantly eclipsed by the man's ear-splitting scream.

Gaedia winced, feeling a twinge in her own back as a measure of the beggar's torment passed through her by proximity. She focused on letting the pain and helpless terror flow through her, clinging to none of it. The burning lasted a long minute, the soldiers seeming to feed on the pain.

By the time Gaedia opened her eyes again, the soldiers had left. The beggar lay curled and shaking on the pavement, hiding his face. Tendrils of acrid smoke curled from his back.

Gaedia tugged against her brother's grip, and to her surprise he released. She knelt down beside the burned man, analyzing the wound. A deep, black and red cauterized imprint of the imperial dragon was scorched into his skin. She touched the skin.

The man shot a terrified glance at Gaedia and recoiled deeper into the shadow of the alleyway. His eyes were wide and red with shock, his sooty face streaked with tears.

"Don't be afraid," Gaedia soothed. The corners of her lips curved in a kind smile as she let her sympathy shine through her expression. "I can help you."

She lifted her head, glancing both ways. There were no soldiers on the street she could see. Looking back at the burned man in the alley, she stretched out her hand. Turning her fingers in a circular pattern, a flicker of light hung in the air, tracing a shape like a sickle moon.

The man's terrified expression softened into puzzled wonder. He glanced between the glowing sigil and Gaedia, then gave her a nod. She had hoped he would recognize the symbol.

Gaedia shot a glance back at her brother, who stood barring the way into the narrow alley. His cold gaze was tempered by a tolerant tightening of his lips. She knew that look usually preceded her getting her way.

"*You have three minutes, Gaed,*" he said in her mind. Her smile beamed at her brother as he turned away, crossing his arms and standing guard.

"Three minutes is all the time I need," Gaedia muttered. She stood and hastily took off her pack. Reaching inside she produced her tin water-flask. Uncorking it, she poured the fresh water onto the cobblestones between her and the watching beggar. *First is body: you must start with a resonant material*, Gaedia recited the formula to herself.

Reaching into the pack again, she felt around and found her sewing kit. Taking from it a single silver needle, one of her own design, she began tracing with it in the air as if it were a stylus. Thin calligraphic lines, bright as moonlight, followed the strokes as she began writing a necessary script. *Second is mind: you must imbue body with reason*. The complex script formed a kind of wheel in the air as Gaedia finished. It pulsed and hung in the air as she finished.

"Lay here, in the water," Gaedia instructed the man. The awestruck beggar nodded avidly. Moving to obey, he winced and sank back on his side. Gaedia helped the man into the puddle, easing him back so his wound touched the wet pavement.

Sitting cross-legged beside the man, Gaedia stretched out her hands. As if by command, the wheel of light slowly pivoted and gently fell over where the man lay, keeping him at the center.

Last is soul: you must draw life into the command, Gaedia finished the thought. She reached again for that divine influence beyond herself. It remained there, strong and sure like an island in a shifting sea.

Gaedia touched the wet ground, lit pale blue by the static sigil. Like the slow animation of storm clouds, the twisting pattern comprising the wheel began to turn and move as if alive. The static scripts she had written began to change, shuffling and rewriting themselves as the healing circle interpreted the necessary methods to heal this unique wound.

The beggar exhaled, eyes wide as he stared upward. A faint harmonious sound reverberated between the alley walls as the circle of light turned, the pooling water beneath it quavering and causing the light to flicker.

A peace like waking from a night of deep, restful sleep filled Gaedia's body, coaxing her mind to relax. The sour air of the dirty alley cleared, replaced by a fresh, sharp scent like the cool coastal air. For a minute, Gaedia lost herself in the influence of the healing circle, letting her body and mind cohere with its kindly dance.

It was only when the light of the wheel evaporated that she stirred from her reverie. The beggar lay in a stunned daze, his eye flicking to and fro, as if uncertain whether he should attempt to move.

Gaedia stood up and dusted her hands. "You can stand up now," she said with a contented smile.

The man shifted his back, staring with furrowed brows. He sat up, reaching over his shoulder to try and touch where the wound had been. But there was no wound to be felt. Only the faintest pink traces of a scar remained.

Gaedia could not stop smiling as she and Telbajorn continued on their way through the streets. Telbajorn was not smiling.

