

# Empire

*Book one of the Bantara Chronicles*

*by Calvin Jones*

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[publishing@cjwriting.com](mailto:publishing@cjwriting.com)

*First published in 2014 by*

**CJ Writing, The Mall School, Connonagh, Leap, Co. Cork, Ireland**

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

*For Ava, Nia and Lana... thanks for your patience!*

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## 1. Partners

Amber shifted uncomfortably.

She crouched on the high bluff looking down at the town below. It was difficult to see through the flurry of snowflakes whipped up by the bitter late-autumn wind. Night was approaching, and she could only just make out individual buildings in the fading light. As she looked lights began to flicker in some of the windows.

Watching from her vantage point, ignoring the cold, she tried to judge whether or not the town would be safe for her. It was unlikely her pursuers would have followed her this high into the mountains. She'd been careful to cover her tracks and they would be expecting her to stick to the dense forest of The Fringe that skirted the foothills.

From up here the town appeared little more than an assortment of crude stone dwellings arranged haphazardly around a large central building, probably an inn of some kind. She could vaguely make out the shuffling shapes of people moving to and from the larger building. It had to be an inn.

Amber stood and turned towards her horse. It waited patiently in the lee of a nearby boulder, seemingly indifferent to the weather. The driving wind whipped the snow around her with renewed fury and she pulled her heavy travel cloak tight. She was cold, tired and hungry: conditions that wouldn't be remedied by another night outdoors. What she needed was a warm fire, some hot food, and a dry, comfortable bed for the night. Her decision made Amber climbed wearily into the saddle and turned her horse onto the steep mountain path that led towards the town.

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Ryan de Brun glanced around the common room of the Pass Inn.

He saw nothing of note: just the usual assortment of patrons talking, drinking, gambling and generally passing the time. The merchant caravans that flooded through the mountain town of Highpass all summer had gradually slowed to a trickle, and finally fizzled out altogether over the last few weeks as winter closed in. Now it was just die-hard locals in the common room.

The main door opened and a black-cloaked figure entered, wind blowing the swirling snow behind them. Ryan looked up from his tankard of beer, his eyes following the newcomer as she walked towards the bar at the centre of the room. She caught the innkeeper's attention. Ryan was too far away to make out more than the occasional word of the ensuing conversation.

In common with similar hostelries everywhere, as soon as the stranger walked through the door all activity in the common room ceased. Seeing the woman talking to the innkeeper, most people seemed conclude it was business as usual, and returned to whatever had held their attention before the interruption.

Ryan kept watching. Something about the way this woman carried herself intrigued him. He couldn't see her face... the cowl of her heavy robe still covered her head, but there was something about her, an intensity and purpose, that piqued his curiosity.

He'd been in Highpass for what seemed an eternity. As far as everyone in town was concerned he was a mercenary: a sword for hire escorting trading caravans across the mountain passes. That was his cover; his real job was freelance espionage: selling information for personal profit. He had what he needed now, and would be heading south to spend the winter in the more hospitable lowlands. He was looking forward to a bit of comfort and civilisation after the rough-and-ready charms of the mountain border town.

The woman was ending her conversation with the innkeeper. She pulled a leather pouch from her belt, and Ryan caught the glint as coin changed hands.

Gold! Nobody paid with gold at a third-rate inn in a mountain border town. He scanned the room. Had anyone else noticed the exchange? Most of the other patrons were oblivious, caught up in their drinking and gaming, but on the far side of the bar a man Ryan recognised looked on with more than a healthy curiosity.

The woman turned away from the bar, pulling back the deep cowl of her travel cloak as she walked over to an empty table near the fire. She wore her long, flame-red hair tied back away from her face. Her angular features were striking, but something about them was different: the ridge of her slender nose, the set of her eyes, her elongated face and high cheekbones -- all perfectly proportioned, but somehow different. She reached a table not far from his, lay her saddlebag and cloak across one of the spare chairs, and took the seat nearest the fire.

A serving maid appeared from the kitchen with a pitcher of wine, a bowl of steaming broth, half a loaf of fresh bread and a slab of cheese. She laid them down on the table in front of the woman, who attacked the food with gusto, and yet somehow managed to look elegant while devouring it. Ryan finished his beer and ordered another, trying not to get caught staring.

His view was obscured suddenly by the bulk of the man he'd seen across the bar approaching the stranger's table. Brock Alver was the town thug, a bully who wasn't afraid to throw his considerable weight around. This time Ryan was close enough to overhear the conversation.

'Hello my pretty,' Alver said. He was a tall, heavysset man, deceptively muscular under a layer of surface blubber.

'Leave me alone!' said the woman curtly.

'My, aren't you a feisty one?' returned Alver, 'I'm just trying to be friendly.'

'I am not looking for company,' said the woman bluntly.

'Oh? Well in that case I think I'll just sit here for a spell and see if I can't work out what it is you are looking for!' Alver pulled out the chair opposite the woman and sat in it, his back to Ryan.

'I have no quarrel with you stranger; at least not yet!' said the woman, 'Please, leave me to finish my meal in peace,' the forced politeness did little to conceal the hostile undercurrent. Ryan could tell she was losing patience. His hand went to the small crossbow hanging at his belt.

'Now, now... there's no need for unpleasantness my dear. These mountain towns are dangerous. A pretty thing like you should have an escort in a place like this; someone to look out for you,' Alver's voice took on a menacing edge. 'After all, there are some unsavoury sorts around here. You can't be too careful?'

