

# CHAPTER 1

## THE IRON FOREST

Shard Harken decided that he would not kill all of his executioners.

Two of them were across the clearing, talking about him in frightened whispers. They, at least, could live.

Still pretending to be unconscious, he heard the youngest of the pair of guards ask his companion, "So how long *does* it take to hang somebody?"

The older man did not reply.

Instead, he slowly finished chewing his wad of blackleaf then spat it into the grass. He flattened the mass of herb and phlegm with his boot and grunted with satisfaction. It was the fourth time he had done so in the hour they had been standing in the rain-soaked killing ground, and the tedious repetition was driving Harken to distraction.

Eventually, having waited while another rumble of thunder broke the pre-dawn sky, the old man deigned to reply. "Doesn't take long enough, I reckon." He raised his voice deliberately so that Harken could hear him clearly. "Course, I seen some last for *hours*, hanging there with their legs kicking and their neck bursting. Such a din as they wriggle away, and the *smell* as their guts let go..."

The boy's face paled.

Through half-closed eyes, Harken saw the other man smile and then add, "Most times, though, it's just a quick snap, like a twig breaking, and that's it. All done and on with the next one."

On the other side of the small clearing, where the odour of wet grass sat heavily on the air, Harken sat unmoving astride a hobbled horse.

His head was down and his hands were tied before him. The rope around his neck was damp, and he felt little warmth from the lantern hanging from the metal gallows above him.

He had listened carefully to the guards since they had brought him, seemingly out cold and helpless, to the Iron Forest and draped the noose over his head. He had observed enough to know that the older man was frightened; his quarterstaff was unused and unmarked, and from the whiteness of his knuckles he was holding it too tightly in hands that would soon be aching and weak from the pressure. The guard's eyes flicked back and forth but did not dare stay on Harken for long.

As if to bolster his own nerves, the man rambled. "Rickard, see him? Shard Harken don't deserve to go quick, if Sir speaks the truth. Let's hope he *hangs on*."

Rickard looked around in silence as his companion fumbled for another plug of blackleaf.

When their conversation ceased, Harken raised his head slightly. Raindrops diluted the blood trailing from his broken lips as he studied his surroundings.

There were no trees in the Iron Forest; it was named for the metal gallows and gibbets that crowded together along both sides of the road as far as the eye could see. Most were unoccupied but there were always just enough corpses rotting in the gibbets to give the

area a permanent rank smell. Occasionally a body would be turned by the breeze, its cage emitting an oily whine and the powerful stink of decaying flesh and crow-picked bones.

Harken could now make out the sound of horses approaching, plus the creaks and squeals of a large carriage.

“Ah, here you go,” the old man said to his companion. “Sir and the others are on their way at last. Didn’t I tell you our message would get to them eventually? Didn’t I? Hopefully we’ll see this killer hanged soon so we can get out of this damn rain before we drown.”

The two stamped their feet against the pre-dawn chill as the horses trotted near. Harken moved carefully so he could observe the new arrivals without revealing that he was fully awake. First were two outriders wrapped in long cloaks that shielded them from the worst of the downpour. Next was a carriage of finest nightwood. Silver lined every edge and the barding of the two great beasts that pulled it. Last was the rear-guard of four more cloaked men with heads down against the weather. All were drenched, and every tired movement told of a miserable night’s journey from the city.

The leading horseman carried a lantern and peered through the light first at Harken and then at his captors sheltering beneath a tree.

“Well, Jalled, any problems?” the rider asked.

“No, Captain,” said the old man. “He has been asleep since we caught him—on account of me hitting him so hard, I expect. He’s been no trouble, has he, Rickard?”

“Er, n-no.”

“Surprising,” the captain said, climbing from his mount. “Thought he might have tried escaping.”

He inspected the prisoner briefly then tugged at the rope tied around Harken’s wrists. He noted that the bedraggled mercenary wore no scabbards, but did not see the wickedly sharp barb fixed to Harken’s thick cord belt that was close to, and hidden by, his bound hands.

Without another glance, the captain strode to the carriage and knocked respectfully on the door before pulling it open. A minute passed and then a voice came from the dark within. Straining, Harken heard a man say, “Are we safe, Captain?”

“Yes, sir. Harken is securely tied and unresisting. I have seen no sign of any of his company. He will die alone.”

“Are you *sure*?”

“I stake my life on it. The execution will go ahead as you wished.”

Another minute, and then the heavy head and huge body of Thomar Uhl slowly appeared from the carriage like a mole forced to leave its tunnel in daylight. Uhl was wrapped in a fine leather coat and broad hat, and grunted with exertion as he stepped down to the sodden ground. His tense expression brightened marginally when he saw the prisoner beneath the gallows, but he still turned his head constantly. His great jowls wobbled as he watched for anything untoward.

“Let’s get on with it, Captain,” he said. “I am tired and home feels very far away. I want to be back in it before I catch a fever. The Forest is filled with the vilest diseases, I hear. You and your men should be cleansed as soon as we return. I will have no pestilence in my hall.”

“Yes, sir. Of course, sir. We shall be most careful, sir.”

Harken saw the captain and guards exchange wearied glances.

Ignoring Rickard and Jalled even as they bowed to him, Uhl stepped at a measured pace to Harken. His men followed on foot, the rain ticking on their leather armour and assorted weapons.

Glancing down, Harken checked that his clothes were suitably marred with grime and gobbets of blood and that he appeared harmless enough.

“So, here you are then,” Uhl said, dabbing at his sweating flesh with a handkerchief liberally soaked in herbs to protect against sickness. “Shard Harken, at the end of a rope in the Iron Forest. The proper place for you.”

“General Harken, if you please,” the prisoner said equably. “Lord-General Harken, if we are being formal.”

His defiance made Uhl pause and there was a faint snigger among the semi-circle of guards. The fat man pressed on, “It is my pleasant duty to sentence you to the death you so richly deserve.”

“My only offence, it seems, is staying alive so that you have to pay me for fulfilling the black contract we agreed. Once I finished your bloody work, and sent your rival Quall to meet his maker, you forced your staff to look for me with weapons and not the silver you promised. Those two were lucky enough to find me.”

Uhl pulled a flask from his riding coat and took a brisk swig before replacing it. His eyes flicked to and fro, ever watchful for the enemies or other threats he clearly imagined were all around. All present knew that his paranoia usually kept him confined indoors, and only the delicious thrill of sending a man to the gallows was enough to bring him into open country, day or night.

“The lies of a condemned man are worthless,” he said for his servitors’ benefit. “Besides, why would I have a contract with somebody who could be bested by a boy and an old man while he was drunk out of his mind in a roadside tavern?”

As Harken had planned, the need to gloat overcame Uhl’s desire to return to the city and sanctuary.

The merchant added, “I must say, when I had word that you had been spotted on the Murthady road, I sent men along its length more in hope than expectation that they might capture you.”

He turned to Rickard and Jalled. “What do you even do for me?”

“Farmhands, sir,” replied Jalled.

“Farmhands,” said Uhl. “Oh, for a mercenary general to be seized by *farmhands*. Two dolts who probably saw you by chance.” He shook his head. “You and your Final Company once

had a reputation, but that was many years ago. Now they are no more and you are nothing but a drunk who tells lies about honest traders. What a pity."

"I am pleased to disappoint you."

Uhl signalled to his captain, who passed over a scroll. The ink, which had to have been applied in haste in the carriage during the journey here, was still fresh and began to run as soon as the rain hit it.

Having looked once again for any signs of a rescue party skulking among the gallows and gibbets, Uhl said, "I like things done correctly, so I shall pronounce the proper verdict: *Shard Harken, soldier for hire, you have been accused of killing Quall of Yell, a silk merchant in the province of Murthady. You committed this heinous crime either on behalf of persons unknown, or as part of a robbery, or simply because of your own evil nature. Therefore, given my authority as a member of the Silver Ring, I pronounce you guilty and sentence you to death.*

"Captain, you and your men will be witnesses that justice was done. I shall have nobody say I did not obey the law, such as it is."

He rolled up the now-sodden scroll. In a voice that was high with excitement, he said, "So, prisoner, do you have anything to say? Other than lies, I mean."

"Yes." Harken paused just long enough to provoke his audience's curiosity. "I let your men find me so that I could succeed where so many had failed, and draw you away from your home and its hundred guards. Oh, and I am still armed."

Harken dropped the rope that he had sliced in two with the barb. With one freed hand he pulled the noose from his neck. With the other, he tugged at the cord around his waist.

Uhl cried, "*It's a scorpion whip!*" and stumbled backwards.

Harken flicked the scorpion at the guard captain. The row of iron teeth that stretched along its length tore through the man's face to the skull beneath. He screamed and fell to his knees. With a startling *snap* Harken sent the whip into another guard, then one more.

Uhl was reeling in confusion and his remaining men were panicking as Harken leapt from the hobbled horse. He showed no sign of ill effects from his beating and moved rapidly to the fallen captain. One guard drew a blade and Harken whipped him across the chest. The barbs, which Harken had patiently sharpened while waiting for Uhl's men to find him, pierced cheap leather and then skin. The helpless man dropped.

Harken drew the captain's sword and turned to the remaining guards.

He said, "If you want to live, go now. If you want to die, try to stop me."

Glancing at the four men who had been on their feet just a second or two before, they stepped back. Any courage they might have mustered had faded away. From the extensive research he had carried out into Uhl and his staff, Harken knew that their loyalty was only as strong as the silver in their often-belated monthly purses. He raised the sword in one hand and the scorpion in the other, and that was all it took for them to flee.