"I respect your kind heart, sister. But we're not here to heal every hurt beggar in the city. We have a job to do here," he said.

"I thought our duty as Rift Watchers was to be kind as doves, living for the lives of others," Gaedia retorted.

"I'm talking about priorities. Safeguarding the Realms from rift threats comes first, and we cannot afford to be distracted from that primary aim."

Gaedia shot Telbajorn a sidelong glance as they crossed another footbridge over one of the city's many waterways. Besides his flicking eyes and locked frown, Gaedia could sense

his anxiety like a fever of radiating heat. She could not read minds, but she knew what kinds of thoughts accompanied that troubling degree of emotion.

"What are you scared of, Tel?" Gaedia pried. *"There hasn't been a rift tear in this part of the world for over a hundred years."*

"That's because the Rift Watchers had sway then," Telbajorn replied. *"Our jurisdiction ends where the Empire is in control."*

Gaedia scoffed. *"You don't really think Daegonur would be fool enough to rip another rift in the Realms. They wouldn't want another Rift War, would they?"* Gaedia tried to insert a humorous inflection into the question. To her dismay, Telbajorn's stony expression did not relax.

"I don't know," Telbajorn replied, his tone grim in her head. *"I do know desire for power can drive otherwise intelligent men to make foolish mistakes. Thrones and borders don't concern us. The Realms do. We are here to ensure Daegonur does not repeat the mistakes of history."*

Neither sent any further communication for several minutes as they walked, for the moment alone with their own thoughts. This new, troubling theory weighed on her mind, darkening the sunny streets to her eyes. Their task had been simple: infiltrate the city and blend into society, serving to aid the underground foothold for the Rift Watch Order in Del-Caeum. The Order had been born in this city, it only made sense the king would desire it to remain there, regardless of what kingdom held control. That they might be there to thwart a breach in the Realms had never seriously crossed Gaedia's mind.

They turned down a narrow byway, descending a steep flight of stairs. Their path connected with a paved walkway along the bank of a canal.

Gaedia drew in a deep breath, the cooling atmosphere of moving water taking the edge off her thoughts. She felt most at home near water, and water was the primary thoroughfare in the sprawling city. Interconnected canal systems wove like veins and arteries through every level of the ancient metropolis, the upper and lower districts connected by locks that raised and lowered thousands of barges a day. It was one of the things that endeared Gaedia to Del-Caeum. The locks were an unmatched feat of Sulvanarian Veicraft engineering—her own patron language. Where she did not feel at home was the under-city Runoff, and that was exactly where their mission was taking them.

The brass bell of a moored barge rang clear, indicating it was about to embark. Telbajorn helped Gaedia down onto the deck just as the boatmen finished unwinding the thick ropes from the cleats, casting off from shore. As Telbajorn counted out the silver coins for the boatmaster, Gaedia gave the other passengers a cursory scan. A few dozing workmen, a woman bouncing a squalling newborn, a Daegon army officer and his attendant were

the only passengers. The boat could accommodate fifty or more, with room to breathe. *But how many really want to go where we're going*, Gaedia thought with a deep shiver.

As the craft maneuvered out into the current, Telbajorn sidled next to Gaedia, speaking aloud,

"The boatman says after we go down the lock this should take us straight to Deep Wharf Market. We should be right on time."

Gaedia fought a smirk at the heinously exaggerated Caelan accent Telbajorn put on.

"*We're already Caelan, Tel. You don't have to pretend to be more Caelan*," she spoke in his mind.

"*I'm actually going for a Western Nolvardi inflection*," Telbajorn replied, keeping his gaze down at his boots. "*I've been practicing. I think it sounds very authentic.*"

"*It sounds like you have a mouthful of sand*," Gaedia jabbed him with her elbow.

"*This is serious, Gaed*," Telbajorn chided. "*We are local leather-workers in the Runoff. We have to play the part.*"

Gaedia attempted to hawk and spit on the deck. The unpracticed attempt left a glistening strand of saliva hanging from her lip. She quickly swept her sleeve over her mouth, trying to look unfazed.

"Good one," Telbajorn muttered out loud.

The barge followed the canal for a short distance before crawling to a halt. The waterway appeared to terminate in a narrow dead end, boxed on three sides by sheer stone walls. Gaedia watched with a shudder of dread as the light of day was choked by two massive steel gates, shutting their craft in.