'I can look after myself, friend, I don't need your protection and I certainly don't want your company. Now go and find somebody else to bother.'

Ryan saw Alver's massive shoulders tense at the woman's rebuke. He got ready to step in.

'You should learn better manners when you visit other peoples' towns woman. Maybe I should just teach you some right now!'

Alver rose out of his chair, reaching across the table with his right hand in a move to grab the woman by the wrist. There was a blur of motion, and the sound of snapping bone as the large man's arm twisted unnaturally. Alver was thrown to the flagstone floor by his shattered wrist screaming in agony.

He landed hard on his back, the strange young woman straddling him, the point of her dagger touched to his exposed throat.

Ryan hadn't even had time to rise out of his chair.

'I told you,' the woman hissed, not even breathing hard, 'I have no quarrel with you. Now I suggest you leave and contemplate your folly. If there is ever a next time, trust me, you can count on it being the last.' She increased pressure slightly. A small bead of blood formed at the dagger's point, growing rapidly until gravity broke its cohesion and tiny red rivulets flowed down the creases of Alver's neck.

'Get off him you crazy whore, or we'll run you through!' shouted a male voice. Two of the ruffians who'd been drinking with Alver had moved around the bar and now stood, a little unsteady, swords drawn, ready to help their felled colleague.

Time to intervene, thought Ryan.

'I suggest you stand down gentlemen,' he said, standing to reveal the loaded crossbow. 'I'll skewer the first of you to move so much as a whisker in the wrong direction.'

'This has nothing to do with you, de Brun,' said the one who'd shouted, 'why get involved? She doesn't mean anything to you.'

'I choose to get involved, Quentin,' Ryan replied, 'Alver was stupid enough to get himself into this mess; you two can stay right out of it,' he swung the crossbow menacingly. 'I said stand down. Now!' The men hesitated, then put up their swords and stepped back.

The young woman simply stood, sheathed her dagger and returned to her meal as if nothing had happened.

Clearly in a lot of pain, Brock Alver struggled to his knees, then slowly and unsteadily to his feet. Whimpering he clutched his injured arm to his chest as he made his way to the door. He glanced in Ryan's direction, and beneath the agony in his eyes Ryan saw a deep, burning hatred. The injured man staggered out of the door, followed by his cronies, and it swung closed behind them.

The inn was silent, everybody in a state of shock at what they had just witnessed. A slip of a girl had bested the town thug without breaking into a sweat. Ryan walked slowly over to the table where the woman sat eating.

'That was quite a show, lady,' he said.

'Thank you for your help,' she said, looking up at him with searching pale blue eyes. He hadn't noticed it in her heated exchange with Alver, but her voice had a distinct lilt, an almost musical quality. The accent was hard to place, though Ryan was sure he'd heard it somewhere before. He pulled out a chair.

'I thought I'd made it clear that I'm not looking for company sir,' she said.

Ryan released the chair and held up his hands, 'Lady, I certainly have no argument with you -- but I will give you some free advice. That thug Alver is no slouch in a fight, with either his fists or a blade, yet you dispatched him like so much refuse...'

'Refuse... an apt description. What of it?' she asked.

'Have a care around Highpass lady. A ruffian like Alver won't forget humiliation like that in a hurry. He'll hole up for a while and lick his wounds, but you can be sure he'll be back -- and he's not without friends. You have made enemies here tonight,' he smiled ruefully and added, 'you and me both.'

'Sir, I am grateful for your help, but remember that I didn't ask for it. I thank you, but I could have dealt with those two myself. And I'm sorry if you find yourself in any trouble for assisting me, but I can accept no responsibility for that.'

'I accept responsibility for my own actions, madam, and would have done the same for anybody in need. Obviously I misjudged the situation. I bid you goodnight.' Disgruntled, he walked to the bar and ordered another beer. Why was he so irritated? Why was the gratitude of this stranger so important to him?

\*

Amber finished her food, thinking about what had happened. The incident had rattled her more than she cared to admit, even to herself. The oaf hadn't given her any real trouble, of course, but the fracas had drawn attention to her, and she still wasn't completely sure she'd shaken her pursuers. She had expected token pursuit after her desertion -- but four companies of elite trackers had surprised her; they had been difficult to shake.

She had fled Oraciel, in defiance of an express order from her King, to search for the truth about her human mother -- who had left her in Oraciel with elven foster parents when she was only two years old. Her efforts to discover her real father, who was elven, had proved fruitless, and had caused her foster parents significant distress. Her decision to leave and search for the human side of her heritage had been a difficult one for her, but she knew in her heart that it was the right one. She had to do this... As time passed she felt she belonged with the elves less and less, and the urge to seek out her true ancestry grew stronger by the day.

She remembered the day two months earlier, deep in the Silverwood, when she had gone to speak to old Ethelel. Ethelel was the nearest she had known to a grandmother, and the wisest person



she knew. That was the day she had decided to leave. It seemed so long ago, and a world away from the mountain wilderness she found herself in now.

The old elven woman lived alone in the woods despite her advanced years. King Arhediel's best efforts to persuade the old woman to resettle inside Oraciel's protective boundaries were to no avail. Of course the King could easily have commanded Ethelel to move into the city, and she would have complied, but all elves, their ruler included, held a deep-seated respect, almost a reverence, for their elders. In a race so long lived the oldest had accumulated centuries of knowledge and experience, and were regarded as the single most valuable resource the elven-nation possessed. Ultimately Ethelel was free to live wherever she chose to.