Harken span to see Uhl stumbling for the door of his carriage and shouting for the driver to *go, go, go*. All the merchant's fears of the world outside his house had come true, and now he could not escape fast enough. With a hard *crack*, the whip struck the fat man across his

back. He gave a shrill cry and collapsed. The driver did not wait to discover his employer's fate, and ordered his horses away at speed.

Harken stood above Uhl, who was moaning in agony. He looked up to see Rickard and Jalled standing in stupefied surprise, amazed by the ferocity that had been unleashed in such a brief time. They made no move to use their staves and simply stared.

Harken called over to them, "I have no quarrel with you. You were helping me to do my job, although you could not have known it.

"Next time, though, you might check that the person you seek is as drunk and helpless as he appears.

"But know this: your employer has a habit of paying people with iron, not silver, once their work is done. I discovered that more than one of my friends fell under yon captain's blade when they should have been receiving their just reward. So now Uhl pays a higher price."

The treacherous merchant was trying desperately to crawl away. He moaned above the sound of the rain.

Rickard and Jalled heard a miserable cry as they fled amid the iron posts, but it might have been the coming storm.

Harken left the wounded guards alone, trusting that their comrades would return for them once he was gone. Now that the assassination was complete, his mind was entirely focused on his children.

Just the thought of Kerris and Bathor was enough to make his heart ache. His work in Yell had kept him from his daughter's nineteenth birthday—the fourth such time he had let her down—and his longing to see her and Bathor, who was five years younger, made him move briskly.

After distributing Uhl's rings and necklaces among the injured men and advising his former foes to visit the blacksmith at Highfall, who would pay a fair price and ask no questions, he did not spare the bloated corpse another glance.

He left behind the scorpion whip; having caused so much damage, its row of barbs would be soaked by gore and chipped by bone. Although difficult to use, it could be a highly effective weapon in the right hands and was ideal for a job such as this. But it tended to last for only one hard fight before its teeth were blunted, and it was useless at very close quarters.

Instead, he took the captain's sword. Despite his employer's tight purse-strings, the leader of Uhl's guards had managed to acquire a well-made blade and had cared for it.

Returning to his horse, which would no longer be the reward Jalled had vocally hoped for, he paused long enough to select a path from the Iron Forest. Taking the northwest road to Rockhall could be faster on the right mount, though the stone-laden path might be treacherous if the horse was nervous. Going southwest would take longer but the journey would be smoother. Looking at the animal and the thickening clouds that promised heavy rain, he chose the latter.

As he set off, the disappearing sun created shadows from the cages all around. Twisted and grotesque shapes spread across his path, and he spurred his horse on. Some believed that to be truly safe you should pass through the Forest only when the sun was at its highest and every trace of darkness was banished. His current journey could not wait that long, but he imagined how visitors might feel the first time they travelled towards Peak and saw the rows of tarnished and stinking gibbets before them. As a warning to anybody thinking of attacking the great city on the mountain ahead, it carried a powerful message: *you will die here and become food for crows.*

The horse was a piebald stallion he had bought in Murthady using money from the treasure chest of the murderous and unlamented Quall. It ignored the surrounding smells and sights and moved easily along the Peak Road, which pierced the centre of the Forest like an arrow aimed at the Thirteen Princes. The mountains were almost impassable guardians along Stonereik's northern border, and at their far end was Peak.

The city towered over the valley, the great slabs of its granite walls stretching for miles along the banks of the Jagged River. Harken guessed that for the majority of those in Stonereik and other provinces who spent their entire lives within miles of the same small village, its size must have been unimaginable. How could they grasp the idea of a city one hundred storeys high? Just climbing the Ramp and standing inside the Prime Gate would be more than enough. How then could they cope with thousands of lives being lived high over their heads? Or the Rip? The Masters of Flights? Would they even know of the woman who ruled Stonereik from the Palace of Winds, the mystic Veil?

Harken felt lighter with every step that took him further west and away from Peak. Even this far into the hills, its tallest towers were still visible. But at least he could no longer see its mammoth southern face. That indomitable stone line conveyed only one message.

*Stay away.*

## CHAPTER 2

### ROCKHALL

Outside the Harken home, a scream was cut horribly short.

In fright, Kerris dropped the plates she was carrying, shattering them into a thousand pieces. Rushing to the doorway of the kitchen where she had been helping her grandmother Rella, she stared into the main street of Rockhall.

Halder the tailor was lying outside his shop, surrounded by a group of armoured men on horseback. One was laughing and sheathing the sword that had evidently just killed the Harkens' nearest neighbour.

Kerris rushed to bar the main door, which was habitually left unsecured.

Her father had chosen Rockhall for its friendly people and its isolation from a world that he so often sought to escape. He had delighted in the fact that he lived in a place where he did not have to worry about intruders or remain with his back to a wall and his eyes ever watching for signs of attack.

Now his daughter feared that lack of security might spell their doom.

Kerris struggled to lift the heavy bar, and dropped it home only a second before a boot kicked the door hard.

A man cried with frustration, and another scream came from Rockhall.

Her grandmother was frantically rummaging through drawers for any serviceable weapons but Kerris could not pause to help. Her mind was fixed on only one thing: Bathor.

Her brother had been outside, tending to the dogs and communicating with them in his own way.

Now she could hear the animals barking furiously at the rear of the farmhouse. Bathor had probably lost control of them and they were running free to discover the sources of the strange smells and sounds close to their home.

She raced from the kitchen to the rear hall as the front door was kicked again, harder this time. Some of the small windows shattered.

"Bathor!" she shouted. In her panic the hall seemed longer than she ever remembered. "Come in! *Come in!*"

The dogs were going berserk, but they could fend for themselves against whatever danger was descending on the village. Bathor could not.

She yanked open the door to behold a scene of chaos.

Her brother was being shielded by two of the largest hounds—Borle and Yetta—as men rode through the yard separating the main house from the outbuildings and the fields beyond. Most of the other dogs lay dead or dying, Kerris saw with a pang. They had been killed by a kick from the horses or a stab from the swords being wielded by each of the six or so riders. The intruders were clad in heavy riding cloaks but the leather armour beneath was all too visible. Kerris had learned enough from her father to guess that this was no simple band of robbers: the horses' barding and every man's armour were of a matching style, and each rider wore the same combination of a longsword and a pair of daggers.

Borle and Yetta snarled and snapped whenever a horse came near. Her brother could only stand behind them in meek confusion.

The space between the door and her brother seemed endless, but Kerris knew she did not have long. Bathor was very tall for his age, and his height made him an easy target for a swordsman on horseback.

A desperate cry came from the kitchen behind her: "*Kerris!*"

The sound snapped her into action. She ran as fast as her legs could carry her to Bathor, who was turning to and fro in panic.

The riders looked round at the sudden movement from the house. One turned his horse to face the woman charging towards them. As he did so, Borle and Yetta instinctively leapt to savage the beast's flank, leaving their young master wholly exposed.

Two of the other men kicked their mounts forward. Their target was clear.

"No!" cried Kerris, reaching her brother a few seconds before the pair. She began pulling him hard towards the house. "Bathor, come with me!"

A man seated high above her laughed hard. In the background she could hear a cry from the horse being attacked by the two surviving hounds. There was a crash as it fell, and a moan from its rider.

Kerris used the distraction to pull her brother further towards the house.

She turned long enough to see that Borle and Yetta were rushing around the feet of the laughing man's horse, seeking an opportunity for attack.

But then a hoof snapped against bone. Half of the barking instantly ceased.

"Grab them, you fools!" called the rider. His companions spurred after Kerris and Bathor while he focused on killing the final dog.

The two siblings reached the door moments before the men. A gauntleted hand grabbed for Kerris' trailing hair as she dived into the house. A finger slipped across her skull. She ducked and the rider had to turn back as his mount sought space away from the narrow confines and human smells of the entrance.

Breathing hard, Kerris shoved the locking bar into place and pulled her brother towards the kitchen. It was worryingly quiet. Bathor was mute in fright and held on to her hand painfully tight.

Stepping cautiously into the kitchen, Kerris saw the door had given way at last.

There was no sign of her grandmother but Rella's maids were by the fireplace.

They had been outside gathering food from the stores and the intruders must have brought them inside and murdered them while Kerris was protecting Bathor.

There was a crash upstairs and footsteps rushed along the landing.

Pulling Bathor with her, she went quietly up each step.

A clatter of metal on metal. A door being kicked open. Grunts. A wordless shout. More footsteps, close together. Another clang.

Turning around the final corner, Kerris saw her grandfather battling an intruder on the landing. Their feet pounded on the floorboards as they turned in the narrow space. Her

grandfather's sword slashed home but his armoured opponent kept his footing and pressed on.

There was no way she could intervene without blocking her grandfather's attacks.

Kerris' bedroom was next to her, and she led her brother into it while trying to form a plan. Bathor sat on the bed, petrified and confused. "Kerris?" he asked. "Grandfather?"

Knowing there was no time to explain in a way he would understand, she seized her dagger from its hook on the wall then turned to him. "Stay here, my love," she said. "I will be back soon."

She kissed his sweat-streaked forehead then leaned her head around the door jamb.

Her grandfather was still fighting but the other man was younger and stronger and clearly had the advantage. He was constantly pushing forward and soon her grandfather would be trapped in a corner.

Kerris tried to remember all the lessons her father had given her. Something about choosing a particular target. Something about protecting yourself. Fear and panic made her memories incoherent.

