

Kron Darkbow seeks vengeance, and he plans to have it no matter the costs. Returning to the city of his birth after 15 years, he hunts down the wizard responsible for the deaths of those he loved only to find out another was responsible for the murders. That other is Belgad the Liar, a former barbarian chieftain who is now boss of the city's underworld.

Following his path for blood, Kron comes across the magical healer, Randall Tendbones, and accidentally reveals Randall's darkest secret to the world. It's a secret about the past, a secret that has kept Randall on the run for three years. Now it has caught up with him, and Belgad the Liar is suddenly the least of Randall and Kron's concerns. The gaze of Lord Verkain, king of the dark northern land of Kobalos, has fallen upon Kron and Randall. And it is a gaze filled with madness.

City of Rogues

Book I of the Kobalos Trilogy

The Ursian Chronicles

by Ty Johnston



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for Greg

Table of Contents

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)



Chapter One

1,994 years After Ashal (A.A.)

Trelvigor sat on a cushioned chair in the dark, his hands crossed in his lap over a curved dagger. Unmoving, he watched a young man with long hair and tattered clothes climb through the open shutters of a window into the top level of the tower.

As the stranger stepped onto the floor, Trelvigor's somber face formed a devilish grin. It had been a simple task casting an aura of darkness around himself. The trespasser could not see him, but the wizard could see the intruder through the open window's moonlight.

The young man glanced around at the cold fireplace and the long iron table holding up a heavy slab of wood as its surface. Built into the walls of the room were shelves lined with decaying books and glass vials filled with colorful liquids. He barely took notice of where Trelvigor sat, his eyes coming to the room's lone door of thick oak.

He took a step toward the door.

Trelvigor waved a hand in the air. "Ice."

The young man stopped, his feet planted to the ground and his arms hanging at his sides as if heavy. His eyes continued to roll from fear, glancing and darting about.

The mage's grin grew wider as he gripped the dagger and stood, allowing the spell of darkness to fall away from him.

The intruder's gaze sprang to the older man in a long tunic who appeared from nowhere.

The wizard raised his blade to eye level so they could see the moon glinting off its curved edges. "This is what happens to those who enter my home uninvited."

The blade slashed at air.

The young man's eyes went wider as pain like fire erupted in his gut. He stared down and saw his stomach slashed open, the intestines spilling onto the floor like fluid.

Trelvigor slashed up with the blade.

The trespasser's body arched, his feet remaining stuck to the floor. Through pain that nearly clouded his vision, he could see his chest had been ripped open, exposing scarlet ribs beneath.

The young man tried to scream but found he could not draw in air. His body quivered ever so slightly then slumped to the floor.

Trelvigor's grin was all teeth as he sheathed the dagger in his belt and kicked the still, bloody form of the youth.

The wizard chuckled. *These petty thieves would never learn.* Trelvigor did not consider himself a vain sorcerer, mainly because he was smart enough to realize he was not the best nor most powerful mage in the city of Bond, but he did have talent and had been a student to more than a few skilled teachers. He also had spent plenty of time on the darker side of the city and knew the right end of a dagger. Stupid thieves should beware, especially when trying to invade his home.

Satisfied the intruder would no longer be causing mischief, Trelvigor turned with his tunic swaying around him and reached for a handful of rags on a shelf. There had been blood spilled, and the wizard had much to clean, the one part of murder he detested.

Trelvigor bent with the rags to wipe blood from the floor. A distant noise, a glasslike tinkling, made him pause. His head came up as he strained his senses to pick up any sound.

Another remote noise followed, this one too like breaking glass.

Trelvigor gritted his teeth, gripped his dagger in its sheath. He strode across the room and out the door. Beyond, he paused atop the circular stone staircase and listened.

He detected nothing more.