The warm, sunlit surface was quickly replaced by rising slime-coated stone walls as the water receded, lowering the barge beneath the earth. The air became dank and dim as they sank deeper and deeper. The boatmen lit torches along the rails, casting a greasy glow over the muck-coated walls.

Gaedia distracted herself by reading the cyclical sequence of Sulvanarian runes carved into the sides of the lock shaft. She interpreted their meaning as easily as reading a book. They were commanding the water to drain and gently lower the barge. The scripts were ancient and retraced a dozen times. She could see where greedy hands had torn away the silver inlays that had once enhanced the commands. *No doubt the Empire's vandalism*, she thought.

From the corner of her eye, she darted a hateful glance at the Daegon officer and his attendant standing on the other end of the deck. *They're like locusts, consuming every good thing they find*. The officer's sharp blue eyes caught her look. She dropped her gaze immediately. She wished they could get off the barge.

"*Don't draw attention to yourself*," Telbajorn's voice hissed in her mind.

"I know, you don't have to tell me," Gaedia replied. She eyed the runes in the shaft walls again. *"It's just, these canal locks would work a lot faster if the Daegon hadn't stolen the silver in the walls."*

"Oh, the empire did not do that," Telbajorn replied, sounding a little amused in her head. *"I forgot, you haven't been to the Runoff. The foundations under the city are a hive of criminals and desperate characters. Loading the walls with silver this deep was just poor urban planning. Oh good, now you've done it."*

The officer and his attendant were crossing the deck toward them.

"Let's see some identification," the officer demanded through an unwieldy eastern accent. Gaedia looked up at the second man, the officer's attendant. He was of Daegon blood, without a doubt, but he was not clad in the ordinary chainmail and blue-gray surcoat like other imperial soldiers. He wore simple leather-padded armor and a short, loose-fitting yellow robe with a hood, tinkling with small gold tokens. His face and hands were tattooed with interweaving Veiscript. *What's an Abrian war mage doing down in the Runoff?* Gaedia wondered.

Telbajorn passed a folded parchment to the officer. The man unfolded the papers and gave them to the war mage, who looked at them with studied scrutiny.

"Forgeries," the mage grunted. He tossed the papers away letting them scatter over the wet planks.

Gaedia clenched her fists, holding back an eager impulse to throw the first blow.

Telbajorn crouched, clutching up the precious identification papers. He blubbered with uncharacteristic deference, "Please, mercy, my lords. We are just cobblers only trying to get by under the streets of your graces."

"Tel, what are you doing?" Gaedia hissed in his mind.

"Play along," Telbajorn replied.

The officer snarled with disgust at Telbajorn. "Stand up. And don't speak. We'll soon know who you two really are."

Their wrists were both bound and they were searched for hidden blades. The mage took the pack off Telbajorn's back, searching it thoroughly. Gaedia grimaced, praying he would not find their scripts. Being sworn to secrecy, they could not risk traveling with Veiscript codexes in their pockets. That would be the first thing a Daegon patrol would search for, besides loose coins. Like their disguises, their scripts were cleverly hidden. Gaedia only prayed they were hidden well enough to fool a war mage.

She glanced up at the officer. Like a waft of body odor, she sensed the reek of lecherous thoughts behind his staring eyes. "You're a pretty thing," the officer grinned.

"Eat muck, blue-eyed pig," she snarled.

Her sinuses stung with a coppery smell from the man's back-handed slap to her face.

She heard Telbajorn in her mind, *“Nice touch. Very subtle.”*

“No weapons, just leather-working and stitching tools,” the mage reported, slinging the pack over his shoulder.

“Likely. But no one’s clean down here. We’ll learn just who you are at the check-point,” the officer smirked. He added with a snort, “Caelan rats.”

A loud clunk shuddered through the lock shaft. The water had lowered to its set level, stories beneath the surface streets of the city. The mechanical grind of rusty iron, and water filled the air as two bulkhead doors opened to emit the barge into another canal—into the Runoff.

As the boat began to crawl forward along the subterranean waterway, Gaedia took in her first look at the infamous Runoff. She had heard stories of the sprawling undercity of Del-Caeum, as deep and vast as an ant colony. Based on its unsavory reputation, she had always imagined it to be an overgrown sewer—dark, cramped, and repulsive. She was stunned by the sight in front of her.