She was halfway towards the fight and desperately searching for space where she could strike when a second intruder burst from the nearest doorway and hurled her against the wall. The dagger fell from her hand.

She retained enough of her senses to see Rella lying unmoving in the bedroom.

Then her attacker was sitting on top of her. He held no sword and instead punched her in the chest. The blow was ferocious and all Kerris' breath rushed from her.

Wriggling beneath his weight, she kicked and squirmed enough to throw him off balance.

His fist narrowly missed her body and hit the floor. He cursed and fell back.

Kerris dug her feet into the floor and pushed herself across the boards. Flailing, she got a finger onto her dagger's hilt just as her grandfather collapsed.

"No!" she cried, ripping the knife into the leg of the man beside her. He staggered into the nearest bedroom with the blade still in his body.

Kerris skidded in blood and hit the floor hard. As she tried to stand, her grandfather's killer rushed for her, shouting, "Damn you, bitch! I'll see you dead!"

From behind her, a booted foot kicked the falling blade from the brute's fingers.

A commanding voice said, "No, Roolmar, you won't. That is not the arrangement."

Roolmar turned to the new arrival to protest, but a gauntleted hand pushed him away.

Kerris looked up at the laughing rider who had been at the rear of the house. He ignored his companion and lowered his hand to her.

"Get up, my dear," he said in a friendly voice. "Calmly, please, if you would. Your grandfather is dead and now that you have left your blade in poor Thaddom, you are unarmed. Roolmar, go and see if Thaddom still lives, just in case."

When Kerris showed no sign of rising, the commander grabbed her hand and pulled her up. His grip was firm and her energy was fading along with her will to resist.

There were no more sounds in the house. Kerris said, "Where's my brother? What have you done with him? If you've hurt him—"

"If I've hurt him it would be a terrible shame and not part of my plan—"

Roolmar cut him off. "Thaddom is dead, sir. She must have cut a vein."

"Well, can't be helped." A smile was never far from his lips, Kerris saw. His tone was cheerful as he went on, "Your brother is intact, my girl... or as intact as he can be."

He stopped as two of his men pulled an unresisting Bathor from the bedroom. The boy looked at them wonderingly and said nothing. His eyes lit up when he saw his sister, but his captors' tight hold stopped him moving towards her.

Their leader said, "If you want him to stay healthy, dear Kerris, you will do exactly as I say. If we wanted you both dead, you would be. No, we would like you to stay alive for as long as possible as we have great plans in mind for you. Very great plans indeed."

He took her chin in his hand and pulled her face away from Bathor and towards his. "Still, mark my words: if you resist or try to attack another of my men, I will gut your brother in a heartbeat. His last sight will be you weeping as you watch him bleed slowly to death in the dirt.

"Once we have finished with him, we will turn our attentions to you."

Roolmar said quietly, "Captain? What about Thaddom's body? He was a good—"

"If he was as good as I had been told before I hired him, he would still be alive, would he not? Leave him."

Then he smiled again and added cheerfully, as if he had never been interrupted, "Do we have an understanding, Kerris?" She could only stare. "Wonderful!"

Standing in the ruins of his home, Harken could imagine everything that must have happened in the past few hours. The bloody evidence was before him in every room.

Having checked fruitlessly for survivors among the various servants and farmhands who had been killed in and around the ground floor, he had charged upstairs to discover his father-in-law's corpse in the hall leading to the bedrooms, and the body of a well-built man in costly leather armour sprawled in Bathor's room. A frantic search confirmed that both children were missing.

His mother-in-law was still lying where she had hidden beneath her bed.

She had been stabbed in the back, and blood pooled around her. Her assailant's dagger had been used to pin a square of parchment to her flesh. As Harken knelt to examine it, he heard a pitifully weak voice ask, "Shard? Oh, Shard."

Rella was still alive, but only barely. Her breath was slow and shallow and pain was written across her features as she fought to hold onto life. Harken crouched beside her and said, "Rella, what has happened? Where are the children?"

There was a long pause as the dying woman gathered enough strength to speak. "Gone," she managed at last. "Seized."

Another pause and another breath, shallower this time. Then Rella said, "'They must live,' he told them. 'Both must live.'" Her head rolled to one side. "Why would he do this, Shard? Why?"

Before Harken could think of an answer, she died.

After a moment, her son-in-law softly removed the fatal blade and took the parchment. One corner was soaked in warm blood, but the message—written neatly in a careful hand, and not by somebody in a hurry to escape the scene of so much death—was still visible: "*We have your children. The Chill. Ebba's Day. Noon.*"

Harken crumpled the square in fury. Who would take Kerris and Bathor, and why?

If Rella was correct, the attackers did not want to kill them; they could have done that securely in the house. Every witness was dead or dying and they could have made sure of no interruptions. The same was true if the intruders had planned rape or other defilement, although Harken hated to even think of his children suffering such a fate. In the house the kidnappers had the benefit of numbers and privacy; why do it elsewhere?

No, the siblings were now hostages, and their captors wanted Harken to be in one of Peak's busiest squares two days from now. There was no time to wonder why, but he had no intention of obeying the command if there was a chance of rescuing Kerris and Bathor before then.

Returning to the dead fighter in Bathor's room, Harken checked him with expert speed. He wore the bracers of a mercenary, and old scars on his thickly-bearded face indicated that he had some experience. His flexible boots were the kind worn by those used to travelling in hills or mountains, and his belt was laden with equipment needed by somebody expecting to spend a long time outside in unforgiving territory. It was all arranged for comfort and ease of use; this was no amateur or thug. He and whoever was with him were also not robbers; nothing of value had been taken from the house.

A brisk search of the outbuildings revealed nothing, and hunting the fields and hills around the house would be time-consuming and futile. The terrain was increasingly difficult as soon as one moved away from the estate. Anybody who had kidnapped a defiant and dangerous woman and a stocky, potentially noisy boy would take the quickest route to sanctuary: the north road from Rockhall and down into the valley.

He had no idea how far ahead of him they might be, but before beginning his deadly pursuit, there was one final place that he had to visit.

"If you speak again, dear heart, I may become angry, which would be disappointing for both of us."

The kidnappers' captain spoke to Kerris in the same maddeningly friendly voice he had used since he and his men arrived. No matter what he actually said, his manner made every sentence sound like he was offering helpful advice. His cheerful-ness was driving her mad, and forcing her to wonder more and more about the man who had seized her and poor Bathor.

In the few hours since the attack, as the company and its two captives rode from a silent Rockhall and descended into the valley, the commander had exchanged few words with anybody. The route was hard and several of the horses had to be encouraged down its steeper sections.

Other than the occasional cry to a reluctant mount, the leader had instead remained intent on the road and the enormous city rising before them. His men clearly knew better than to break his silent contemplation.

Kerris and Bathor were seated on separate animals with their hands tied to the saddles, each horse being led by one of their guards on another mount.

For Kerris, the thought of her grandparents and the numerous dead servants and villagers was agonizing, and she wept copiously. But she kept her face turned from her brother's to save him any more confusion or pain.

She could only wonder at what was inside his head. Did he understand what had just happened? From his reactions, she had to guess not.

Thinking like this inspired Kerris to repeat the question she had just asked: "Why *do* you need my brother? He knows nothing and cannot tell anybody what happened. You must see that."

The rider turned. "Our work has gone well so far—although Thaddom might disagree, I suppose. I would like it to continue going well, so be so good as to stop distracting me until we are safe. It would be a pity if we had to spoil our progress by leaving Bathor for the wolves and the mercies of mighty Hex."

It was a long time before he spoke again.

By now Rockhall was far behind them and they were entering the outskirts of the Iron Forest.

As always, the sight chilled her. She assumed the riders felt likewise.

However, the commander suddenly said, "Gregor, fancy seeing you! What did you do to end your days here?"

He was directing his remarks to the corpse of a young man swinging in the quickening wind. The body had lost its eyes to the birds that infested the execution ground, but he had been handsome once. His leather armour, similar to that worn by her captors, had been slashed open across the chest, and as a sudden gust forced the body to turn, Kerris saw that the left hand was missing. The rope around the boy's neck was darkened by dried blood, and a cloud of flies buzzed around the swollen head.

"Good soldier, Gregor," the commander was saying, almost to himself. He turned to Roolmar and the men beside him. "You three, get him down and get his ashes in the ground. Whatever he did after he left us, he probably does not deserve to spend his days like this."

"But Captain," said Roolmar, "what of Harken? He might have our trail."

"He crossed the Murthady border yesterday morning, if my sources are correct. Let us allow him a few hours to report back to Uhl about his contract, and a few to ride home. He should soon be arriving to find a few corpses and no children. Gregor, if fate had not

chosen a different path for him, might have become a better soldier than you will ever be, Roolmar. We don't have time to give him the proper ceremony but he should at least be allowed to sleep in stone. So bury him, or join him." He paused for a moment's thought, then added, "But be quick about it, just in case."

His men set to work with determination and their commander passed the time by examining other bodies hanging in the Forest. His horse shied away from the most decayed.

Kerris took the opportunity to study the group who remained closely gathered around her and Bathor. To a man, they were burly and scarred, with leather that bore signs of many battles and weapons in well-used scabbards. Some eyed her curves and returned her gaze with leers. Others busied themselves exchanging poor witticisms with the trio preparing their former comrade for the Ritual of Ash. From their positions and the hands that she saw habitually returning to sword hilts, it was clear that there was no way she and Bathor could escape. Even if she could kick her horse into bolting, she could not pull her brother's with her. Determined as she was, grabbing a stray weapon would serve her little; she knew enough to perhaps injure or kill one guard, but the others would be on her immediately. Bathor would be helpless all the while.