Perhaps the young thief had a partner? Someone who had followed him into the wizard's den and now could not find his way out? Trelvigor doubted that. One lesson the mage had learned on the streets was that good thieves worked alone because there was less likelihood of being caught. The young intruder Trelvigor had slain had not been bright, but he had shown some skill; he had been caught only because Trelvigor had placed an alarm ward around the house.

The sorcerer hurried down the stone steps, then came to a halt once more. He could have sworn a shadow had moved above.

He waited patiently for a few moments. Another lesson he had learned on the streets of Bond was that a shadow could spell death.

A breath passed.

But nothing moved.

The wizard continued down a hallway. He had dealt with the thief and now had someone or something else within his home.

As he stormed into his private quarters, Trelvigor's grin returned in hopes of finding another opponent. But the wizard found no threat in his bedroom. His eyes followed the gilded curves of the huge master bed and the intricate embroidery of Hiponese tapestries hanging about the chamber.

Another shadow danced upon the wall in the hallway.

The wizard mumbled a few words of magic, simple protection wards, then stuck his head into the hall.

Nothing.

Trelvigor scowled. Someone was going to pay for their mischief.

He gritted his teeth and hurried down a stone stairway into the main apartments of the mansion, rounding a corner into a long, high-ceilinged entertaining room. He came to a halt. Before him stood a dark wooden cabinet, a piece of furniture nearly as tall as himself, that stored many fine liquors. The cabinet doors hung open and two bottles of Ursian brandy had been smashed on the rug in the center of the room. A trail of the dark alcohol ran from the shattered bottles into the hallway Trelvigor had just exited.

The wizard glanced around the room. Everything else seemed in place. The couches covered in tiger skins appeared fine, as did the bear rug before the burning fireplace and the gold-plated sconces that featured oil-filled lamps. The polished rosewood desk had not been touched, and neither had the brocade cushioned chairs or the Ursian tapestries on the walls.

Trelvigor glanced at the broken bottles again. It was bad enough to have found that fool breaking into his house, but now his home seemed a stranger.

The now familiar, distant chord of shattering glass came to him from the hallway.

For the first time since entering the room, Trelvigor peered inside the liquor cabinet. It was almost empty, only two dust-covered bottles of cheap wine rested in the back. Missing were nearly a dozen bottles of the strongest potables that could be purchased in West Ursia.

Someone had broken into his home and not only taken his rightful property, but was destroying those belongings and ruining his house. Someone was having fun, a little joke on the wizard. That someone would learn a lesson far harsher than had the dead thief. Trelvigor would take his time with this one, delighting in slicing flesh from bone.

The sorcerer yanked out the long, curved dagger. He stormed out of his entertaining room, turning left to follow a trail of dark liquor to the kitchen, the direction he had last heard the breaking of glass.

Once inside the kitchen, Trelvigor found on the floor two more busted bottles, one a black Kobalan whiskey and the other a lighter East Ursian brandy. Another liquid trail left the room through a doorway to the dining room.

The din of shattering glass came to him again, this time from above.

The wizard glared at the ceiling. Above him was the tower where he had disposed of the thief. Whomever was causing this mess had gotten past Trelvigor, and the only path to the tower was the one he had just taken. Someone either had slipped past him, which was not possible, or someone had exited the lower floor and in a matter of seconds been able to scale the tower and climb through the window on the topmost level.

Trelvigor gripped the dagger more firmly and charged through his home and up the stairs to the tower's upper level. He did not pause in front of the door, but plunged through with his weapon in front.

His anger drained as a dark, cloaked figure gave him reason to halt. The shape was in the center of the chamber, next to the remains of the thief. The being seemed human, but Trelvigor could make out little because of the enveloping black cloak and the hood pulled forward to shadow the face.

The mage's first inclination was to ask who this being was to invade his home, but he was more concerned with his own safety upon noting the large sword strapped on the figure's back, the weapon's pommel above the right shoulder.

The wizard noticed two more shattered bottles of expensive alcohol, this time in front of the door, leaving another liquid trail directly beneath Trelvigor's feet.