A vast cavern of pillared galleries soared over their crawling canal. Thousands of lamps, torches, and internally lit windows cast a perpetual twilight gold over the subterranean world. Crisscrossing bridges spanned the air above, each bridge an elevated waterway carrying its own boats and cargo. Houses and creeping shanty structures crawled up the cave walls like insect nests, pin-prick windows glowing with greasy gaslight.

Besides the common stories, Telbajorn had told Gaedia of the Runoff’s history, how the substrata of the city served as a visual timeline. Scanning the irregular walls and colossal pillars, Gaedia could confirm his tale. She parsed the architecture from every period of Caelus’ history in the cavern walls—from golden ages to evil occupations, spanning through centuries. The sight made her feel both small and very young at the same time.

Their canal flowed along a channel in the rock floor of the Runoff, shored on either side by a busy wharf. The waterfront town was built of scrap wood and garbage, and was as alive as any city square on market day. People of every race teemed, busied with their own errands. Horns and drums from somewhere muttered a brutish tune over the noise of shouting vendors. Tattered flags of mottled colors spanned over the putrid waterway, completing the façade of the ceaseless festival of rats.

Gaedia wrinkled her nose at the pungent odor of human filth and rotten fish, mingling wretchedly with the more wholesome aromas of an active market. But more striking than the smell was the emotional climate. It was a mottled quilt of varied shades, not entirely unlike the surface streets. Gaedia shut her eyes, letting herself drink in the atmosphere. In the muddled haze of human experience there were recognizable sparks of the sharper emotions: happiness, grief, friendship, resentment, belonging, shame. Avarice and desperation were not much heavier than they were anywhere else people lived. The most

troubling sensation was the pervasive sluggish tar of resignation—defeat. *It drags down every soul. Even here.* Gaedia thought to herself.

With irritation, she could tell the officer was looking at her again.

“Just be patient,” Telbajorn spoke in her mind. *“I think this will play in our favor.”*

Gaedia tried hard not to roll her eyes as she replied, *“We’ve only been back in Del-Caeum a day and you let us get captured. Was that part of the plan? Because I really would have liked to know that in advance.”*

“Not exactly. But waste no opportunity to make life easier, I always say,” Telbajorn said, sounding a little too pleased.

“I guess this does save us the effort of breaking into the check-point,” Gaedia admitted.

“Once inside, we find the captive, cause a distraction, and slip away before anyone notices,” Telbajorn said.

Gaedia pursed her lips, eyeing her pack over the war mage’s shoulder. *“But how to get away from these two,”* she pondered.

The barge rounded a curve in the canal. Between the slumped rooftops of slum houses, Gaedia saw where their path led them. The wedge-shaped face of a stone fortress loomed ahead, situated at a fork in the waterway. The emblem of the blue-eyed dragon flew from drooping banners along the battlements. On either side of the fortress, drawbridges were raised, upheld by heavy chains. Gaedia had not seen any other bridges on this level of the Runoff. The fortified island was likely the only crossing for miles.

“If that’s the check-point then I hope there’s more to your plan,” Gaedia shuddered. *“There could be a hundred soldiers stationed there.”*

“Or more,” Telbajorn added. *“Do not worry. There is power on our side to dwarf their numbers.”*

The barge jerked as it touched the dock under the glowering face of the fortress. Ropes were thrown over the rails and the craft was tethered to shore by workers in short slate-blue tunics. A gangplank was lowered.

As they were led onto solid ground, Gaedia noticed the brand marks scorched into the dock workers’ arms and necks. *War prisoners made slaves.* She clenched her jaw. *The Daegon hold nothing sacred. The Priests will make justice. I hope I live to see it.*

Gaedia took note of the narrow iron portcullis, lifting on its own to admit the four of them inside. She could see no mechanizing Veiscript carved into the metal, which troubled her. No visible script could only mean the Vei commands were written somewhere close enough to raise the gate, but out of reach from tampering hands. She could not discern what kinds of defensive powers were written into the exits.

A long stone corridor opened before them, lit by torches and lined with intermittent doorways. A bitter waft of hopelessness met her senses as they entered the hallway.

Gaedia's professional composure cracked under the feeling, realizing their mission may be participating in that palpable dismay.