She had ruled out any immediate escape plan by the time the three guards set light to Gregor's body.

Their leader called from deep within the Iron Forest: "Here, now!"

The men returned to their horses and Roolmar pulled Kerris' with him into the mass of gallows.

The captain was kneeling beside the body of a fat man. Other corpses lay nearby. However, all had been stripped of any valuables and none bore weapons, just empty scabbards.

"Thomar Uhl," the commander said to the arriving group. "With a few of his guards, I imagine." He rose and paced between the iron posts. An empty noose was swinging from the one nearest the bodies, and the commander watched it drift to and fro for a moment before turning to his men.

"Today Uhl was supposed to meet Harken and pay him for some business in Yell, or so my patrons told me. But I wonder if he had something else in mind. He did like to see a man swing. What else would have dragged the fat fool out here?"

He wandered around the bodies. The damage inflicted with a scorpion whip was obvious. "No sign of any treasures or weapons. Presumably thieves took whatever Harken—if this was his handiwork—left behind. They are probably around us now, hiding among the damned."

His men's eyes probed the shadows amid the posts for any sign of those who might be brave or desperate enough to dwell in the Forest. Kerris noted that the commander smiled at their discomfort.

There were uneasy glances from every soldier until they returned to the Peak Road.

Kerris ignored the bodies and gave little thought to those who preyed on the dead. Her mind was occupied with two thoughts: was it her father who killed Uhl and his men so recently, and if there had been combat, was he still in a condition to rescue her and Bathor from so many guards?

The tomb, the entrance to which was visible from Harken's bedroom window, had been painstakingly constructed within a hill topped in an ancient nightwood tree. Kidnappers keen to escape would not have taken the steep climb to the hilltop, so Harken was not surprised to see the lantern hanging intact before the strong stone door. Judging by the fresh oil in the lamp, Wish's parents had visited as usual while he had been away. He felt an awful pang of sadness at their deaths. At least their souls would sleep below, alongside their beautiful daughter.

Once the lantern was burning brightly, Harken pulled open the door. Cool air burst past his face as he stepped down into the tomb. Darkness quickly surrounded the lamp's warm glow. But there was a comfortable peace here and Wish had always loved the view from the hill.

Her ashes had been scattered into the cracks of the rocky floor in the middle of the tomb, and the open space was edged with vases of fresh flowers. Windblooms, her favourites. The pale green centres matched the eyes that had once twinkled with joy.

Harken moved to the alcove beside the entrance. Reaching inside, he pulled free the parcel wrapped in cloth that he had so carefully waterproofed.

Kneeling on the blanket Rella and her husband had placed here for comfort during their visits, he unwrapped the long bundle. Inside lay his war axe Blackheart and his dagger Red Sun. Both were too easily recognized to be used for the sort of low-profile contract he had just completed, and would have been taken by whoever he allowed to capture him. It had pained him to leave them behind.

Now his hands gripped Blackheart's hilt tenderly, fingers sliding into the accustomed grooves that had been worn deep with use. The axe was heavy but balanced in such a way that a strong man could swing it with speed.

Harken had insisted that it be cast in the darkest iron available in the north, no matter what the cost, and then edged in a thin line of hardened silver. In night combat, the type he preferred, his opponents' eyes would see only the silver as it caught any available light and sped towards their flesh.

Red Sun, in contrast, was made entirely of white steel. Its only colour came from the ruby in the pommel, just part of the payment for Harken's first contract with his own company. Despite work that had taken him to almost every kingdom and sent hundreds of men to their graves, he had managed to keep the narrow dagger intact and razor sharp and it had proved a lifesaver in many a tight corner.

He strapped Blackheart across his back while Red Sun's scabbard and belt sat diagonally across his abdomen.

He gathered a few more essential supplies that he had stored in the alcove for safekeeping, tucked a small pouch of coins under his shirt for emergencies, and then turned to the empty circle of the tomb.

In her final days, Wish had insisted that he go to no expense for her funeral arrangements, and instead use any money to care for her daughter and the child that she was determined to bear before the creeping rot claimed her life. Harken had bitten back any argument when he saw the awful fear in her eyes, and so the floral tributes were the room's only decoration.

Now he found its calm and cool atmosphere welcoming. He had spent so much of his life in wild and dangerous places that it was a sanctuary of sorts, however much he hated the reason for its existence.

He ran a gloved hand over the floor and, falling to one knee, said: "I'm afraid our children are gone, my dear. Snatched away." His voice rolled around the small stone space.

Harken was not overly religious, and only prayed with the intermittent care of a person who risked violent death. But he had a healthy respect for the twin gods and their powers. He supposed that a tomb was as good a place as any to send them a message.

His wife had been killed by a combination of disease and childbirth and was now spending eternity overlooking the family and home she had loved with all her heart. He told her: "I swear by the gods above and below that I will find our son and daughter. I swear that those who took them will pay, no matter who they are or where they run. I swear I will bring our children home."

Other than his weapons and essential supplies, Harken took little from the house. He was optimistic that in country he knew so well he could catch up with any group of riders, but time was pressing; if the clouds emptied, tracks would be washed away.

He could guess where his targets would head: Peak and its maze of crowded streets, hidden halls, and secret levels, where they would doubtless hide until their hoped-for rendezvous with him on Ebba's Day. But he had to be sure; the kidnappers might have some temporary hiding place to the south, and he could be riding for hours in the wrong direction.

His rapid progress did not go unnoticed; as he crossed the market square, he saw a ragtag crowd of villagers heading cautiously towards his house. The men and a few of the women carried staves, daggers, or other weapons, but none held them with any determination.

A fleeting thought crossed Harken's mind: *now the threat has gone, they have found their courage*. But he immediately dismissed it as unfair; whoever took his children was determined and therefore dangerous. Kerris and Bathor had not been chosen at random by a passing gang—Rockhall was such a long way from anywhere that travelling there without a profitable purpose was tiring and wasteful. While Harken knew that his daughter was beautiful, kidnappers could have easily found many such attractive women in Peak, if

that was their desire. No, a group of hard men had targeted his children to draw Harken to them in the city. No villagers would have stood in their way.

"We are sorry, Lord-General," said Morro, the blacksmith's apprentice. A bloody cloth was wrapped around his forearm. "A few of us tried to stop them, but..." He looked forlorn.

"Who were they?" asked Harken.

"There were about ten of them. Maybe more. On big horses. Halder saw them, and he must have asked what they were doing or if he could help. I heard one of them say, 'We do not need anybody, thank you,' just like that, and they cut Halder down."

"This man, the one who spoke, what did he look like?"

"Tall and thin. He had one sword on his belt and another across his back. Bracers like yours."

Harken's were of heavy leather and stretched along his forearms. From the wrist towards the elbow they were ringed in closely-arrayed lines of silver, one for each contract he had successfully completed.

The lines were difficult to install with precision and were only added by Bandekor, smith to the Iron Fist mercenary brotherhood, once the end of a contract was confirmed by the Fist's council. Anybody who managed to fraudulently add a ring of silver, or who wore another's bracers, would suffer the organization's only sentence: death.

Harken's bracers carried thirty-three lines, each hard-won and paid for in blood; rarely his.

He pointed to them. "Did anybody see how much silver the leader had on his wrists? As much as this?"

"Yes, maybe," said Morro. "Maybe a few more, maybe less."

*Damn*, thought Harken.

Assuming they were genuine—and the Fist would relentlessly pursue anybody it thought guilty of deceit—those rings indicated he was up against a skilled and experienced adversary, and outnumbered by at least ten to one.

He had certainly faced worse odds and returned intact more often than not, but this new revelation only proved that his children had been targeted by somebody with a long reach and deep pockets. No member of the Iron Fist would simply kidnap somebody in the vague hope of profiting from them. They were soldiers, not slavers. No, this was a contract taken up by a highly capable mercenary and his men, who would probably have served with him for years.

Harken had expected as much, but having his fears confirmed seemed to make the situation worse.

"They took poor Kerris and Bathor along the north road," said Morro, eager to help. "She was resisting them a bit, but I don't think her brother had any idea what was going on. Poor boy."

Harken's face was grim and his knuckles were tight on the reins. "I am sorry if I brought this down on Rockhall. I go to find my children, but I must ask one thing of you. There are

many bodies at our home, so please give them the Ritual of Ash. Leave any dead riders to feed Hex's hunger. Lay them on my fields, if you wish, and do not let them sleep in stone. They do not deserve it."

He spurred the horse into life, and was just in earshot as Morro called after him, "The leader, he was laughing a lot. He laughed and laughed and laughed..."

Peak was now a few miles away but its size, its sheer *weight*, was already a distracting presence.

All eyes were fixed on it as the mercenaries and their prisoners left the Iron Forest behind and began crossing the plains sloping gently towards the rushing waters of the Jagged and its single bridge.

The city rose far above everything around it: a mammoth block between the mountains that shielded its lower levels from the worst of the northern winds but did nothing to protect its upper storeys. Kerris had never been within the chilling walls, and she could only imagine how cold and uncomfortable it must be in the topmost floors. Surely nobody could stand to be so far from the ground?

Most of the men seemed to share her awe at the structure that grew more massive with every steady step from their horses. But their commander looked disinterested. Instead Kerris caught him watching her whenever he was not looking at the road behind them.