The dark figure lowered its cowl slightly, as if to menace. "It has been fifteen years."

Trelvigor leaned forward, staring at the black hole where a face would be if the cloak's hood were pulled back. He was trying to see lips moving, but could not. He guessed the figure was a man, or at least male, because of its sturdy voice, but even that was not certain.

With sweating palms, the wizard shifted his knife to the other hand and then back again. "What is it you want?"

"Fifteen years ago you murdered a man and woman."

Trelvigor had killed a lot of people over the years. How was he expected to remember two bodies out of dozens, especially from across fifteen years?

"There was an ambush." The figure crouched while it recalled the past. "You had half a dozen men at your command. You forced the couple's wagon to a halt and demanded surrender of their goods. The man said 'no,' and your brutes launched arrows into them, stilling their lives."

A dim memory surfaced in Trelvigor's mind's eye. "Belgad."

"What?"

"I worked for Belgad in those days." The knife shifted again, then shifted back. "We only hit merchants who were too cheap or stubborn to hire guards. We didn't kill them unless they put up a fight, or we had orders to make an example of them."

The dark form stood straighter, taller, the moonlight from the window stretching the figure's shadow across the floor nearly to Trelvigor's feet. "You mean Belgad the Liar."

"Had to have been."

"I see." The figure's voice was like stone grating against stone.

Trelvigor shivered. He normally had little fear of any mortal man, but he wasn't sure what this was in front of him. It seemed human, but there was no proof of that. "It's Belgad you should be speaking with."

"I will," the dark figure said, standing tall once more, its stature menacing, "but first I want to know if you remember the names of the couple."

Trelvigor's mind was a blank.

"You don't know, do you?"

Trelvigor's mind raced, but nothing surfaced in his memory.

"I should do to you what befell the young man on this cold, stone floor." The figure waved a hand over the dead thief.

Trelvigor's eyes darted to the dark hole of the hood.

"He didn't deserve the fate you offered." The figure clenched a black, gloved fist over the

corpse. "I only hired him to break out a window or two. I figured it would be best to have someone else disarm your alarm wards. It never occurred to me how sick you truly were."

The figure took a step forward.

Trelvigor jumped back, holding his dagger in front. "Stay away! Or I'll turn your insides out and feed you to a demon."

The dark shape chuckled.

Sweat dripping down his face, the wizard waved his weapon. "You laugh?"

The figure ceased its chortle.

"Then become my slave." The wizard snapped his fingers.

The figure stood motionless.

Trelvigor pointed at the large sword. "Fall on your weapon."

The dark figure chuckled again. "Charms only work on the weak of mind."

Trelvigor's nerve nearly broke and he almost turned to run. The dark thing was right, and if it had the willpower to ignore his charms, then it could possibly ignore other illusions. There was only one way to find out.

"Ice," Trelvigor said, pointing the dagger at the cloaked form.

"I've been studying you from afar for some time." The moon from the window outlined the bulky figure, outlining muscle beneath the black cloak. "I know your tricks."

"I've nothing to fear from you." Trelvigor's voice quivered. "You cannot harm me."

"Let me guess. You have placed a protection spell around yourself."

"Yes, so there is nothing you can do to me."

"Neither sword nor arrow can harm you, I suppose?"

Trelvigor nodded.

"How are you, then, with fire?" A hand gloved in black snapped out from beneath the cloak, flinging a small gray ball.

Trelvigor watched the clay orb sail across the room before it cracked onto the ground at his feet and burst, flames exploding from within and climbing up his limbs.

The wizard screamed as he dropped to the ground, rolling across the room's stone floor in hopes of smothering the fire sticking to his skin and melting his silk tunic. He rolled into the smashed liquor bottles, cutting his hands and face, and learned new levels of anguish as the spilled alcohol caught fire and began to cook the flesh on his arms. Further thrashing only spread the conflagration, catching ablaze the liquor trail leading to the stairs and beyond.