[Creative rewrite needed: "their mission may be participating in that palpable dismay" is unclear. I think the intended idea is that the captive they came to rescue may be contributing to the hopelessness Gaedia senses, but that needs your wording.] A kind of repressed maternal concern arose for him, but she choked it back down. *You have to focus. Stop getting distracted by your emotions*, she reprimanded herself. *If you botch this, he's gone.*

A sickening foreboding churned in her gut as the portcullis clunked shut behind them. Gaedia looked up at her brother. His calm, stoical face betrayed no hint of anxiety. The fact that his underlying emotions reflected his exterior appearance gave her all the confidence she needed.

He shot her a look out of the corner of his eye. *"I'll let you take this next move, Gaed,"* he said.

"With pleasure," Gaedia said.

She quickly reached up and tugged hard at the sleeve of Telbajorn's disguise. The seams popped along the shoulder, causing an open tear. He shot her a baffled and slightly offended look.

"Play along," Gaedia said with a teasing smirk.

She cleared her throat and piped up, putting on her most unassuming, girlish tone. "Excuse me, sirs, but how long will this take?"

The officer scoffed loudly. "Think of it as, all your plans are canceled until further notice."

She sighed drearily. "Oh dear, that sounds like a very long time. My brother's clothes need mending. I wonder if I could have my sewing things from our bag?"

"Not a chance," the mage laughed. He patted the leather pack over his shoulder.

"I'm sorry, but I wasn't talking to you, sir," Gaedia said. She directed her attention to the officer, who was looking back at her curiously. "You're the ranking man here, right? You seem kind. It's only my needles and threads." She smiled shyly and watched the officer's expression soften. He halted. The mage following suit a pace later.

"Give the girl her sewing things," the officer commanded.

"You can't be serious," the mage protested.

"Don't forget, you answer to me," the officer snarled. He softened again, adding, "What's she gonna do with some thread?"

Gaedia took the little pouch with a small bow. "Very decent of you both."

"Don't you forget my little favors, girl." The officer made a grotesque attempt at a charming smile before continuing to lead them up the passage.

The instant their eyes were off her, Gaedia nimbly plucked a single silver needle from the pouch. She rapidly traced a crescent-shaped sigil above the object, catalyzing it. The shape pulsed and the needle resonated with a soft ring. *That won't be the only favor you give, pig*, she thought with satisfaction.

Gaedia stuck the needle in the officer's back and let go. He let out a sharp gasp, coming to a sudden halt.

"What? Are you all right?" the mage asked, looking puzzled and slightly irritated.

The officer turned to his attendant, speaking in a slow, languid fashion. "Silly of me. I just remembered something. The check-point Simmigir had requested to speak with you as soon as we arrived."

"The Simmigir? Why didn't you tell me?" the mage blustered, turning pale.

The officer only held out his hands in resignation. "It must have slipped my mind. Leave the pack. I'll handle these hooligans."

The mage's racing footsteps dwindled away up the passage.

Telbajorn looked down at Gaedia. "Hooligans? Really?"

"I know, just no other word came to mind," Gaedia said. The officer repeated her exact words in parrot-like fashion, as if doing a poor impression of Gaedia's voice.

"That's going to get old," Telbajorn grimaced.

"I don't exactly have total control over it," Gaedia grumbled. The officer repeated the words again. She held up her bound hands to the officer. He immediately whipped out a dagger and cut her free, moving on to Telbajorn with unnatural, puppeted movements.

Gaedia rubbed her wrists then began digging through their bag. She tossed her brother a small jangling pouch. He caught it, pouring the handful of gold coins into his palm with a satisfied look. Gaedia knew they were false currency, carefully etched with Veiscript commands only her brother knew. She smiled as she plucked a silver thimble from the bottom of the bag, etched with fine Sulvanarian script. They were not as powerful as carrying their own codexes, but she hoped they would suffice.

Gaedia tucked the thimble into her bodice and dusted her hands. "My mind will stay bridged with his for around a quarter hour. Plenty of time."

After the officer had echoed the words, Telbajorn spoke to him directly. "There is a prisoner here. Taerin Ven-Moren. Is he alive?"

The officer grinned stupidly and nodded affirmatively.

"You will take us to him," Telbajorn commanded.