In the hour or so since they left the bodies of Uhl and his guards, she had grown used to the way the leader's bouts of silence could be followed by bursts of conversation. He would speak to his men quickly, issuing a flurry of instructions or comments about their surroundings, and then say nothing for long stretches when he was content to brood or simply look about.

He had been watching her for some time, smiling softly all the while, when another of those bursts began.

"My name is Kaspaar Ban Storm," he said, giving a sketch of a bow as he steered his horse nearer hers. "It seems only fair to introduce myself, given what we will be going through together. I would give my name to your brother, but I do not think he would understand."

He nodded back to Bathor, who was among the sellswords and gazing at the bridge standing proud to the south of the city. The gatehouse on the nearest bank was clear enough and the first collapsible section of the road over the river could just be seen in the fading daylight.

"I am charmed to make your acquaintance," Ban Storm added. "Despite the circumstances."

He gave her that maddening smile again. Kerris imagined smashing the neat and clean teeth she saw within.

"Once we have spent more time together, you will discover that I am actually quite charming," he said, then he lowered his voice. "My men, though, are bastards, without exception. With me, you will be safe if you behave. With them... I make no promises." He

shrugged, as if they were beyond his control. "We have been through a lot and they are not the kind to cut and run if something happens to their leader. Well, they may run in the end, but they would certainly cut you first. So do as you are told, look beautiful, and wait for all this to be over."

"All of *what*? Why do you want us?"

"We don't want you. We want your father. Unfortunately, my client's informers tell us that he is far too principled to do what she wants if she simply asks him. So we have been hired to persuade him. You and your addle-brained brother are his encouragement. I am sure that once he has done what is necessary, whether he wants to or not, then you will be able to return to whatever you call life."

He smiled once more. Kerris had never felt such hate for another person.

Then he pulled his horse away and returned to his brooding as if they had never spoken. The floodgate of conversation had shut again.

The tracks of so many horses were easy to see, even over the poor terrain of the northern road. It was clear that the raiding party might indeed consist of at least 10 men.

Harken tried to distract himself from thoughts of his children's fear by running through names of any sellswords who had completed numerous contracts.

It was certainly possible to achieve such success. As he could attest, it was merely a case of choosing the right work for the right people in the right places. He had heard of many inexperienced companies who had found them-selves badly outnumbered in battlefields not of their choosing. They had died badly, far from home and forgotten by all save their families and a few who followed their dangerous trade.

Others had been hired by treacherous principals like Thomar Uhl, the kind who considered it more financially prudent to kill his hirelings and deal with any consequences from the Iron Fist or the dead company's friends.

Harken had always done his best to ensure that his Final Company knew all it could about the work rather than set off for destinations unknown on behalf of clients uncertain. He had turned down countless lucrative deals once he had completed his research and balanced what was involved against the probability of everybody returning home alive and with coins in their purses. More often than not, his prudence had saved lives. The Final Company knew that while they might have become richer, faster, in another freelance army, the chances of them living long enough to enjoy their wealth were greatly increased by fighting alongside Shard Harken. Their commander did not sell his life cheaply, nor theirs. For that they loved him.

Harken was almost certain he would have to call on that love if he was to save his children. Whoever wanted them could afford expensive help, and once Kerris and Bathor were in Peak they could become very difficult to find. He far preferred an open battleground, no matter what the risks, to the enclosed spaces of the city. It was a place of shadowed corners and mysteries, where combat went on between floors and death could come at you from secret places.

At least in the field you could see your enemies. In Peak, you might never know who had killed you. If he was to survive long enough to find and rescue Kerris and Bathor, he would probably need reinforcements.

He was weighing his options as he arrived at the edge of the Iron Forest and saw fresh hoof prints heading in a loose circle beside the road. Their route indicated that some of the riders had seen Uhl's body.

No matter; Kerris had no illusions about her father's trade, and he had tried to pass on his knowledge to her between contracts. Life could be dangerous whether you were a man or a woman, and there was no way Bathor could defend anybody or be the man of the house if his aging grandfather was not present. Harken could only hope that his daughter had learnt enough to bide her time and wait for the right opportunity, if one arose, before escaping.

The tracks continued north and confirmed that the kidnappers were taking his children to Peak.

With a plan taking shape in his quickening mind, Harken turned his horse towards the black city.

## CHAPTER 3

### THE FAREWELL BRIDGE

The sun was setting by the time Ban Storm, his men, and their increasingly tense captives reached the shanty town bordering the southern edge of the Farewell Bridge.

The road twisted through tents and huts housing bedraggled travellers and others who lacked the toll to cross the Jagged, and more permanent residents. The kidnappers readied their weapons as they began the slow descent towards the bridge, the rapidly-running water, and the giant walls ahead.

Kerris could not help but stare at Peak, which soared higher than she could see and now blocked any view of the mountains further north.

Stretching from west to east for the entire length of the plateau on the other side of the river, it seemed to absorb any remnants of the light and cast a thousand shadows across the banks and over the bridge. From this distance, she could make out a myriad of windows dotted throughout all but the lowest levels, and she soon lost count of the number of lanterns she could see being lit behind the tiny openings.

To her left, at the city's base where the wall melded imperceptibly with the stone beneath, were Peak's docks. The wharf was just visible in the failing light. There were no boats, but she spotted a gang of men securing a heap of barrels with heavy ropes. Once their work was completed, they receded away from the water and far back into the darkness under the overhanging city.

Beside them were a string of mammoth water wheels, bucket after bucket being filled endlessly by the Jagged and then sent into sluices inside the walls.

The quiet of the distant docks contrasted with the increasing noise all around her. The kidnappers' arrival had prompted a bold assortment of people to surround the riders. They put hands out in supplication and pleaded for aid.

"A splinter of silver for the bridge, sir? Just a splinter?"

"Can't you help me over to Peak? My mother, she's sick—"

"I was robbed and they left me with nothing. But I have to reach the city before nightfall—"

Somebody grabbed her arm.

Ban Storm had ridden up beside her, casually knocking the nearest people aside, and his fingers tightened around her elbow. "You probably thought you might cry for help," he said, and Kerris knew her face revealed the accuracy of his suspicions. "Take care: nobody here will rescue you."

He kicked out at a pair of hands reaching for the pack behind his saddle. "A few are stranded here because they do not have the money to cross the bridge. All they want to do is get into Peak and make their fortunes. Beggars are always irritating, don't you find? The rest are here only to prey on anybody who passes through. They may rob you, and almost certainly rape you, but they won't save you from us."

He shouted an order, and his men followed as he led the horses of Kerris and her brother off the road and into a small patch of open ground. It had been trodden heavily and the animals had to work hard to press forward. It was enough of a swamp to deter anybody on foot, and the group basked in the sudden feeling of freedom away from the crowds. Their departure from the road was watched by a few hopeful souls but most returned their gaze towards the bridge. The search went on for new arrivals hoping to enter Peak before nightfall.

Ban Storm faced Kerris once more. "Despite what I said, I cannot take the chance of somebody intervening on your behalf and causing us to wait while we kill them.

"So, my dear, we will have to gag you before we cross the bridge. Your brother, too, of course; who knows what mad scheme might fly into that head of his, hmm?"

He nodded to Roolmar, who forced a cloth around Kerris' mouth and tied it tightly, then placed a riding cloak on her shoulders. It was fitted with a hood, which he pulled up to hide her face. The movements gave him an opportunity to brush against her breasts, and he did so, slowly. Before moving to her brother, he stared at her and licked his lips with his fat tongue then let his eyes roam up and down her body. However, he was careful to ensure that Ban Storm could not see.

Once both gags and hoods were in place, the group returned to the road and began pushing their way through a fresh crowd of beggars, cursing and threatening as they went.

Soon they reached the gatehouse and the line of guards that prevented the penniless from crossing in the last few minutes of dusk.

A bored sergeant stepped forward and recited a speech he had clearly given countless times: "Daylight: the bridge costs a splinter. Darkness: the bridge costs nothing, or everything."

At Ban Storm's signal, Roolmar pressed a fistful of coins into the man's hand, and the iron gates were opened. Giving the shanty town and its occupants another glance, Kerris feared she and Bathor were being led ever further from any possibility of rescue.

Pushing his mount hard, Harken made rapid progress towards the Farewell Bridge, but night had descended before he reached the riverbank and its thronged residents.

In darkness the shanty was quieter but more dangerous. Fewer people were willing to leave their shelters to beg, but those that were would be the especially desperate ones, frantic to cross for whatever reason. He ensured Red Sun was loose in its sheath, and he turned to and fro to look for anybody hoping to pull him from his horse.

While the bridge was best crossed on foot, it was not unknown for some, in an emergency, to attempt it on horseback. All had failed, and all had died, but still some would try.

Not tonight. Apart from a few faces watching him from their shelters, he saw nobody until he drew closer to the gatehouse. The gates stopping him from progressing onto the first section were a solid wall, and the guards' lanterns did little to lighten the path.

Harken was dismounting as the night's watch approached. "If you're looking for a bed, you've come too far," said one guard, running a hand admiringly over the horse's flank. "Y'want to turn back, get to the Bank Inn, east of the shanty. If that's full, go to Hollfast. Could be a farmer there will put you up."

"I do not need a bed," said Harken. "I need to cross."

"Now? At night?" The guard and his fellows laughed. "You must be cracked. Nobody's crossed in the dark since..." He trailed off, trying to remember.

"I will cross. Tonight. Now." Harken let his hands drop. The men's lanterns caught the flashes of silver along his bracers. Their laughter stopped.

The leader withdrew from touching Harken's horse. "Sorry. No offence meant. But you do know about the bridge? The ghosts?"