It was a beautiful day, the warm, oblique rays of the early autumn sun shone through the canopy of giant oak and livewood boughs, casting dappled shadows across the small glade where Ethelel's shack stood. The old woman was sitting outside as Amber approached, and looked up when the young half-elf entered the clearing.

'Ah, Amber, sweet child, what brings you to see a weary old thing like me?' she asked, leaning on her stick as if to get up and greet the youngster.

Amber smiled. 'No, don't get up.' She walked over, standing next to the old woman. 'I need your help Ethelel,' she paused, unsure of herself, 'I need you to tell me about my parents.'

'Ardel and Gwyndal, You have known them your whole life -- what can I tell you that you don't already know?'

'No, I mean my real parents. Who was my mother, why doesn't anyone speak of her, and why won't anybody tell me about my father?' Amber was frustrated, and let her emotion show in a very

un-elven display.

'Oh! Settle now child. Come, sit up here with me for a while,' Ethelel indicated a spot next to her on the crude wooden bench. Amber sat, and looked at the old woman's weathered face. Ethelel was old even by elven standards. Nobody knew exactly how long she had lived, but she had spent more than five hundred years in the Silverwood and beyond. Amber looked into the old woman's kind, knowing eyes and almost lost herself in their depth. She knew then, without doubt, that there was no emotion this woman hadn't experienced in her long life, no hurt she hadn't known, no joy she couldn't share. Amber suddenly felt less alone. She could share her pain, her anguish, her frustration, and her fear with someone who would truly understand.

After a silence that seemed to last an age, Amber spoke softly, 'When I was a child, I thought I was just like all of the other children in Oraciel. At play in the glades, the streams, out in the woods, it never even occurred to me that I was in any way different to my friends. It didn't seem to occur to them either. Then I went to school.' She shook her head ruefully, 'Master Tellar used to treat me differently. I don't think he meant to, but subconsciously he'd single me out: ask me the hardest questions and punish me for things he seemed to overlook in others. I never understood it. I thought there was something wrong with me. Soon afterwards, all of the other children started to treat me differently, as if my peers were subconsciously picking up on Master Tellar's victimisation. I never really fitted in with the crowd, and I put that down to a problem with me, not them. Then the bullying started outside class. As each year went by it got worse and worse, as my non-elven features became more distinctive. I realised something was different -- thought that something was wrong with me, but I didn't know what it was. I used to cry myself to sleep at night wondering how I could make myself more like them, how I could stop the cruelty.

'The other children were so callous that I just wanted it all to end. One day, when it just got too much, I took an old crossbow from Ardel's workshop and shot one of the boys in the leg. I was enraged; I lost control completely. I wanted to hurt them all like they had hurt me; wanted them to suffer. Then after I'd leashed out in frustration all of the anger and pain flooded out of me, and I was sorry. So very sorry and ashamed of what I had done.

'It was terrible. I was branded a freak; I was a danger to others, they said, and expelled me from the school. I was sent to the military academy to complete my education. That was when my foster parents told me I was adopted. My mother was human, my father elven but beyond that there was nothing more they could tell me,' Ethelel listened intently, she knew of Amber's history but had never heard the young woman speak of her childhood before. How difficult it must have been, she thought, growing up different to those around you, trying to come to terms with those differences. Talking about it was obviously something that Amber needed to do.

'I have struggled through the last fifty years trying to find my place here -- but I still don't fit in. Now I know I never will. I don't belong here Ethelel, at least I won't until I know for certain who I really am, where I came from. The truth; all I want... no, not want -- need. What I need, is the truth.'

Ethelel sighed 'It was long ago, Amber, and my recollection is vague. It's strange, but nobody can really remember that time clearly. It's as if some sort of enchantment has fogged our collective memories of the events surrounding your birth. All I have are vague recollections: impressions if you will. There was a woman -- a proud woman of high bearing -- a woman of presence and stature. She was a stranger here, not one of us: a human. I remember that.'

'Go on,' Amber urged.

'There really are no more details I can give you, save that your father is elven and is most likely still in Oraciel -- although his memory of the time is probably as clouded as the rest of us. He may not even know you exist Amber.' Ethelel sighed again. 'You deserve the truth, Amber, but I don't have the answers you need -- and neither will anyone else in Oraciel, I'll venture.'

'What can I do, Ethelel? I can't stay here any more, I have to find out the truth, but the King has forbidden me to depart. I have a duty here! How can a member of the Royal Personal Guard defy the wishes of her King?'

'Amber, you must follow your heart, and use your head. The King will learn to understand when you are gone. I wish I could help you more, but...' she paused, as if considering something. 'There may be one way you could glean something of value, at least give yourself a starting point, but it could be dangerous.'

'Anything; tell me!' Amber said eagerly.

'Have you heard of a creature called the Dryalak?' the old woman asked.

'Only in silly children's tales mother and father used to tell me as a youngster,' Amber replied.

'Well, it exists. It was the last being of an ancient race, they say, a creature of great power. It is said that it died by force of its own will in an attempt to end its solitude and join its departed brethren, but its spirit, its very essence, was somehow trapped. Its body is long since perished, but they say its spirit is tied to a place called The Simmer Pit, high in the volcanic region where the continent's three great mountain ranges meet. They say that over a millennium of isolation has made the Dryalak a curious entity, and it will sometimes speak to people who dare to venture into the vicinity. It is rumoured to have the power of time-sight, and can grant a view of past or future to anybody who can pay its price -- but

that price can be high, so be wary, and do not go alone'.