The dark figure slid backward, away from the burning and shrieking wizard. It gave Trelvigor one last glance, an evil grin of white teeth beneath the black cloak's hood, then was gone through the window.

Chapter Two

If one of his Dartague countrymen saw the fortress Belgad the Liar claimed as home, the man would believe Belgad was a king. The building was much like its owner, towering and solid. The grounds of the fortress included a yard of no few acres surrounded by a high stone wall. However, the property's surroundings proved Belgad was not royalty. His fortress rested in the west end of Bond within a region known as the Swamps, named so because it lay between two rivers that eventually ran into one another east of the city. If the northerner called Belgad were king of anything, it was the busy and crowded streets within the Swamps where the majority of Bond's rabble led their daily lives.

Despite this wealth and power, Belgad the Liar sat glum in a massive oak chair on a raised platform at one end of his grand hall, the room much like a chapel with high windows upon either side showing gardens beyond.

"Dismissed," the large, bald northerner said to a short man in robes before him.

The little man backed away quickly, bobbing his head. "Thank you, mighty one, thank you."

Belgad sneered and waved the stooping figure away. Acquiescence from others was expected, but it was nothing the large man respected. Looking much like a barbarian king of old in his lion-skin tunic, Belgad ran his fingers over the white mustache beneath his crooked nose while his eyes shifted to another figure standing at the foot of the steps leading to the throne.

This man was also short, as most were to Belgad, and he was covered in ratty clothes. His eyes glanced around nervously beneath the stern gaze of his liege

Belgad motioned the man forward. "Report."

"Sir, you'd asked me to keep watch on the Docks situation."

"Yes, Stilp. Proceed."

"That pope they got in the East has lowered the tariffs on all their goods," Stilp said, then added a shrug, "but the dock foremen, they don't want to pay no extra."

"How much have the tariffs dropped?"

"Three percent."

Belgad's hard eyes focused upon his employee. "More gold is falling into their laps, but they don't want to pay extra for their protection when it means there is more to protect."

Stilp stared down at his dusty boots. "Yes, sir."

Belgad leaned forward on his throne, rested his chin on a fist and stared through the high windows on one side of the hall. Beyond he spied a bountiful garden full of foreign trees and other plants he had brought to his fortress at great expense; he knew next to nothing about the greenery other than it was something a rich and powerful man like himself should have, and after a long day of dealing with a line of clients, the garden calmed his mind.

"The next guild assembly is in two days." Belgad continued to stare into the garden as if he were alone. "Take three men and make it clear the Docks does not profit without my protection."

"How far should I push?"

Belgad's blue eyes returned to the smaller man and made him shiver. "Roughen a few of them, if necessary, but no killings. Killings are bad for business."

"Yes, sir." Stilp backed away.

Belgad's gaze traveled down the center of the hall to an approaching thin fellow in a red silk robe swaying about his feet. The man passed Stilp, who exited between armed guards and through a huge door of oak. Belgad paused in anticipation of what Lalo the Finder would have to say. Lalo never minced words, and nearly everything he said was of import.

"I beg your pardon, my lord." Lalo halted at the bottom of the throne's steps, his head slightly

bowed. "There is a situation of which you should be aware."

"Speak, Finder."

"The house of Trelvigor the mage is in flames. There has been no sign of the wizard himself, and I fear the worst."

Trelvigor was an old client to Belgad, having been in the northerner's employ since Belgad had arrived in Bond fifteen years earlier. The wizard had dark, sometimes disturbing faults. But those same faults had often been used in Belgad's service. Being a patron meant one had certain responsibilities to one's clients.

Besides, Belgad realized this gave him an excuse to leave his fortress and to cancel the rest of his meetings.

The Dartague stood straight, at his full height, towering over Lalo. "Ready a carriage."

It was dark, but not late, and the journey by carriage from the Swamps to Trelvigor's mansion in Uptown took nearly an hour because of the foot traffic on the cobblestone streets. The trip could have taken longer for many, but Belgad's reputation cleared the way with help from an escort of two heavily-armed guards driving the carriage and two other men on horseback.