"Yes, and I am not afraid. They will not stop me."

Harken pulled his horse on and the men wound open the gates.

When the way was clear, their leader said, "May Hex, god of the winds, pass over you tonight. But trust me, he won't."

Harken ignored him and made encouraging noises to his horse. She was reluctant and he had to pull hard at the reins to keep her moving.

The gates closed behind him and then the only sound was the river racing beneath his feet and pounding into the bridge's foundations. As his mount trod slowly forward, Harken examined the bridge, looking for any changes since the last time he had crossed. It was wide enough for a wagon or cart, with thin walls as high as a man's stomach.

Wheel tracks had been worn into it over centuries of use, and dung from countless animals being taken on a final journey into Peak had stained the stonework.

Once he passed through the central gatehouse, he would be on the second and much longer span, which would take him over the Isle of Ghosts—and *whatever fate will bring*, he thought.

If his enemies wanted to delay him, they might arrange for the second span to collapse before he stepped upon it. Usually it would only be lowered into the Jagged during times of war, to prevent invading infantry from crossing and to prohibit larger enemy ships from navigating the one safe channel through the rapids. It would be an effective barrier if whoever had taken Kerris and Bathor wanted to ensure they had time to reach a secure location.

He was reaching the bridge's highest point, right over its main archway.

Ahead was the gatehouse, then the Jagged's bank, the plateau, and Peak. Once he was on the second span, he would be able to see the Isle stretching either side of the bridge's foundations. The soil sat on rocks that had claimed so many vessels attempting the channel under the bridge. Harken was unsure whether the Jagged was named for its overall twisting shape or for the pitiless granite spikes that had given the Isle of Ghosts its occupants. Either way, it was a suitable title.

There were no more guards; none would stay out here on the Farewell at night and if he showed any sign of being a danger, the Stone Brotherhood could easily rain fire on him from Peak. Once he left the gatehouse, he would be in the realm of the forsaken ones.

Standing between the winch mechanisms that filled either side of the last shelter this side of the city, he pulled Blackheart from his back. Its weight felt good in his hands.

The gatehouse and its winches were little used, given how few dared to even think of attacking Peak, and they were riddled with a smell of damp and dereliction that Harken did not like. His horse whinnied in discomfort and he had to hold tight with his free hand to keep her moving. Footsteps and hoof beats echoed dully, their noise disguised by the rushing water below. Then man and animal stood on the northern span.

This half of the bridge was older than the other, which had had to be repaired several times as one army or another had come to grief at the brunt of Peak's long-range war machines. There was no other crossing for many miles in either direction, so any attacker had to brave the bridge. If for some reason the Farewell remained up, the enemy's vanguard would inevitably be wiped out in a storm of stones, or burning pitch, or simple arrows. Only a few of the hardest had managed to reach the northern span, and it had suffered little damage from war. However, this part of the Farewell had been worse affected by the winds that followed the Jagged's path past the mountains. Here and there the stonework looked close to collapse, and Harken even noticed a few small holes in the floor that nobody had been willing or able to repair. Anyone crossing would have to take care, but upon reaching the opposite bank they would find themselves only a brisk walk away from the world's greatest city.

For so many, the journey was well worth the risk.

*I am one of them*, thought Harken. Clicking his teeth at the horse, he encouraged it to follow beside him.

Peak's seemingly endless walls soared above him, shielding him from much of the moonlight.

By daylight, it was a monument to man's ability to create order and structure in forbidding places. At night, it was only blackness pierced by lanterns, and its sheer overwhelming size made it difficult to guess how much further he had to go before he reached the riverbank.

Here, the noise of the water smashing into the shallows drowned out the noise of man and beast, but Harken knew that would be no protection.

A form seemingly made of nothing but smoke rose before him.

The horse whinnied, and only Harken's strength prevented it from bolting.

As he watched, the mists grew thicker until the outline of a head appeared. It was an approximation of a man with unblinking eyes and a thin mouth. Its body swirled and span, shifting with every gust of wind, but the face remained fixed upon him.

"Back, dead soul," called Harken. He heard fear in his voice. It was an unusual sensation.

The ghost remained hovering but its body was becoming more human and substantial. Lines of smoke turned into a translucent shirt, while legs and feet gradually grew from the

swirling cloud. The vestige of hair fanned around the shape of the face. Harken was soon staring at the recreation of a sailor floating above the tumult where he had drowned a nameless time ago.

Then it spoke. The words sounded in Harken's head even though the man of smoke no longer had a voice. *"You. Must. Die."*

"No," Harken said. "The forsaken of the Farewell Bridge owe me a debt. Settle it."

The smoke did not move, but Harken was uncomfortably aware that more mist was rising from the shadows below. It was divided momentarily by the wind, but then began forming the shapes of three more dead men.

*"Debt,"* the first sailor said. *"Speak."*

Harken lowered Blackheart and leant upon its hilt.

His other arm was aching from holding onto the reins, but he hated the idea of releasing the horse. A charge might be his only means of escape, if he could reach the saddle before he was overcome.

He said, "The leaders of the Kovar were hanged here after their last attack failed. When the stink of their rotten flesh grew too strong, they were dropped into your waters. Their souls were a gift to you."

The ghosts rose and fell on the breeze, losing and then regaining their forms.

Staring at what would have been the first sailor's eyes, Harken said, "I was the one that hanged them."

The smoke floated closer. Harken instantly raised Blackheart high before him and turned it so the silver on its edges and across his bracers caught what little light struck the bridge.

He called out with all his determination, "By the gods and the silver I bear, if you strike me I will harm you and the pain will last forever. Let me pass and you owe me no more."

The sailor shape paused. For a moment Harken believed that the campfire tales were true—the only defence against the ghosts of the Farewell Bridge was silver. It was lust for the metal, which could be found only beneath Peak, that had brought crews to sail along the Jagged and die on the rocks or soldiers to fall under fire from the city walls. Silver reminded their spirits of their frailty, the stories said.

Then the ghost attacked, and Harken knew the tales were nothing but lies.

He could hold the reins no longer, and his horse bolted.

He swung Blackheart futilely as the smoke flew towards him, its fragile edges distorted and vague.

It entered his body. For a moment there was a sickening feeling of fullness, and a terrible rush of thoughts through his head—*drowningtherapidsIamintherapids*—and then it was gone.

He staggered, weak and defenceless. Every piece of silver he wore was glowing vividly.

When he regained his senses, the spirits had disappeared.

He rose on legs that felt as if they were full of water. His hands were shaking, and a few minutes had to pass before they were still.

Looking towards the sky and then the river, he said: "Whoever watches over my fate, listen well: I am entering Peak, and if you keep me alive many souls may come your way before I leave."

His panicked horse had come to rest, sweating hard, on the plateau halfway between the Farewell and the Ramp. As Harken calmed it, he looked back at the northern span. He knew he was lucky that only a handful of ghosts had risen; Gorlav, a sergeant who had fallen beside him on the Sorrowful Steps, had once told him of a whole company that had been seized while crossing the Jagged. Returning from patrol, they received orders to leave their night camp at the riverbank and rush to Peak to quell a riot. Their captain was not from the right family so could not question the command. They had marched to their doom, an army of dead mariners forcing them over the sides of the bridge and onto the ever-thirsty rocks below.

*So, luck is with me so far, Harken thought. Let it stay with me, and let my children's kidnappers pray they had my fortune.*

He kicked the horse into life and steered for the Ramp and the city of legends that lay at its end.

## CHAPTER 4

### PRIME

Entering Peak during the day involved forcing a path through the crowds that constantly filled the Ramp to buy and sell without paying the traders' tax. Thieves and cheats could also be a problem for the unwary.

Entering at night, once all the merchants and customers had departed, only involved convincing the Stone Brotherhood to open the gate.

Harken was unsure which was worse.

The winding tunnel at the end of the Ramp, which was forcibly kept clear of hindrances in order to give the defenders hidden behind its walls a clear line of fire, was a brief respite from the chaos of the bridge and what might befall him in the city. He made steady progress along the narrow passage, ever mindful of the crossbows that had to be pointing at him from a hundred unseen holes. Murmuring comforting words at his horse, which was unnerved by the ever-narrowing walls, he came to the gates that soared three storeys high at the tunnel mouth. Strings of lanterns illuminated the space before the entrance, but their light was deliberately directed into visitors' eyes, to blind them and thereby ruin their aim should they attempt to fire back at any guards. The stink of animals was strong in this confined space.

Before he could demand entrance, a spyhole opened in the woodwork and a Stone Brother's face appeared.

"Yes, sellsword?" the fellow demanded, one eye on the silver of the bracers that were all too visible in the yellow light. "Who hopes to enter Peak at night? Who braved the Farewell?"

"Shard Harken. Lord-General Shard Harken."

There was a pause, during which he could hear a murmur of conversation between the Brother and his unseen comrades. Eventually, a new face appeared in the spyhole. It was younger than the first but when its owner spoke it was with the voice of authority. "What is your business here, Lord-General? You do have a certain reputation, after all, and questions might be asked if I was to allow you entrance to launch your typical kind of, um, *mayhem*."

The hole in the door was wide enough for Harken to notice the silver buttons that ran in a line atop the speaker's mottled grey jerkin. He studied the man's features hard before replying.

"My business is my own, Captain... Kirkeman, isn't it? Who fought alongside my Final Company at the Vull? Took the Murthady banner?"

The captain could not hide his pride at the recognition. "Aye, Lord-General. I did. You have a keen eye. That was too many years ago."