\*

With Ethel's warning ringing in her head Amber snapped out of her reverie. A passing maid had cleared away her leftovers and she had finished her wine. She looked up at the bar, where the man who had been so willing to help her stood nursing his mug of beer. Amber knew she needed help -- but she needed someone she could trust. Could she trust this stranger to help her? Her instinct was yes, but she was wary and sceptical by nature.

Amber's childhood had left her to view everybody as a potential enemy until they proved otherwise. Trust was something earned by deed, not by default. Still, she needed help, and he seemed the most likely candidate. The only other person she had any contact with here was nursing a shattered wrist and quite probably plotting revenge. She buried her reservations, stood up and walked to the bar.

'I'm sorry,' she ventured.

He turned to look at her, 'You've changed your tune then?' he raised his eyebrows quizzically, a sarcastic tone creeping into the deep timbre of his voice.

'Look, I was on edge after the confrontation. I lashed out, I apologise,' Amber said, 'but don't expect any more than that. I'm grateful for your help earlier, lets just leave it at that and let me buy you a beer, shall we?'

'Sounds good,' he conceded, 'Kirk, a beer for me, and...?' he shot Amber a questioning look.

'The same,' Amber supplied.

'...another for the lady,' he said. 'What's your name?'

'Amber,' she said.

'Ryan de Brun at your service,' he stood away from the bar effecting a mock bow.

Amber smiled. 'Okay then, Ryan, I need some help to reach a place called The Simmer Pit, do you know it?'

'I've heard of it,' he replied, 'but I can't say I've ever had cause to go there. That whole area is alive with volcanic activity. They say the ground underfoot can roast you if you wander into the wrong place.'

'So I hear,' she said, 'but it's very important for me to reach there, and I can't do it alone. I can pay you for your services, of course -- whatever the going rate is and a suitable bonus when we get back.'

'As it happens I have just finished my current contract, and need a bit of work to tide me over. Give me some time to consider and I'll let you know tomorrow.'

'I leave at dawn. I can't tarry here, especially after what happened tonight. Be at the stables at first light if you decide to accept -- otherwise I'll assume you're not coming.'

'Lady, leaving for where exactly? You can't travel up into those mountains at this time of year. It's suicide -- no, worse, complete lunacy. Winter is only around the corner, you'd best find somewhere warm and wait...'

'Like I said, I'll be leaving at first light, be there or not -- its your decision,' she finished her beer and left through the door at the back of the common room.

\*

Ryan stood at the bar alone, thinking about what she had said. He was going, of course, he'd already decided that. This woman intrigued him and he wanted to find out more about her. Putting off

his return to civilisation for a little while wouldn't kill him -- or at least he hoped it wouldn't.

He'd been working undercover in Highpass for the last two years. The brief had been to gather as much information as possible on a renegade band of mercenaries operating out of the mountain town and to pass it on to the Merchants Guild in Ular, Bantara's second city and capital of Utara province. The Guild suspected the wayward band of mercenaries were working out of Highpass attempting to monopolise the caravan escort trade and artificially inflate prices for their services.

The Merchant's Guild needed proof that this band of mercenaries was raiding caravans using the pass from Highpass to Quar-ylan. The pass was the only wagon-navigable trading route linking Bantara with the Kingdom of Kural to the north, and the neutral townships of Dran-Anam in the northeastern foothills of the Barrier Range. The raids were forcing traders to travel with a far larger armed escort than was the norm, and were pushing up mercenary rates. With an effective monopoly on the Highpass route the mercenaries were making a killing out of the hapless merchants.

During his time in Highpass Ryan had gathered intelligence on the movements of key members of the mercenary group, including their whereabouts and habitual haunts. He sent regular reports back to the Guild who had been passing the intelligence on to the Bantaran authorities. His contact at the Guild had informed Ryan that a raid by the Border Garrison of the Imperial Guard was imminent, and that the time had come for him to move on.

Ryan smiled to himself. Their friend Brock Alver would have some time to cool off in an Imperial cell before he could come looking for either Amber or himself.

## 2. Vision

Ryan shook his head, trying to clear it of last night's cobwebs. His stomach churned uneasily, and his head hurt all the more for shaking it.

After Amber had left the bar Ryan had started talking with Kirk, the innkeeper, about the incident with Alver, then about mercenary activity in general. The night had rolled on and before he knew it he was the last in the bar, and had downed much more of the potent highland brew than he'd intended.

The eastern sky was brightening rapidly as he walked into the courtyard of the Pass Inn, vowing to himself that he wouldn't drink again for some time. There had been a hazy light in the east when he'd stirred from his bed, though the sun hadn't yet crested the towering peaks of the Barrier Range.

'Your late!' said Amber, coming out of the stable leading a sleek black gelding.

'The sun hasn't broken the peaks yet,' he tried to sound convincing, 'and up here first-light is when the sun clears the mountains.'

'First light is first light -- you're late!'

'Just give me time to saddle up, I'll be with you in no time,' he headed into the dark maw of the stable.

Amber climbed into the saddle to wait, wondering if she should have just left without him. She didn't know why she'd waited. She'd fully expected to ride out alone this morning -- but for some reason she'd waited over an hour, pretending to busy herself with this task or that, on the chance that this stranger would show up.