Mages Way was one of the widest roads in Bond, its fancy homes lining the street for a mile or more, but Belgad could not see the wizard's burning mansion from the open window of his carriage. There were too many wagons, horses and people blocking the path to see much of anything other than an orange glow in the distance. All classes of persons filled the street, from the bored wealthy who lived nearby to the dirty slum dwellers come up from the Swamps. The fire was the entertainment of the night.

"Stop the carriage," the Dartague ordered.

The guard steering the horses reined the animals to a halt.

Belgad shoved open the carriage door and climbed out to the street. "I'll walk from here."

He tromped away from the carriage and his personal guards. A person would have to be a fool to try and strike down Belgad the Liar in the middle of the streets. Even if Belgad were killed, the repercussions could be devastating.

Still walking, Belgad watched the glow that flowed over the crowd ahead. The northerner could make out a bucket brigade of well-meaning citizens and city patrolmen transferring water from the river several blocks south. Even from this distance, he could tell the firefighters were wasting their time. It was obvious there would be nothing left of the mansion other than its stone frame and tower.

Closer to the flames, Belgad could make out several orange tabards of the city guards. The men huddled together next to the bucket brigade. He made a straight line for the guards.

"Who is in charge in this district tonight?"

One of the guards stepped forward. "That would be me, Lord Belgad." A disquieted hand gripped the pommel of the sword at his side. "Sergeant Gris at your service."

Belgad waved a hand toward the flames. "Is river water the best you can do?"

"It is the best we could arrange for now, sir." Gris waved a hand toward the bucket line. "The water pumps at the Docks are being used to drain ships, and no mages along the Way are available."

Belgad stared over the crowd to other expensive homes lining the road. Several of the buildings, a number of them minor fortresses or mansions, showed burning lights in the windows.

"You mean none of them would come."

The sergeant nodded toward the wealthy abodes. "I asked several myself personally, but I was told they did not have the proper spells prepared to be of aid."

"They had no love for Trelvigor." It made a cruel sense to the Dartague. Wizards were a fickle lot, and Trelvigor was not welcome among their numbers. The mage whose home was in flames had

gained no love in sorcerous circles through his connections with the city's underworld.

The heavy ceiling beams in the burning structure collapsed with a cracking din, shaking the ground. Cries of fear went up from the crowd as orange and yellow sparks exploded into the air, showering the bucket brigade with soot and sending its members fleeing.

Belgad looked through open windows where the shutters had been burned away and saw a furnace with stone walls. "Has there been any sign of Trelvigor?"

Gris glanced at the blaze, then back to the larger man beside him. "Not yet, sir. And to be honest, I don't expect to find anything until the fire has been put out."

"Any idea what started it?" With a roving gaze, Belgad watched the bucket brigade reform its line to the river.

"I do not know, sir," Gris said, following the Dartague's look, "but others who saw it early on said the fire started from within. Probably the kitchen, but you never can tell with wizards. Sometimes they've got potions brewing and Ashal knows what other goings on."

Belgad had to admit the sergeant might be correct. Trelvigor had not been an exceptional alchemist, though he did know how to cook a poison or two.

A yell went up from the front of the bucket line.

"Excuse me, sir." Sergeant Gris took off at a run.

Belgad watched the man go. From his viewpoint he could make out the bucket brigade near the front entrance to the remains of the wizard's mansion. Several men were kneeling as Gris approached, but the flames and crowd kept Belgad from seeing more.

The sergeant spoke briefly with the bucketeers before jogging back to Belgad.

The Dartague nodded toward the flames and the gathering of men there. "What news?"

"They've found him."

"The wizard?"

"Yes, sir, and he's alive. He managed to crawl his way to the front door before passing out, but he's in bad shape."

Belgad waved to one of his bodyguards and the man came forward. "Go to the nearest healing tower and let them know we're bringing a man badly burnt."