"Brave warriors should be remembered for all time, should they not? I expect there are a few more veterans of the Vull there with you. A bad day in the mud, lads, was it not?"

He heard a few muttered comments and bitter jokes about a battle that had seen his company victorious with only a handful of casualties, even as Peak's forces fell beside them like bushels before the scythe.

He could recall campaigns and those who fought them in almost perfect detail, and paying a compliment to a survivor that he had half-seen among the blood-soaked lines had paid dividends many times.

This night was no exception. Kirkeman shouted, "Open the gates, you dogs!"

Enormous chains rattled up and down, starting a mechanical clattering and banging high over his head. The entrance to Peak opened before him.

As Harken led his horse inside, Captain Kirkeman saluted sharply, followed by his squad of four guards. The uniforms that gave them their names and supposedly camouflaged them amid the streaked colours of the city's granite were sharp and spotless. Harken acknowledged them in the expected fashion by slamming his right arm across his chest, and said: "Good group you have here, Kirkeman."

"Thank you, Lord-General. The Stone Brotherhood stands strong as always."

Harken took a brief look around the First Square, the open space that greeted all visitors. He imagined that the city's long-dead architects had intended that the roof three storeys above him and the vents to the tunnel behind him should create an impression of freshness and room to breathe. However, subsequent generations had done all they could to dirty that air and fill that space.

Opposite him were the two main routes leading further into Peak, which were almost jammed with a tide of beggars and merchants seeking coin from travellers, legally or not. To the right was the long, dark, stained path left by beasts going for slaughter.

Peak's appetite was insatiable, and its underground slaughter-houses were sited close to the main gate in order to minimize the time taken in turning herd after herd of Stonereik's animals into meat, bones, leather, and other by-products. Thanks to its monopoly over the supply of food and water, the Provenders' guild was essential to Peak's survival. If it was not, the stench of its halls alone would have been enough for it to be forced outside the gate and far away from this floor, which was known as Prime.

The worst kind of inns filled the square's remaining walls, and Harken saw aged and filth-stained bawds leering from upper windows at him and the guards. Directly over his head, ninety-nine more levels of the city soared into the sky, but down here he felt only an oppressive claustrophobia.

Kirkeman followed the direction of the Lord-General's gaze. He spat into the dust. "We do our best to keep the place clear, you know, but still they infest these streets — *these streets*, your welcome to Peak. They're like vermin, always underfoot and in the way. Maybe one day they will be exterminated."

Harken was studying the inns, having noticed one girl in particular. She was on the second floor of a hovel called the Broken Barrel, and unlike the other prostitutes she did not expose her breasts, catcall, or blow a half-hearted kiss in an attempt to drag a few last coins

from any man passing by at this late hour. Instead she simply watched the square from her small window.

Distracted, Harken said: "What's that, Captain?"

"I was saying, sir, I'm sorry you should have to see such people. You being the saviour of Peak and all. You should be carried shoulder high, not faced with dregs like these."

Harken brushed off the compliment. "I am trying to catch up with some friends of mine. They were headed for Peak tonight, and you may have seen them. A band of sellswords? Perhaps with a girl and boy?"

"Aye, they passed through an hour or two ago. Ten or so, maybe, but most were hooded. There might have been a girl among them. I couldn't say. We were very busy."

It would have to do.

Undoubtedly the kidnappers would have hidden Kerris, if not her brother. A boy among a group of men was just another face, but a beautiful girl, frightened and panicked? She would have been remembered, and questions asked.

Harken made a show of pulling his cloak around himself in an effort to hide his bracers. As he did so, he said: "One veteran to another, I would prefer if my arrival were kept a secret. I have more than a few enemies on one floor or another. They could make life difficult."

"Oh, I will say nothing, Lord-General."

"And your men?"

"They know what's good for them. You have more than earned the right to go where you will. And to do what you want." The captain nodded significantly at Harken's assorted weapons.

"Good man. Let your squad have a drink on me." He pressed a coin into the Brother's hand and headed across the square. The guards would undoubtedly be spreading word of his arrival around the Narrows within an hour, he knew, but at least they would be telling everybody how well armed he was. And how determined he was to find a certain company of sellswords.

The Broken Barrel Inn lived up to its name. Harken managed to rouse a half-asleep stablehand to take care of his horse, but one glance at the rotting stall and mouldy hay told him that his stay could not be long. The main room was no better: a handful of tables were scattered across a floor that rose and fell on warped timbers, and a bedraggled group of drinkers turned to examine the new man among them. One glance at his axe and the steady gaze that returned their stares were enough to keep them pinned to their chairs.

Having placed a splinter of silver on a bar stained with an unknown mixture of liquids, Harken quickly found himself on the inn's second floor.

What he hoped was the correct door opened at his first knock. He was greeted by the girl he had seen staring from her window.

"It's a bit late," she said, struggling to smile. She was probably only a few years older than his daughter, but life had already treated her harshly. Several scars gave her face a hard and haunted look. She wore a corset and skirt that hung poorly over a malnourished

body, and as she raised a hand to brush back her lank blonde hair he noticed that two of her fingers were missing.

"I will make it worth your while," he said, pulling assorted coins from his purse. "I am safe, and want only to talk."

Her expression was unmistakeable: *I've heard that before*. Her eyes dropped to the money and she backed away to allow him inside her meagre room.

Harken strode to the window, which as he expected had a perfect view of the giant gates. The Stone Brothers were refilling the oil of their lamps, and the entrance dropped into partial darkness.

*Sloppy, Captain Kirkeman*, thought Harken, who would have insisted that the oil change be carried out in phases so that the gates were always illuminated. The extra shadows would last only a few minutes but the kidnappers' leader might have timed his arrival for such a moment to hide the composition of his company. Once the horses were away from the gates, the guards would have been distracted by the next arrivals rushing to enter before nightfall. But the kidnappers' journey across the square *might* have been observed by somebody—

The girl brushed up behind him. She had loosened the corset so that her breasts were more visible.

Harken felt only pity, not lust. "I meant what I said," he told her softly, waving to the room's only chair. "Perhaps we might talk awhile."

She accepted defeat and sat, folding her too-thin arms. "What's your name, brave soldier? I'm Elm."

Her voice was gentle, but she tried to affect the accent of the Narrows in an effort to sound less vulnerable.

Harken placed the coins on her dirty bed and sat on its edge. It creaked loudly under his weight and he paused to remove the heaviest of his weapons. Elm watched as he placed Blackheart on the table. She was trembling—perhaps from fear, or from remembered pain.

"You have nothing to worry about, Elm," he said, smiling. "I need your help, and I will pay you well for it."

"Oh?" She lowered her arms a fraction.

"You are not like the others here, showing off your charms. You just watch the gates."

"I am waiting for my lover to return."

She said it simply, but Harken heard her underlying desperation. "Illrek, the silver merchant. He left a year ago now, but he promised he would return for me once he had made his fortune."

Harken nodded in sympathy while racking his brain for any recollection of the name. Silver merchants from Peak were too numerous to count, and his last string of contracts had taken him far from sources of gossip about the city.

Elm ran her maimed hand over the assorted coins. "He hasn't sent word, but I know he loves me, so I watch the gates as often as I can. He will be back for me, if the gods will it, and he will take me south."

Harken knew the likelihood of a wealthy trader taking a badly-used First Square whore to wife, and changed the subject. "You see everybody who enters?"

"Most of them. I cannot work as much as the other girls. I..." She glanced momentarily towards her groin. Harken hated to think of what injury she might have sustained.

"Did you see a company of men that entered tonight? Sellswords like me?" He stretched out his arms so she could see his bracers clearly. "It is vital that I learn all I can about them. Especially their leader."

Elm thought for a moment. Across the square, the gates opened for a patrol and a flicker of breeze from the tunnel made her hair dance. *She was beautiful once*, thought Harken. Now she spent her days pining for somebody she would never see again and being abused by men looking for cheap women far from the pleasure halls and the well-protected bawds who worked within them.

She looked hopeful. "I saw a lot of riders, all with swords. They had a girl and boy with them. They came through the gates, and they met up with a lot more who had been waiting for them. Another ten, maybe."

"A girl and boy? You are sure? How could you tell?"

"They were crossing the square as the lamps went out, but I saw them before they went into the Narrows." She nodded in the direction of the entrance to the lower city's worst neighbourhood. Only large groups or the most dangerous individuals would brave the streets and alleys that were sometimes barely wide enough for a child to walk down. "There was some kind of problem with one of them, trying to kick out or something. Then the hood fell back and I saw it was a girl. Pretty, she was, and I don't reckon she wanted to go into the Narrows. Can't blame her."

"Where was the boy? Was he hurt? Did he speak?"

"The girl was pulling at the horse next to her, maybe trying to get it to bolt. Anyway, the rider at the front came charging back and grabbed the horse's rider. Put a sword to their neck, he did, and made sure the girl could see what he was doing. It was a boy, clear as day. Looked right scared. The leader laughed, shouted a bit, and then off they went. Most interesting thing I've seen in days."

So Kerris was still feisty and capable of resisting, thought Harken. But the news of the company's increased size was troubling. "Do you remember anything about the other riders? I know something about the laughing man and his group, but what of the ones who were waiting for them?"

Elm wandered to the window, perhaps to resume her wait for her lost lover. There was silence for a while. Harken was about to prompt her when she said quietly: "They had a sign on their armour. I saw it just before they went into the shadows. It was a circle. A ring."