Ryan emerged from the barn escorting a large bay mare, the saddle and tack thrown loosely over



the horse. He stood the animal in the centre of the courtyard and started to tighten things up. Amber watched him as he worked, his hands sure and steady as he tended the horse. He moved methodically, with an economy that Amber found strangely soothing; no gesture or movement was wasted.

'There,' he finished and looked up.

She turned away quickly, flustered that he may have caught her watching him. 'Come on, we've already lost a good hour's riding,' she kicked her horse and headed for the gate, hooves clattering on the stone.

Ryan mounted quickly and sped after her, glad to leave Highpass behind.

\*

Oraciel, literally City of Trees in the elven tongue, was the ancestral homeland of all elven-kind. Though disparate elven populations were spread across the world, Oraciel was still a place of significance to them all. It was a large arboreal city constantly evolving to fit the needs of the people who lived in it.

The city consisted of thousands of Livewood trees, a species endemic to this specific part of the Silverwood, a temperate forest spanning the northern reaches of the Silver River. The river defined the border between the fiery feudal dictatorship of Gnogh to the west and the mighty Empire of Bantara to the east. The forest sprawled on either side of it, partly in Bantaran territory, partly in Gnogh.

Elven Lorelords had discovered long ago that a livewood sapling could be magically imprinted with an image, and would grow into a fairly accurate approximation of it as it developed. Over millennia they had influenced the trees' growth so that now Oraciel was a bustling city of living wood, above which a magnificent shielding canopy of golden foliage spread its protective embrace. The trees

themselves had also evolved, and now adapted themselves seamlessly to the needs of their elven symbionts.

The centrepiece of this constantly growing marvel was the Royal Residence: elaborate open areas where many flattened, branched walkways converged; enormous circular halls in the centre of giant hollowed trunks; elaborate apartments; private clearings and ornate, leafy terraces made the Residence a truly magnificent place.

Arhediel, King of Oraciel, and accepted figurehead of all elven-kind, currently favoured the fabled Hall of Whispers as his place of court. It lay at the base of the ancient livewood bole that formed the centre of the Royal Residence.

The hall was an almost circular space clearly defined by an array of huge aerial root structures, each as thick as the girth of four men. These rose like sinuous pillars out of the ground, curving inwards overhead to support the enormous bulk of the tree high above. On a dais at the eastern edge of the circle stood an intricate livewood throne on which King Arhediel sat.

Darnill, chief tracker to the Elven Court knelt at the base of the dais, awaiting acknowledgement from his king. He had been in the Hall of Whispers before to consult with Arhediel and the Council, but this was the first time he had been summoned to appear before his king alone; he didn't know what to expect. Arhediel was acknowledged by his people as a fair and just monarch, and by all the evidence was a reasonable man, but Darnill was still nervous.

'Rise, Darnill, you do not need to kneel before me,' the rich, confident tones carried the weight of someone who had been born to rule, and whose grooming for that role started at a tender age. 'What news of our deserter?'

'She fled to the east sire -- along The Fringe, as expected. It was not difficult for my men to pick up her trail in the forest and we gained on her quickly...'

'I sense a but coming, Darnill.'

'Sire, as soon as she realised she was being tailed it became more difficult. The girl has some skill, and her choice of route proved lucky for her,' Darnill wasn't about to tell his king that the deserter, a member of the monarch's Personal Guard named Amber, had led the finest trackers under his command on a merry dance for two days through familiar woodland before disappearing, apparently without trace. Luck had nothing to do with it; she had duped them completely, and by the time they realised the trail they were following was false her true trail was well concealed.

'So,' the King looked down, arching one thin eyebrow inquisitively, 'you're telling me that through a stroke of luck this young girl has eluded the finest trackers I have at my disposal. Trackers, I might add, who are widely acknowledged to be the best in all of Ketania.'

'That's right, sire.'

'I find that difficult to believe Darnill, knowing how good you and your men are. The only way she could have lost you is through cunning and guile.'

Darnill quickly concluded that with the King unconvinced by his embellishment of the facts, elements of the truth would probably serve him better. 'She was quite inventive, sire. In truth I do not know how she lost us. My suspicion is that she has managed to mislead us along a false trail and has risen above the tree line into the mountains. Our skills are honed to the woodland, and don't lend themselves readily to tracking in the mountains,' he hoped he sounded convincing. They had lost Amber's trail almost as soon as she'd realised she was being followed. The girl was a natural. Darnill

found himself wishing that she had elected to join his Trackers instead of the Royal Personal Guard.

'Darnill, I will have that girl found and brought back here to Oraciel. She will answer for her desertion. A member of the Royal Personal Guard has never abandoned their post in this way before, and I will not allow this girl to set a precedent. I want her found!'

'What would you have me do sire?'

'Take a small group of your best men; find her. Bring her back here... ' he saw Darnill was about to speak, and raised a hand to silence the Chief Tracker, 'I am, of course, aware that you will be entering Bantaran territory, and that -- in theory at least -- sending an armed party into Bantara contravenes the Silverwood Treaty, so I ask you to be discreet. It is a delicate situation. Should you be apprehended, we would be forced to deny knowledge of any mission. In such circumstances you are on a private vendetta without our knowledge. Understood?'

'I will put together a team. What about supplies and reporting?'

