

# Finder

Terri-Lynne DeFino

(Sample - First Chapter)

Part 1: The End

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## \*Ethen\*

**E**THEN RATTLED THE BONE DICE in his fist, listened to them click against one another.  
*I knew it.*

He tossed them onto the packed clay floor. They bumped and rolled while the gathered gamblers shouted blessings for their own symbols, curses for anyone else's. Ethen straightened before the dice turned their last.

"Pooni eyes!"

The crowd groaned as he scooped his winnings onto his palm; all but the one man to whom the dice belonged. Time to go, despite the small fortune he could win from these sims. Ethen bowed his way from the dim, smoky room. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the man follow.

Every golden hair on his head prickled. His blood surged. He shouldered past the teety-dancers he had tossed dints to earlier. They reached for him.

"Come back, Dommo!"

"We will dance for you!"

"You can touch this time!"

Ethen stumbled out of the doovah despite all those perfect brown teeties luring him back. Once on the street, the instincts bred by a lifetime spent evading capture kicked him into a sprint.

The streets of Pashni't meandered and crisscrossed like they did in every other desert town. Ethen never missed a step. In his head, a map unfurled with each pushed stride. The household of Dommo Juddah Luash wasn't far. If he could only reach it before—

Strong hands pulled Ethen off his feet, strangled him on his own shirt collar. Thrashing, kicking, cursing, he found a target that finally loosened the man's grip. He was running again the moment his feet touched the cobbles.

"Ethen, wait!"

Stumbling to a halt, he spun to find a familiar figure doubled over on the side of the street. He hurried back the way he came.

“Bloody camel balls, Dolek. I didn’t know it was you.”

“In trouble already?”

“It’s not my fault this time.”

“It’s never your fault.”

Arm under Dolek’s shoulder, Ethen helped him to his feet, brushed him off. “Where’d I get you?”

“Where no man should ever be hit.” Dolek chuckled. “Who are you running from?”

“A cheat who got angry because I threw his weighted dice to my advantage.”

“You should know better than to cheat a cheat at his own game.” Dolek paused, his lips pursed. “You went to the Charming Goat.”

“It was too early to Find the Luash household.”

“I specifically told you to stay away from that doovah.”

Ethen grinned. “Now it is you who should know better.”

But Dolek did not grin back. “I lied for you, Ethen. I told Dommo Luash you were trustworthy. I told him you were the best Finder on the Strip.”

“Well, I am the best Finder on the Strip.”

“You are not a child anymore.”

“Look, I’m grateful for the job but I Find *things*, not poonies. I don’t know if I can—”

“This job will change your fortune!” Dolek grabbed him by the arms, shook him gently. “You have a gift, Ethen; one that will feed you, put walls and a roof around you. You are twenty years old; young enough to escape this life. Make a promise to me that you will not go back to the Charming Goat.”

Ethen bowed his head, “I promise.”

Dolek’s hands, as rough and strong as they had been the first time they snatched nine year old Ethen off his feet, fell away.

“What are you even doing here?” Ethen asked. “Kassani is a long way from Pashni’it.”

“Only far if you must walk between them.”

“Where’d you get a camel?”

“It was part of the deal I made with a client.” Dolek tapped the side of his nose. “The new restrictions on spices have tipped advantages into the laps of those who can get them.”

Blood rushed to Ethen’s cheeks. “You’re dealing in spices now?”

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“The wealthier the Merchants in Therk become, the greater their lust for the forbidden. It has been more than thirty years since the desert swallowed the Spice Way. Some of those spices will never be seen in Therk or Greater Argoa again; but there are still a rare few a crafty man can get his hands on.”

“And you somehow got some?”

Dolek only tapped his nose again. Now Ethen shook his head. “You know the emperor’s Hounds will kill you if you’re caught.”

“They would have to catch me to do so.”

From the Seat tower in the center of Pashni’it, a gong clanged the hour. “Seven beats,” Dolek said. “You will be late. Go, Ethen. I will see you back in Kassani after you have earned a reputation as the greatest Finder in all of Therk.”

Ethen started backing away. “You be careful, Dolek.”

“I did not get to be so old by being careless. Go. Change your fortune!”

The Luash household sat like an overweight Merchant in the eastern territory of Pashni’it. White stucco. Terraces pocked with what passed for flora in such a dry clime. Gated archways. A cobbled entry drive. Fresh horse dung speckled the cobbles where it would stay until the desert sun turned it to dust. Ethen pulled the bell.

A slave stepped out of a guardhouse. Facial markings bespeaking his place in the household, the path of his bondage and his lineage swirled along his cheekbones and up onto his forehead. Intricate, despite deep wrinkles. Ethen did his best not to stare as the slave fit a large iron key into the gate’s lock.

“Come.” The slave bowed his head, stepped aside. “Dommi-sa is expecting you.”