Harken struggled to bite back a flurry of soldier's curses. *The Silver Ring!* What would Peak's most powerful and dangerous guild want with his children? Or, more realistically, with him?

"I reckon you've had enough for your money," Elm ventured, "if you're sure you don't want me." She gave a weak smile. "I can see old Wem is getting his fish stand ready for the day down there, so that means it's about three bells. I usually sleep now so I'm ready for when the gates open up for the day."

That would be in just three hours. Harken felt a fresh pang of sympathy.

He rose and considered his options. Entering the Narrows in the early hours to search for twenty or more well-armed men, at least half of whom belonged to the Silver Ring and could therefore count on many friends, was suicidal. The kidnappers wanted to meet him for some purpose, but on their terms at a place of their choosing. Assuming they had seized his children to persuade him to complete a contract—would-be clients had threatened Iron Fist members with worse—they would be unlikely to kill him if he managed to find his foes in the confusion of lanes and slums. But they might hurt Kerris or Bathor, and he knew better than most people just how many ways it was possible to inflict injuries that would not quite lead to death.

He trusted his skills enough to know he was capable of rescuing his children despite the odds, but he would almost certainly die in the attempt and thereby leave his loved ones to an uncertain fate.

*No, he thought. The leader is not a careless man. He has no reason to hurt them, so they will be safe for a while. I will learn what I can before we meet. Then I shall turn the tables and bring down a fury the likes of which they cannot imagine.*

He turned to Elm, who was readying her bed. "Perhaps I could ask you for one more favour."

Kerris opened her eyes slowly. Careful to keep her movement to a minimum, she looked around at the room in which she, Bathor, and their captors appeared to be spending the night.

It was long and narrow, with a vaulted ceiling from which hung lanterns that swung in the constant draft. From her position lying on the floor, it was difficult to see too far, but she guessed that this was once a storeroom for an inn or maybe a brewery. The spicy tang of eastern ale—the kind her grandfather liked, or *had* liked, she thought sadly—lingered on the air and discarded barrels were strewn along one wall. The rest of the space was now occupied by perhaps two dozen guards, most of who seemed to be sleeping deeply.

Kerris lay in a pool of shadow cast by the vault that blocked some of the nearest lantern's light. Further dark circles lay almost in a straight line between her and the single door through which the party had entered some unknown time ago.

Reaching the door would mean passing four sleeping soldiers, but if she was quiet, and kept to the darkness...

Kerris dismissed the treacherous thought. *What about Bathor?*

Her brother lay far away at the other end of the room. As Kerris had feared, he had moaned and panicked as soon as he entered the storehouse's chill and its clinging darkness. Her captors' response was swift: "Make the dolt happy," Ban Storm had commanded, "or

we'll have Stone Brothers on us too fast for even me to deal with. I have travelled too far for too many questions tonight."

So Bathor was placed beneath the brightest lantern and surrounded by the bodies of enough men that he no longer felt the cold. He lay still and silent, and—Kerris hoped—with some measure of peace.

Her limbs were tired and her body cried out for nourishment, but she managed to rise to a crouching position without raising any alarm. The snoring and other sounds around her did not change.

Now she was more awake and with every sense alert, she could hear a quiet conversation from Bathor's end of the room. Ban Storm was talking to another man, the sergeant who she had gathered was the leader of the Silver Ring's party of guards. He and his men had been obedient enough, but she had sensed a tension between the sellswords and those who wore the guild livery.

"—why we wait here," the sergeant was saying. "We have safe houses in the Narrows. Private places."

"All of which Harken would find, given enough time." Ban Storm spoke with easy confidence. "He has enough friends and enough willpower that he could tear all your haunts apart. But here, a forgotten cellar beneath a ruined tavern? No, we are safe for a while."

"You think too much of him," the sergeant said, rising to stretch his legs. "My men—"

"Will be nothing but offal if they do not take care. Harken has fought more battles in more wars than you or I could count. He has started many and finished others. He has waded through seas of bodies, yet he survives almost unscathed." Ban Storm was still seated, but Kerris could feel his dominance over the big man standing beside him. "Why else would my employers want him? They have a mission that only he can complete, whether he wishes to or not."

"I still think—"

"That is your mistake, Sergeant. Do not *think*. Just *obey*, and keep me and my men safe while we wait. I want Harken in the right place at the right time, obedient and willing to listen to reason. So let him tire trying to find us, and we will have the upper hand. I fear we shall need it. Veil and her lackey the Reiklord have eyes and ears throughout these levels. I would prefer they did not learn of our business thanks to some unnecessary and public swordplay."

Kerris had heard enough. She had no idea of the time, but imagined that the new day could not be far off. Soon the entire party would be awake and her slim hope of escape would be snatched away.

The sergeant was now pacing close to Bathor while stretching with an audible crack of bones. Ban Storm was rummaging for something inside his pack, and neither was looking in her direction. Every other man appeared to be fast asleep.

Her thoughts were jumbled, but two arose again and again: *I cannot save Bathor now. I could get help.*

With a final look at her brother's gentle face, she began crawling towards the door. Hot tears ran down her cheeks. *I'm sorry, my love, but I will be back with aid.*

She made deliberately slow progress, mindful of the presence of the two sleepless commanders. However, Ban Storm must have been so confident that he had posted no guards, and she moved steadily past the four still forms closest to the door.

It was barred—*no key, thank the gods above and below!* She would have to trust that she could lift the wood quietly and that the hinges would not give a tell-tale creak.

Out of nowhere she was kicked in the side. Pain erupted across her stomach and she rolled back in agony.

A brutal voice said, "Where are you going, my pretty one?"

Then a man was on top of her, pushing her legs apart even as she began to struggle violently. A strong hand seized her head and pounded it into the floor. The pain was excruciating. Her eyes saw only blinding white.

Laughing, her attacker rucked up her skirt and her groin was exposed. Dazed, she could do little to resist. Her arms flailed uselessly as one of the brute's hands roamed across her bosom.

"Let's see what you got, girl," he said, ripping open her bodice.

His weight suddenly shifted from her. He cried in confusion, and Kerris opened her eyes to see Ban Storm pulling him upright and throwing him against the wall. The thug was hefty and towered over the younger man, but Ban Storm seemed possessed by a terrible, boundless fury that gave him the power to pin his opponent to the stonework. Behind him the Silver Ring and mercenary company rose to their feet in confusion. Many hands were near weapons but none moved, such was the determination written across Ban Storm's face.

"*What did I say?*" he shouted at the brute, who struggled in vain against the iron-strong arm across his gullet. "*She is not to be harmed. Not struck. Not defiled. Not even bruised.*"

He looked down at Kerris. Even in her shock she was somehow pleased to notice that his gaze went to her face and not to her bare bosom or between her legs.

"Go and repair yourself, girl," he said, nodding behind her and apparently oblivious to the man going unconscious at the relentless pressure of his arm. "That corner away from the door is dark enough to suit. By the way, I am pleased you seized the opportunity I gave you to try to escape. A test of your will, I am afraid, that tells me just how carefully you should be watched. Do not think I will be so lenient again. Another such attempt will be the last for you and your brother."

Then he nodded more insistently and she rushed into the shadows, clutching her clothing around her cooling skin.

As she stopped where the men could not see her, she felt something soft beneath her foot.

She knelt quickly and reached down. It was a broad leaf, poking up between the flagstones. She ran a finger around the edge and counted four sharp points: *nightspoor!* The plant, which thrived in damp and dark places where the sun never reached, was an effective remedy for stomach ailments, if used correctly. She had seen her grandfather give it to

the herd when they had drunk from soiled streams. *If taken in excess...* Kerris ripped off the leaf and tucked it into her belt pouch.

"As for you," Ban Storm said to the big man, "you will have to serve as a demonstration."

There was a heavy thud. Kerris' attacker stumbled to the floor, clutching at his throat.

Ban Storm pulled a dagger and tossed it easily between his hands as he stood over the winded guard.

"I am Kaspaar Ban Storm," he said, focusing on the man before him but speaking loud enough for all to hear. "My family was one of the ten dynasties who founded this city. The title *Ban* was added to our name generations ago—I don't expect you to know, fool that you are, but I was told it meant 'honoured ones' in the old tongue. The Storms have served this city for hundreds of years, and I serve it still."

There was a long silence, and the injured man tried to rise. As he did so, Ban Storm said, "You, on the other hand, are naught but a thug. A bravo. A *nothing*. Somebody so stupid that they do not appreciate that Shard Harken, one of the most dangerous men ever to have entered this city, is already bound to be furious that his children have been snatched. *Furious*. Can you imagine how impossible it would be to control him if he discovered his beloved daughter had been ruined by the likes of a guard named... What is your name?"

The guard struggled to answer but before his ill-treated throat could form a word, Ban Storm said: "No, wait. Nobody cares about your name."

He sliced the man's neck from ear to ear. A fan of blood gushed forth and was pooling in the stones even before the heavy body fell atop them.

From her corner, Kerris cried out in shock. The Silver Ring men grabbed at their weapons but their commander raised a warning hand as Ban Storm's company put hands on their own hilts.

"No!" the sergeant cried. "We have an agreement, and he is right. I do not know what is intended for the lord-general, but his children will not be harmed. If anybody else touches either of them, I will open his veins myself."

Ban Storm nodded at his men, who kept their weapons sheathed. He said, "Now, let us all remember—I am Kaspaar Ban Storm, and all I ask for is a little respect."

Carefully avoiding the thickening blood as he stepped over the guard's body, he held out a hand towards Kerris and smiled.

"That is not too much to ask, is it?"

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