"Yes, my lord." The man ran off through the crowd.

"He looked in bad shape, sir." Gris took a step back as Belgad turned to him once more. "I don't know if the healers can save this one."

"They had better." Belgad grimaced. "That's why I make donations to them every month."

Randall Tendbones had seen a lot of pain and death in his twenty-one years, but he had never seen someone burnt so horribly they were hardly recognizable as human.

The blackened, smoking husk that was Trelvigor the wizard was curled in a fetal position on a padded table. It was difficult for Randall to tell where the man's clothing ended and the remains of the flesh began; all had been burnt and melted together into a crispy mush. Hardened flakes of black skin protruded from the wizard in the few places raw muscle did not show.

The healer closed his eyes and rested a hand on a forehead that looked like cooked strips of beef. Randall breathed in slowly, allowing magic to flow from within his soul and to seep into the unconscious mage. He could not quickly heal someone injured so badly, but for now he could calm Trelvigor and keep the mage from waking to the anguish, if he could awaken at all.

A knock at the door caused the healer to remove his hand and open his eyes.

"Yes?"

A coarse voice spoke from beyond. "Lord Belgad would like a word with you."

"I'll be right with him."

Booted feet stomped away as the healer pulled off the white robes of his profession and dumped them in an open barrel next to the door. For a moment he stood in his simple tunic, contemplating the man he was about to meet.

Beyond the door was a circular chamber familiar to Randall, a portion of the tower proper that was a combination waiting room and work room for the healer. The man Randall knew by reputation as Belgad the Liar was sitting in the healer's chair behind his desk. Two men clad in chain armor stood opposite Randall next to the room's other door. Beyond that door could be heard the various comings and goings of other healers and patients.

Belgad stood. "What is his condition?"

Randall walked to his desk. "He will probably live."

"Probably?"

"There's been much damage," the healer explained. "He will take some time to heal. It's a wonder he's alive at all."

Belgad nodded and returned to the chair. "How long?"

Randall pulled up a chair and sat in front of his desk. "Master Belgad, there's no magic strong enough to entirely undo what has been done to him."

The Dartague grunted. "I should ask one of the other healers, or take him to the other tower."

"Believe me, Trelvigor will be best served here." Randall stared with earnest across the table top. "Healing magic takes much endurance. My youth allows me to channel far stronger resources from within than could another, older healer."

"Your youth also reveals your inexperience."

"I'm Kobalan. If anyone understands pain, it would be I."

Belgad blinked.

Randall regretted the slip about his nationality, but he wanted to prove to this man he was the best healer available.

He was soon glad to notice the Dartague let the remark go.

Belgad pointed to the healer. "You still haven't told me how long it would take to work your magic."

"About three weeks."

"How long until he can talk?"

"A couple of weeks, perhaps longer." Randall shrugged. "The inside of his mouth was seared, his tongue nearly gone, and his lungs have been singed."

"You can ... grow back his tongue?"

"That's why it will take at least a couple of weeks before he can talk." Randall motioned toward the room where Trelvigor lay in a stupor. "The magic needed to grow major tissue or organs is quite straining. I'm afraid I won't be doing much other work for a month or so."

Belgad stood, showing the conversation was at an end. "That is why you have other healers." The large man moved toward the door.

One of the guards opened the portal, but the northerner paused and turned back to the healer. "Let me know when he can speak."

"Yes, my lord." Randall watched the three men exit his chamber.

Chapter Three

The boy was only twelve, but he knew an opportunity when he saw it. From between two fruit stalls he spied Ezra the baker's shop across the way of the bazaar's central path.

Ezra had been foolish to leave a window open, and Ezra had been foolish to leave a loaf of nut bread cooling in the window. Ezra could expect to lose a little business that day.

The boy glanced from side to side. It was morning and the bazaar wasn't at its busiest, but a number of hawkers and early customers were on the streets. No one seemed to notice the lad in grimy rags kneeling between two stalls.