Ethen passed through the gate, waiting until the man closed and again locked it to say, “I’ve lived along the Strip all my life and have a lot of friends among your kind, but I’ve never seen markings as beautiful as yours.”

“I assure you that they are nothing of the kind, Dommo.”

“Dommo? I’m just Ethen.”

He held up his fist but the slave did not touch knuckles to knuckles. He only bowed his head again. “I am called Gitmin, Dommo Ethen.”

Ethen let his hand fall away. “That’s odd. I know a gate man in Kassani and his name is Gitmin too.”

The man looked at him out of the corner of his eye. “It is not an uncommon name among my kind.”

Gitmin led him across the cobbles, careful not to step on the horse droppings. Ethen avoided them as well. He asked, "How many horses does Dommo Luash have?"

"Enough to leave fresh droppings in the drive for all of Pashni'it to see," the slave answered, and though his tone was even, Ethen thought he heard a hint of sarcasm.

Pulling a cord hanging in the alcove of the front entrance, Gitmin stepped back into the shadows. The sound of footsteps came from the other side of the door. Ethen flexed his shoulders, shook out his wrists like a fighter preparing for a fight. Gitmin's spindly hand grasped his wrist.

"There is a Gitmin in every household," he whispered. "Just as there is a Bibi and a Nani. But there is only one Zihariel, Dommo Ethen. Only one. Remember this. I beg you."

The door opened with a whoosh of air and the tinkling of a door harp. Another man stood in the doorway, this one larger, younger and bearing the eunuch's crescent mixed in among the other facial markings.

"May the desert gods grant you prosperity, Dommo." Gitmin bowed, backing away from the door.

"This way," the new, unnaturally high voice said. "Dommi-sa is anxious to meet you."

Ethen glanced over his shoulder, but Gitmin was already gone. He stepped over the threshold.

This was no middling Merchant. Whatever the squalor of this border town nearer to the Charming Goat, the Luash household burgeoned with opulent furnishings, rugs and curios. Dustless, quite a feat in the desert just before the yearly rains swelled the Bihn Iabba over her banks, there wasn't a single cranny unadorned by finery and light.

"This way."

Ethen followed the eunuch but was often left behind. There was much to see. Much to steal. It took great control, but he managed to keep his pockets empty.

*On the way out. Something small.*

He caught up just as his guide pulled aside a drape. "The Finder has arrived, Dommi-sa."

"Excellent," a rich, composed voice called back. "Show him in."

The eunuch held the drape higher, bowing to gesture Ethen through. Dommo Juddah Luash rose from his chair.

"Welcome to Pashni'it."

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The man was younger than Ethen expected the wealthiest Merchant in Pashni't to be. Younger, more attractive than the fat, old men with lusty young wives he was accustomed dealing with along the Strip. Ethen moved forward to touch his knuckles to the man's offered fist. "Thank you, Dommo Luash."

The man waved him into a chair. "Juddah. I am Juddah. And you are Ethen, yes?"

"Yes, Dommo Juddah."

"Our friend from Kassani has many good things to say of your Finding skills. I will admit to being unhappy about needing such skills; it breaks my heart, in fact."

"I will be sure to thank Dolek when I see him."

Juddah leaned back, steeping his fingers beneath his chin. "I was told you were a Therk."

Ethen felt the color rise to his cheeks. "I am, Dommo. On my mahti's side. I was born and raised outside of Kassani."

"Then by your coloring, your father is a Northman."

"So I've been told." Ethen grinned. "I've never met a Therk with blond hair or blue eyes that didn't have some Northman blood. Forgive me, Dommo Juddah, but is there a problem with me being only half Therk?"

"A problem?" Steeped fingers fell to his lap. "Not really. You are simply not what I was expecting."

"May I ask what you were expecting?"

Juddah Luash smiled and leaned forward in his chair. "A darker man with a few more years behind him." And then he laughed. "But it does not matter if you are Northman or Therk, I am in need of a Finder and you come highly recommended. Let us get down to the matter at hand. What do you know of my crisis?"

Ethen forced himself not to fidget in his chair. "Only that you've got an escaped slave that needs Finding."

"And you have no qualms about doing such a thing? Returning a Napooniri girl to her Dommi-sa?"

Leaning back in his chair, feigning indifference, he answered, "I've lived on the Strip my whole life. Slaves are part of my everyday, though I've never had the means to own one myself. There've been slaves in Therk since long before I was ever born. That's not going to change whether or not I have an opinion, so I don't have one."

"I see."

Ethen held his pose. Dolek had done too good a job praising skills he had yet to master; skills he had never used on a human being before. Juddah Luash looked away first. He said, “Perhaps I should give you some background to help you Find her for me as quickly as possible. Then we will discuss what I am willing to pay to have my Zihariel back.”

Ethen snapped to attention.