'Larian,' the King called for his chief advisor, and Darnill started as a shadow came to life in an alcove behind and to the left of Arhediel's throne. Larian moved into the light.

'Highness?' said the newcomer.

'Make sure Darnill and his men have everything they need, and send a Loremaster with them, someone young, who won't slow them down. They will need assistance in masking their features from the humans, and it will provide Darnill with a medium to keep me informed of their progress.'

Darnill cursed to himself, the last thing he needed on a covert operation was a Loremaster along for the ride. They were useful in their place, but that place wasn't in the field. It seemed, however, that the King had decided.

'Darnill, go with Larian, he will see to your needs. Make haste, the girl Amber moves further away with every breath -- you must hurry if you are to catch her before she is out of reach.'

'Yes highness,' Darnill managed, as the King terminated the interview. He turned and followed Larian out of the Hall of Whispers.

Aradhiel sat alone in the hall wondering why he was so bent on finding the stray half-breed. He felt driven to search for Amber, to bring her back to Oraciel. It wasn't the anger at being disobeyed; a need for retribution, though that was undoubtedly a part of it. That was, of course, the only way he could justify the search to others, as a hunt for a deserter, but in reality it was much more than that. He couldn't explain why, but he was more comfortable when she was around. That was part of the reason he had selected her for the Royal Personal Guard -- that and her excellent performance at the Military Academy. Somehow having Amber nearby made him feel more secure.

Arhediel knew it was dangerous to send operatives into Bantara. With the current climate in the Empire any sort of dispute could turn ugly very quickly -- but he didn't know what other choice he had. Anyway, Darnill and his men were the best, and were unlikely to get caught.

Still pondering his strange affinity with the young half-human, King Arhediel stood and left the Hall of Whispers, the glow-globes high above winking out and plunging the hall into darkness with his passing.

\*

'Come on, not much further -- I'm sure it's just over the next ridge,' shouted Amber. Ryan could barely hear her over the whistling winds driving down from the peaks of the Towers of the Gods.

'It's getting dark,' he shouted back, 'we need to find shelter out of this weather 'till morning. If we

get caught out in this all night we'll freeze to death.'

'Ryan, we're almost there, just a little bit further,' Ambers voice was desperate; her drive to move forward seemed to outweigh her common sense.

'There's a small cave up ahead, we'll shelter there and talk about it out of this wind,' Ryan gestured towards a fissure in the rock up above and strode off towards the opening. Amber followed, dragging her feet like a reluctant child.

Just inside the entrance, out of the wind, Ryan took out his flint and, using his dagger, struck a spark to an oiled torch from his pack. A flame leapt into life in the wadding of the torch, and the resulting light revealed that the narrow fissure opened up into a sizeable cavern that would house both them and the horses comfortably.

Once the animals had been tethered towards the rear of the cave and fed, Ryan went about preparing a fire. They'd been collecting dry wood whenever they could on the three-day journey from Highpass, and carried it bundled in oilcloth tied behind their saddles.

Ryan lit some dry twigs with the torch and fanned the embryonic flames into life, adding larger pieces of wood as they grew. Soon a cosy campfire burned brightly in the centre of the cavern.

He looked up and examined the cave in the firelight. Smoke from the fire was spiralling towards the rock ceiling and seemed to be drawn away up what must be a natural chimney in the rock. At least, he thought, they wouldn't be choking on smoke all night.

The longer they travelled the more driven Amber seemed to become; she was constantly pushing the boundaries of how quickly and how far they could move each day. In three days they had covered what would normally take at least four, in conditions that were bordering on the extreme. Her stamina

seemed boundless and she shrugged off the cold. That was fine, he thought, but the horses needed rest and shelter as much as they both did, and to keep going when the horses were as weary as they were now was to risk losing one or both of them. And out here that amounted to nothing less than suicide.

Ryan cooked up a simple meal of oatmeal flavoured with nuts, dry herbs and some of the hard, dry cheese from their rations. It was a little bland, but was hot and nutritious. They ate in silence sitting in the flickering halo of light provided by the fire, letting the radiated heat drive some of the chill from their bones.

'Thank you, I needed to rest,' Amber said, huddled on the opposite side of the fire, a blanket wrapped around her shoulders, nursing a hot mug of chakra-tea.

'We both did, and the horses too. If we drive them any harder Amber we'll drive them to their death.'

'I know, it's just that the closer we get the more I feel I need to reach the Simmer Pit and this Dryalak.'

'You still haven't told me exactly why it's so important that you find this creature,' Ryan was fishing. He'd been trying to piece together why Amber was bent on this trek since they had left Highpass, but the young woman said little, hiding behind a rigid mask of control that he found infuriating. He'd only picked up the occasional morsel of useful information during their conversations, and those snippets only served to heighten the mystery.

She still intrigued him.

Amber stared into the fire as she replied, 'I need some information. Somebody I trust told me that this Dryalak is my best chance of getting it -- or at least of finding somewhere definite to start looking.'

'Looking for what, exactly?' he asked, pressing his luck a little.

'It's personal, and not something I care to talk about. All you need to know is that we're heading for this Simmer Pit,' her tone had become a little indignant, scolding even, and she tilted her head upwards in a haughty manner that he found irritating.

Ryan lost patience. 'Just remember lady that I'm here through choice, not for some poxy reward. You haven't really hired me, I've accepted no retainer, and you certainly haven't earned the right to talk down to me.'