The officer bowed and produced a jangling ring of keys from his belt. He led them to a metal door further along the corridor and unlocked it. With sleepwalking contentment the officer guided them up a steep flight of stairs and through an open hatch into an upper chamber.

The long room reminded Gaedia of the gun deck of a warship. A dozen ornate steel cannons, forged to resemble fire-breathing dragons, aimed their deadly muzzles out over the Runoff through windows in the sloped, stone-brick wall. Barrels of ammunition were arranged in the middle aisle of the chamber, each burned with the emblem of the Daegon mining guild.

A gang of loitering soldiers cast the officer and his prisoners a disinterested glance before returning to their game of dice.

The officer led them quietly through the fortress' magazine to an auxiliary door that accessed another hallway. Midway up the hall it was bisected by a steel gate, guarded by two dozing soldiers. Gaedia could see the rows of iron-barred detention cells beyond and sense the intensified reek of hopelessness. *We're coming for you, Taerin*, Gaedia thought.

She felt her mouth go dry as she heard the officer blurt out, "We're coming for you, Taerin."

Immediately one of the snoozing guards snorted and jolted awake. His eyes flared with panic. He roused his comrade with a sharp kick. They shot to their feet, standing at attention.

"Open up. I have two spies here for interrogation," the officer barked, repeating after Gaedia's mental command.

"Yes sir... er, first we'll need your identification, sir," the first guard said with uneasy formality.

Gaedia added a growl of irritation to the officer's tone. "I'd think you'd recognize your superior officer." The officer detached a pendant from his shoulder cape and presented it to the guard—his signet of rank.

"Thank you," the guard muttered after scanning the signet, handing back the object. He produced a bundle of papers, scanning a list carefully. "And your name please, sir. I'm sorry, I have to follow protocol."

Gaedia's heart froze. Entrancing and puppeting someone of weak mind was easy enough for her. But searching another's mind for personal information like a name was advanced work, like scouring an entire library for a particular phrase. She did not have the components nor time to risk attempting that kind of search. Before she could stop her thoughts from saying it, she heard the officer repeat them out loud in a musing voice.

"What is your name?"

The guard looked taken aback, even frightened under the officer's dream-like gaze. The guard gulped and said, "I am Qaštu Ilezu, sir."

"I've never heard of you. That's good. It's safer to remain anonymous," the officer parroted. "Now, if you don't want the name Ilezu to end up on the Simmigir's desk tomorrow, you'll let me through this blasted gate." Gaedia forced her mind not to formulate

a prayer that this ploy would work. There was a short silence as the guard dropped his anxious gaze to the list again.

“Ah, of course. You’re right here, sir. You may enter.” He gave a nervous laugh as he unlocked the gate.

“Ilezu,” Gaedia made the officer scoff as they proceeded through. “Dumb name. A good name for a dog.”

The detention hall was lit by hanging lanterns, casting a flickering half-light. Shadowy shapes of huddled prisoners watched them from their squalid cells. Gaedia wondered which were truly criminals and which were good people who had run afoul of their capricious imperial overlords.

The officer finally came to a halt in front of a solid steel door with only a small sliding porthole to look inside. His keys rattled as he unlocked the cell, then pushed the door open. The cell was entirely black within.

Telbajorn held up a single gold coin in the palm of his hand. He traced a simple Abrian rune over the coin and the golden object immediately cracked into a thin, yellow flame.

Gaedia covered her mouth as her stomach convulsed, her limbs refusing to enter the room. Inside the small, square cell was a man hanging from a beam by his ankles. The crown of his tattooed head was half submerged in a basin of water. The empire’s preferred method of torture was burning flesh with hot irons—but for one familiar with the Vei language of fire and insight, they had to be more creative.

Taerin’s pale exposed torso was slashed with whip lacerations, their red streaks making his Abrian markings illegible. The skin around his half-open eyes was red and bloated. Strange, round scars warped the skin of his forehead.

Telbajorn was at Taerin’s side in an instant. He methodically pressed his fingers under the corner of the man’s jaw.

“He’s alive.” Telbajorn cracked a relieved smile. Gaedia felt her neck muscles slacken, allowing her to breathe easily again.

Gaedia joined Telbajorn at the man’s side, analyzing his injuries. There were abrasions around his ankles where the braces held him up, but besides that his legs looked untouched.