He glanced at the cooling loaf of bread again. It would be so easy. He could dart across cobbled stones and snag his breakfast, then it would be zig, zag, zoom! And he'd be gone. No one would know from where he had come and no one would know where he had gone.

He licked his lips. He could already feel the warmth of the bread on his tongue. It was time for breakfast.

The boy took a step.

A boot slid between his feet.

He dropped hard, his quick hands all that saved him from a broken nose.

Before he could roll over, a hand clamped on the back of his shirt and yanked him to his feet.

The boy tried to run, but he was held in a grip of iron and his struggles soon ceased.

He twisted his head to stare at a gloved hand that led up to a man in a deerskin tabard. He was tall, with dusty boots rising to his knees. A leather vest covered a linen shirt and a long, tan cloak hung from his back. The clothes were those of a man who spent much time in the woods or on the roads, but they were clean and in good condition. Also, the sizable sword on the fellow's left hip told the boy this was someone he should take seriously.

The man nodded across the way to the baker's shop. "Looked as if you were about to have breakfast."

The boy had learned early in his young life to read human character, and he knew right away this man was no fool. It would be stupid to lie. "A good breakfast it would have been, too, without your intrusion."

The man pointed to their right past a line of booths to the edge of a stone warehouse. "Two city guards around that corner," he said, then pointed to their left between another row of stalls, "and a member of the beggars' guild up that way. He probably would not like you scaring off his business. I think I saved you a bit of trouble."

The stranger released his grip on the youth.

The boy thought about running, but his curiosity got the best of him. He wanted to know how he had been caught. He was sure there had been no one near him mere seconds before. "Where'd you come from just now?"

The man chuckled. "That corner." He jabbed a thumb behind them to a dark spot aft of a fruit stall. "I was sitting on a crate finishing my breakfast when you showed. If you're going to have a future as a thief, you're going to have to learn to read your surroundings better."

"I'm no thief!"

The man chuckled again. "You were about to pay for that loaf of bread?"

The boy pouted. He would have stuffed his hands in his pockets, but his ragged pants didn't have any pockets.

Towering over the youth, the man showed no signs of allowing the boy to flee without answering questions. "What's your name, boy?"

“Why should I tell you?”

A smile remained on the stranger’s lips, but not in his eyes. “Because I’m asking, and in polite society, one generally gives one’s name when asked.”

“Who says we’re in polite society? Anyway, I don’t know you.”

“I am Lucius Tallerus,” the man said with a polite nod of his head. “Now you.”

The boy bit his bottom lip. He didn’t like giving his name to this man. The fellow seemed almost as if he were a member of the city guard. The lad didn’t think he was in trouble, but he didn’t want to take any chances. Still, there was no use in putting off the inevitable.

“Wyck.”

The grin on Lucius’s lips grew wider, but his stern eyes were not blinking. “Try again. Your real name.”

“I don’t know my real name.” The boy was telling the truth. “I never knew my mom and dad, but on the streets they call me Wyck.”

Some of the cold fled from the man’s eyes as he pulled a small leather sack from beneath his tabard. He opened it with one hand, retrieved three silver coins and held them out. “Take these.”

The boy’s eyes were wide as he stared at the coins.

Lucius’s gloved hand moved a little closer to the boy, the coins in his palm. “I want you to buy some food and new clothes. And I want you to get a room off the streets, at least for the night.”

Wyck’s eyes darted from the coins to the man’s face. “I’m not doing anything *sick* for you. I might be living on the streets, but I’m not desperate.”

The grin returned to Lucius’s face. “I didn’t mean anything of the sorts. The coins are for you, then we part ways if you wish.”

Confusion was plain on the boy’s face. “Why are you doing this?”

He saw a glazed look come over the man’s eyes. “Because I lived on these streets for a while when I was about your age.”

Lucius’s voice showed he was telling the truth.

The boy lifted the coins.