She lowered her head, blushing slightly. 'I'm sorry; I didn't mean to sound so condescending. It's just very important to me, that's all -- and it is personal.'

'How can I help you with this quest if you won't even tell me what it's about?' Ryan's voice echoed the frustration he was feeling. Why did he care so much anyway about this woman's quest? Why was he even here? By rights he should be spending winter in one of the balmy cities of Bantara's south, not slogging through snowstorms and bitter, icy winds.

Amber sighed -- a long, weary exhalation. 'I know you are trying to help, and believe me you are helping. But I'm not ready to talk about these things yet Ryan. In time maybe I will be, but until then, I must ask you to please be patient.'

She could be so infuriatingly logical and polite.

'Of course; I'm sorry for trying to push you.' His curiosity had got the better of him, he reflected, and he probably shouldn't have probed his moody travel companion so much. She'd tell him eventually, perhaps, when she was ready. And anyway, she wasn't the only one who kept secrets. As far as she knew he was just a mercenary, a sword for hire selling his loyalties to the highest bidder. Why should



she trust him?

'We should get some sleep,' he said, standing to stoke the fire with wood to keep it burning through the night. 'Stay close to the fire, that way you won't freeze.'

Amber nodded her agreement and stretched out on her bedroll. Ryan watched her in the flickering light of the fire, her chest moving rhythmically with each breath, slowing and becoming regular as sleep embraced her.

Where are you from, he thought, and what is it that you are searching for that's so important? Ryan lay down on his bedroll on the opposite side of the fire, watching the play of firelight on her angular features, so peaceful in sleep. He closed his eyes, but sleep was a long time coming, and when it did his dreams were plagued with images of a determined young woman with flame-red hair.

\*

Chichoni, Emperor of Bantara, trudged up the winding spiral of stone steps leading to the central tower-room where the Trio had their lair. He wore a heavy velvet robe hastily drawn over his nightclothes. His feet, clad in comfortable slippers made of rare chalama skin and lined with the creatures' precious, insulating wool, could still feel the chill of heat-sapping stone underfoot.

He shivered, more in anticipation of the coming meeting than with the cold. Though it was winter in Bantara, it hardly ever got cold enough in Celesti to warrant heavy clothing. Conference with the Trio always chilled him, made him nervous -- and this time they had called him!

His father had discovered them, apparently, high in the Barrier Range some thirty years earlier, and had moved them to the capital, Celesti to make use of their obscure talents. They were two sisters and a brother, as far as he could tell; at least that's what they maintained -- triplets no less. They were

members of the grun, a cave dwelling race who had lost the power of sight, and used a powerful mind-sight to navigate the perpetual darkness of their natural home. Grun were by nature gentle creatures, but The Trio were freaks. It was said that they had been ostracised from grun society after they were found cavorting in the remains of their older sibling, having slaughtered him in his sleep and eaten their fill of the raw, bloody flesh. They had been banished to the deepest caverns of the complex Bladrin cave system, where they were thought to have perished in starved insanity.

Chichoni didn't know how his father had discovered his macabre minions, but did know that deep underground they had pushed their natural mind-sight ability to the limit, warping it to show more than their immediate surroundings -- even to plant suggestions in the minds of others. They had survived by using this talent to lure unsuspecting creatures to their death deep in the caverns. Here, above ground, and without the physical barrier of tonnes of rock to penetrate, their combined minds could reach out to see almost anywhere in the Empire, and even to exert some influence over others. They were a useful, if disturbing tool for a man in his position.

As he climbed higher the stench of the lair wafted down the stairwell, assaulting his nose with the sickly-sweet odour of rotting flesh and the overpowering smell of inhuman excrement. Trying not to gag he reached the top of the bare stone stairwell and stood facing a solid hardwood door. It was reinforced with steel cladding and had been magically sealed. Only he knew the specific sequence to deactivate the magical combination -- a precaution more to protect unwitting victims from being lured to the lair than anything else. His father had lost several of his most useful aides before he discovered what was happening and had put a stop to it. Chichoni was even more wary of the weird threesome, and he'd had the original door reinforced and his magician, Olvin, had put the magical seal in place.

He delved into the inner lining of his robe and brought forth an ivory carving, the cool hardness

reassuring in his hand. The intricate key-shaped carving shimmered in the pale, flickering light of the wall torches as he slid it into its position on the door. It retracted into the solid wood, emitting a slight red glow that radiated outwards to suffuse the portal in soft light. Chichoni leaned forward and lightly touched several of the rivets in the door's steel cladding in a specific sequence. There was an audible click as the locks turned, and the ivory key appeared once more on the outer surface of the wooden door. Chichoni pocketed the key and pushed a lever to operate a mechanical mechanism that swung the heavy portal open.

The stench of the lair formed a palpable barrier, and he was forced to take a deep breath before entering. It was dark inside, but a magical glow-globe in the ceiling was set to illuminate dimly as soon as the door was opened. As his eyes got used to the gloom he used his other senses to try and pinpoint the location of the Trio. Smell was useless, as it was so overwhelmed by the unbearable stench. He concentrated on listening, gradually filtering out the regular sound of his own breathing and the perceptible thumping of his rapidly beating heart. He listened for them beyond the steel bars that separated this annexe from their lair. There -- was that shallow breathing he heard over to his left? And ahead of him, a faint scuffling as one of them shambled over towards the bars. His adjusting eyes saw movement off to his left and Chichoni knew then that he'd pinpointed two of them. Now, where was the third? He felt something drip onto the shoulder of his robe, and heard a faint sizzling as if something corrosive was eating into the fabric. Chichoni looked up, and there was the third creature, clinging to the bars above his head, drooling digestive juices in anticipation of an unexpected meal.