Gaedia touched the metal grips. “If we can get him up, I think he can walk,” she said.

A croaking murmur rasped from Taerin’s cracked lips. He was trying to speak. She and Telbajorn moved in closer, listening. The words were nonsense syllables at first, but amongst the garble of sounds came two words she recognized.

“G...Gladeran...Vettu-Gnosi...”

She exchanged a mystified look with her brother. Before she could speak, Taerin let out a hoarse cough. His swollen eyes shot open wide in panic, then settled as he recognized his friends. A weak smile curled his cracked lips.

“Don’t look so worried, Gaed. I think I still look pretty good,” he said.

Gaedia’s diaphragm fluttered as she let out a delighted laugh. Although she tried to remain composed, her throat constricted, vicariously feeling Taerin’s overwhelming relief. Her throat choked on all the words she wanted to say, settling for, “Let’s get you out of here.”

The moisture that filled her eyes was an unwanted obstruction as she helped Telbajorn unlatch the ankle braces. They quickly and carefully detached Taerin’s feet from the beam and set him on the floor. Taerin wobbled, then crumpled to his knees with a groan.

“There’s no strength in his legs,” Gaedia said. She tipped the basin over, spilling the water over the floor and soaking Taerin’s tattered pants. She splashed her hands in the liquid and immediately began tracing a circle of bluish runes like she had done for the beggar.

“There’s no time for a healing circle,” Telbajorn said. “Can you stand?”

“I don’t know,” Taerin winced as he tried to rise.

Another thought sparked Gaedia’s mind. She produced a second silver needle from her sewing pouch, quickly tracing a simple blood-quickenig sigil over it.

“Sulvanarian won’t be enough to restore his strength,” Telbajorn stated.

“But you know some Malaccadian, don’t you?” Gaedia retorted. She passed her brother the enchanted needle. “You can add a command to imbue his legs with strength.”

“Good thinking,” Telbajorn said. He looked a little impressed.

He took the needle and began tracing a series of right-angled shapes over it, each gleaming a deep red. “The command will only last for a few minutes. I wish to the Priests I had my codex.”

The crimson runes pulsed as they completed, the needle harmonizing with a subtle red glow.

Gaedia pulled back the ripped cloth of Taerin’s knee-breeches, exposing the thigh. Telbajorn lifted the needle over the skin, shutting one eye as he scanned for the right spot.

“Wait, what are you—” Taerin’s objection was cut off as Telbajorn stabbed the needle into the flesh.

Taerin sucked in a hissing breath. He exhaled as the inscribed needle took effect. “I sure missed you guys,” he said.

“How do your legs feel?” Gaedia asked. She watched his expression closely.

“You know, pins and needles... so to speak,” Taerin said with a short laugh.

They helped him gingerly to his feet and let him stand. He tested his legs with more confidence now, hobbling around the room. "Yeah, I think I can walk," Taerin said.

Gaedia gestured to the entranced officer. He was swaying like an idle child in the doorway. "What do we do about him?" she asked. She turned to Telbajorn. "My mind-command will wear off any moment, then he'll call for help."

"We'll lock him in this cell and take the keys," Telbajorn said. "By the time he—"

Suddenly, a shocking jolt of animal panic erupted through Gaedia's brain, engulfing every other sensation. A sharp gasp and a dull thud from the doorway stole both their attention. The Daegon officer was no longer standing in the doorway to the cell. He had fallen backward and was lying out in the hall, blood flowing from his throat.

Taerin looked back at the two, a film of red on the steel of the officer's dagger in his hand.

"What? He's one of the enemy." Taerin shrugged. "Did you both get soft in exile?"

Gaedia breathed deep, trying to calm her racing heart rate. She wondered if it was the sudden severing of her mental link with the Daegon man or Taerin's brazen act of butchering another man that disturbed her senses. She glanced at her brother. Telbajorn was eyeing Taerin with cold scrutiny.

From up the hallway came a coarse shout in the Daegon tongue. The next instant an alarm bell was already clanging.

"Now you've done it. C'mon!" Telbajorn barked. He pushed past Taerin into the hall.

Gaedia stepped over the officer's body, keeping herself from looking. She shook her head to try and dispel the clinging disturbance. She could not dwell on it. She had to have her wits about her if they wanted to escape alive.