Lucius pointed to the money. “There can be more of those.”

It was Wyck’s turn to smile. “How?”

“I take it you spend most of your time here in the Swamps.”

The lad nodded.

“Then you are someone who hears things,” Lucius said, scanning their surroundings as if making sure no one else was listening, “someone who knows things.”

“I hear enough.”

“Good, because that’s how you can earn my silver.” Lucius stared at the lad again. “I want you to be my eyes and ears on the streets. If there’s news or gossip, let me know.”

Wyck stared at the coins in his hand. “That’s easy enough.”

“Off with you, then. I’ve business to attend to.”

The boy turned and ran as fast as his legs would carry him. His mind was already filling with fruit-filled pastries and sugar candies.

He pulled to a halt after a dozen steps and turned to see the man still standing next to the stall. “How do I find you?”

“You know the Rusty Scabbard?”

Wyck nodded again. He was familiar with the tavern.

“Leave word for me there.”

With that the boy rushed off.

Once the youth was gone down an alley, Lucius turned to his right. He had been telling the truth about the two city guards, and he needed to ask directions of them.

The blackened shell that had been the home of Trelvigor the wizard was little more than smoking walls and rubble by morning. Even the mansion's tower had fallen once the wooden roof of the main structure had collapsed.

It was the job of Sergeant Gris to clean up the mess. It was not a job he enjoyed, but it was not one he detested. It was merely another task to be performed among the steady stream of tasks he dealt with daily.

Soon after the sun was above the remainder of the wizard's mansion, Gris and three of his men were overseeing a crew of workers who had been pulled from various jobs around the city to attend to the burnt building. Someone from another division of the city's bureaucracy would normally be in charge of such an operation, but the mayor had wanted the Guard there because of the nature of the building. It had been a wizard's home and could present untold dangers. Gris believed any dangers would have gone up in flames, but he didn't question what he was told to do.

Wheelbarrows were lined up in front of the mansion's remains as workers loaded them with pieces of blackened wood and stone that had fallen outside of the residence proper. The inside of the structure was still too hot for anyone to enter, but the crew was cleaning as best it could.

Gris turned to face the street. There were still some gawkers, most fresh awake though a few looked haggard enough to have been there all night.

Surveying the surroundings, the sergeant was grateful the fire had been on Mages Way. The street's width would make it easier for a crew to move in with cranes to dismantle the leftovers and clear away the rubble. Trelvigor wasn't able to talk, but Gris couldn't imagine the mage would argue about tearing down the building. There was nothing to save.

Movement in the back of the crowd caused the sergeant to shift his gaze, and he spotted a man making his way toward him through the pedestrians. He recognized the tall, sturdy fellow dressed in tanned deer skins and leathers.

The sergeant's lips formed into a grin. "By Ashal, Lucius Tallerus." He marched forward with a hand outstretched.

Lucius returned the sergeant's firm grip with a smile of his own.

"You're a long way from the Prisonlands," Gris said as their hands parted. "What brought you here?"

"Looking for you."

"Busy this morning." Gris nodded toward the shell of a building. "But nothing I can't break away from for a few minutes. How'd you find me?"

"A clerk at the central barracks told me where you were stationed." Lucius pointed at the remains of Trelvigor's mansion. "What happened here?"

Gris glanced at the rising smoke. "Wizard's house caught fire last night. We don't know what caused it yet, and the wizard's in no shape to answer questions."

"I guess there's not much a dead man can tell you."

"He's not dead."

Lucius pointed at the house again. "He lived through that?"

"Managed to make his way to the front door." Gris shrugged as if almost disbelieving. "When he was pulled out, he wasn't much more than a husk. One of the local healers thinks he can have him back on his feet in a few weeks."

"Is that why the city guard are involved?"

"Usually we're not in on this sort of thing," Gris said, nodding as they walked away from the crowd into the center of Mages Way, "but it was a wizard, and a body was found in the rubble of the house's tower."

"Servant?"

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