'Foul things!' he said to no one in particular. 'Why have you called me here?' he turned, directing his attention to nearest of the grun.

'We sssee thingsss massster,' said a sickly, sibilant voice from behind him.

Chichoni span around to see a shuffling hunched shape, a vague outline against the blackness. 'What things? Why do you bother my sleep? I've warned you about interfering with my dreams. If its without good reason then it will go hard on you,' he was in control here, and it was time they realised it.

'Massster, it iss a thing you mussst know, we have ssseen it...,' the voice came from above this time.

'... yesss, ssseen it we have,' to his right. It infuriated him how they all spoke as one, finishing each others thoughts, delivering fragments of each others sentences -- like three disparate entities of a single being, a symptom, no doubt, of their combined, warped consciousness. Chichoni's skin crawled, he wanted to find out what they knew and get out of this place as soon as possible.

'What? What can be so important as to bring me here at night?'

'Ahhhhh! A prizzze, yesss...'

'... a token of aprecciation, hmmm!'

'Sssomething to make it worth our while'

The air was heavy with the stink of rot and death, and more, Chichoni felt a cloying, malevolent aura gripping his mind. It seemed to thicken the air, making it an effort to breath.

'Why should I do anything for you?' he managed, his stomach threatening to spasm and empty its contents all over the floor.

'Help you we can, yesss. A threat we sssee...'

'... yesss, a threat to your rule. Ssseen it we have.'

'A sssacrifice we want, yesss, an offering.'

'Just tell me what it is you know,' Chichoni was losing patience -- it was always trying dealing with the trio.

'We want a boy, yesss...'

'... thiss time a boy we thinksss!'

'Yesss, a boy would be niccce.'

Chichoni shivered inwardly as he caught sight of the bleached, partially gnawed bones of their last victim. He had exchanged the life of that hapless soul for information on the revolt in the north of Valtar province. The information had proved to be most useful and his Imperial Guard had quashed the rebellion before it gathered momentum. Still, confronted with scraps of putrefied flesh and rotting tendons hanging loosely from the butchered skeleton, Chichoni felt physically sick. He hated these creatures, detested them with a passion, but he also needed them. His rule was under threat; a wave of discontent was sweeping the Empire, the common people ready to revolt -- all that they lacked was cohesion and momentum. The only thing keeping him ahead of the game, giving him an edge, was the information he could glean from the Trio's mind-sight.

He wrestled with his conscience for a few moments, but his desire to know what they had seen overcame the faint pangs of guilt he felt at offering up the life of an innocent -- in the end it always did.

'Very well, you will have your sacrifice, I will send up a servant boy in the morning,' he could hear them smacking their lips greedily at the prospect; he almost retched again, but managed to stay in control. 'Now, tell me what you know.'

'A ssstirring there has been, a movement from afar...'

'A half-breed movesss thiss way...'

'yesss, half elf, half human -- moving she iss.'

'She goes to consssult with the anccient.'

'The truth she ssseeks...'

'... yesss, and will find.'

'What truth, and what do I care about this half-breed?'

'A leader she iss, though know it she doesss not.'

'Yesss, find her true heritage she will.'

'Yesss, and sssoon.'

'Damn it, what has this got to do with me or the Empire?' anger and frustration crept into Chichoni's voice.

'Ahh, we sssee many people, lead them she will...'

'... unite them, yesss.'

'Come for you they will. Yesss, sssoon!'

'Show me this woman!' Chichoni commanded.

'That will increassse the priccce massster.'

'Yesss, another sssacrifice we will need...'

'... to recover our energy. Tiring it iss.'

'Yes, yes, anything, just show me what this woman looks like,' Chichoni was frantic; he had to put a face to this unseen threat. If he knew what she looked like he could crush her before she ever became a real threat.

'Look then,' the trio moved together, so close in the darkness that they seemed to become one shuffling mass. Chichoni felt the air charge with energy, then saw an image forming in front of his eyes.

The image was of a human-looking woman with angular features and flame red hair, she appeared to be sleeping, and the flickering light seemed to come from a nearby fire. He committed the image to memory as the scene widened to show a cavern. She was travelling with a companion, a human male, who slept across the fire from her, and there were horses tethered near the back of the cave. The image dissolved as quickly as it had formed, and the Trio slumped to the floor, breathing heavily with the effort.

'We need more than ssservants now massster.'

'Yesss, anything you sssaid!'

'We will have a new-born, yesss, a babe.'

'Yesss, every darkmoon, the firsst babe born in Cccelessti, oursss it will be.'

'Very tender they are -- yesss new-born, very tender.'

'Stop it!' Chichoni was almost beside himself, his stomach knotted as he realised what they were asking, what they had tricked him into. He retched again, and this time he couldn't keep the contents of his stomach down. The Trio descended on the pool, arms groping through the bars to grab handfuls of the vomited matter -- a sickening, snuffling mass in the gloom, wolfing down the partially digested food

along with their own filth from the floor.

Chichoni, still retching, staggered through the door, activated the magical lock and started down the stairs.

***END OF FREE SAMPLE***

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