They raced back the way they had come. The iron-bar gate leading out of the detention area was wide open, but not for them. Soldiers from the magazine were pouring out into the hallway, their curved swords flashing in the lantern light.

"You know what to do," Telbajorn called. He tossed Taerin one of his gold coins before igniting his own into a column of fire.

The charging soldiers stopped, daunted. Combined heat washed over Gaedia as she stood back, watching Taerin's coin also erupt into tongues of flame that licked the brick ceiling.

The two of them angled the faces of their coins toward the soldiers.

"You better run!" Taerin laughed. The guards stumbled over each other, retreating from the advancing wall of flame. Taerin ran ahead of Telbajorn, chasing the soldiers as they fled.

He was about to follow them through the door into the gun magazine when Telbajorn called out, "Taerin, wait!"

From inside the magazine chamber, two crossbow bolts exploded into sparks against the wall behind Taerin. He pivoted and dove back out of the doorway. He let out an exhilarated laugh, jabbing Telbajorn's arm. "C'mon, we can take them, Tell!" he said.

"No, we have to try a different way," Telbajorn shouted.

There came another shout from the detention area. They all turned to see another host of soldiers barreling down the passage.

"Nope. My way!" Taerin yelled. He flared the flame from his coin into a roaring blaze. He threw it around the corner of the doorway and into the magazine. A cry of alarm from the bowmen inside rang out and Taerin darted into the room.

Telbajorn followed him into the room. "Taerin, don't be an idiot!"

"What has gotten into him?" Gaedia muttered.

Entering the magazine, Gaedia found the chamber was already a crackling inferno. The wood ceiling and joists were flooded with fire. Gaedia's blood went cold seeing hungry flames crawling the sides of the ammunition barrels. It was only a matter of seconds before they unleashed their full energy.

Taerin had slid around the mouth of one of the cannons and was perched on the sheer edge of the open portal, facing out into the Runoff.

Telbajorn was shouting and clambering to reach his friend. "Are you insane?" he called out.

"Maybe a little," Taerin said with a smirk. He jumped through the window, disappearing outside.

Gaedia ducked under the cannon barrel and stuck her head outside with her brother. The exterior wall of the pyramid-like fortress was a steep slope of stone terminating in the coursing black water of the canal below, like a castle moat. Taerin was already just a small shape sliding fast down the surface.

"Gaed, go!" Telbajorn cried. He gave her a shove through the window. "I'll follow."

Odorous wind threw back her white hair as she skimmed down the incline toward the water.

[Creative rewrite needed: "odorous wind" reads as specifically foul-smelling, but the sentence does not establish which odor matters here. If the smell is intentional, specify it in your own wording; if not, replace the adjective.] The stone under her was made slick by years of algae growth, accelerating her descent. She craned her body back to glance at Telbajorn. He was sliding close behind.

From where they had jumped, a flash of red light pulsed from every cannon window. Then, with an ear-splitting blast, the murky air above was flooded with fire. Fast-moving stone debris shot out and tumbled all around Gaedia like meteorites. Her heart hammered

as she sped toward the water. She sucked in a deep breath and tensed her muscles, ready for the impact.

The cold plunge was like an embrace to Gaedia. The muffling silence of the engulfing canal water in her ears cleared and sharpened her senses. She stayed under the surface as long as she could, letting the current carry her while rocks and debris from the explosion rained down.

When she allowed herself to emerge again, she found it difficult to catch her breath, her chest constricting with anxiety. *Is that your fear you're feeling*, Gaedia thought. *Or someone else?*

"Telbajorn!" she called out in a half-choked voice. She scanned the water for any sign of her brother or Taerin. Her mind raced to the worst possible conclusions as she slid into panic. *No. No... he was right behind me. Not Telbajorn too, not him.*

"It was the Marstone that made the blast that shade of red, you know," Telbajorn commented. Gaedia whirled and saw her brother calmly treading water behind her. His wet, red hair matted almost comically against his large forehead. He was grinning in a boyish way she was not accustomed to seeing on his face.

Dread evaporated into ecstasy. Gaedia threw her arms around her brother's neck, accidentally dunking him in the process.

"Hey, don't drown yourselves," Taerin called out. He was crouching on a stone platform on the edge of the water, reaching out a hand. "I owe you both my life."