—*there is only one Zihariel.*

Juddah was rising from his chair, a plush thing that appeared as if it had ensconced Merchant asses in comfort for a hundred years, and would do so for a hundred more. He gestured Ethen through the curtained door.

“I deal in antiquities.” Juddah walked beside him, not ahead or behind; a good sign. “As you can see, I have a great love of them myself. I find it difficult to part with much of what I acquire. Sometimes, it’s impossible. I am a bit like you, Ethen, able to search out treasures of great worth; but where you can Find anything you set your mind to, I uncover relics passing as junk.”

“A great gift itself.”

Juddah nodded. “Perhaps. But useless to me in my current circumstance. It will not help me to find my Zihariel.”

*My Zihariel.* Twice now he had referred to her as such. There was something of longing in his voice, something of sorrow.

“Are you old enough to recall the last Purge here in Therk, Ethen?”

“Barely, Dommo,” Ethen answered. “I think I was fourteen and more concerned with other matters.”

“Ah, fourteen.” Juddah laughed. “Girls and games; I understand completely. But I was already a man during the last Purge. It was brutal. So many slain. So many riches confiscated. Too much lost.

“I am a man of means, Ethen. I am Dommi-sa to a modest household of slaves out of necessity. A Merchant of my standing must hold human chattel if he is to be taken seriously by other Merchants of standing. But I tell you this with a pure heart, I am kind to my slaves. I purchase those most in risk of going to a cruel Dommi-sa. I provide them with a good life. None more so than my Zihariel. Let me show you.”

Hastening his pace, Juddah led Ethen further into his sprawling home, stopping before an uncharacteristic wooden door. The man took a key from his pocket and fitted it into the lock, pushing it open when the mechanism clicked.

“Zihariel’s conservatory.”

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Ethen stepped into the room. The plush carpet beneath his feet was a work of art in lavender and pink and gold and blue, and more sumptuous than he had never seen in all the markets along Uskny's Strip.

The walls were a soft blue, a mimic of the desert sky in those days after drenching rains left the previously parched world alive and lusty. A vast window overlooking a courtyard fountain shimmered rainbows along its surface. *Fo*. A simple word for Therk's treasure, its trademark. Rare glass, even within the land of its making, it was more so in the border towns usually too poor to house such a thing.

Carpet and glass were small wonders compared to the stands and tables and shelves full of every musical instrument Ethen had ever heard, or heard of; and some that he hadn't. Instruments of such adept workmanship, they were treasures in and of themselves. Ethen tried to calculate what they would be worth in a respectable market, not on the streets and alleys of the Strip. He was fairly certain numbers didn't go that high.

"I found her in a cage," Juddah was saying, his hand caressing a long, silver tube of an instrument. "She was such a tiny thing. Dirty and ragged. The last of her family to be sold, along with a little brother I have since discovered was bought by a family in Moscrea somewhere, as a playmate for their little son. There is a clue for you, Ethen. The little brother. She might try to find him. Curse my tongue for telling her of him. You see, there was little I denied her. Almost nothing I would not give her."

"I can see that."

"Life begins and ends in Zihariel's music," Juddah continued. "I saw her in her cage, playing an eflaute like this one, only it was crude and wooden. A toy. My heart knew joy. It knew love. I saw in her what no one else in that terrible place did. I bought her to save her, to nurture her. And I have. Look at what I have given to her! A fortune in the finest instruments. The life of an Imperial Princess. And she ran from me. My friend, you've no idea the pain of it. None."

"How old is she, Dommo?"

"Sixteen."

"And you bought her after the last Purge?"

Juddah nodded. "I believe she was ten when I found her. She is like my own child to me."

Ethen walked around the room, pretending to be interested in the instruments and their placement. He touched a seat cushion here, a music stand there. He waved his hands over several instruments. It was all show.



Finding was a much simpler process, and not a very impressive one. He picked up most of what he needed to know about Zihariel the moment he stepped into her conservatory.

“I can see that you treated her very well, Dommo. I’ll Find her for you. I’ll need to have something of hers, to keep the connection fresh. And a good description. Is there someone who can draw me a sketch?”

“Take her bosbani.” He handed Ethen the silver eflaute he’d been cradling. “It is quite old and very valuable. She cherished it more than any other instrument in this conservatory.”

“Perhaps something less dear to you, Dommo.”

“It was dear to her. That is what’s important. Take it. Guard it. Its worth is nothing compared to Zihariel, but if you return without it, I will have to take action. As for a sketch, there is a portrait I display at her concerts. Come. I will show you.”

The house seemed endless, the rooms opening one into another like all Therk homes. Whether the man was trying to impress him or thought he was fooling him into believing the house was bigger, Ethen said nothing. He simply followed as Juddah led him through the same rooms for the third time.

“Here we are.”

Juddah stood before another wooden door requiring a key to enter. He pushed it open. Ethen whistled long, shaking his head. “She is one pampered pooni,” he said. “Why would she leave all—Dommo? Dommo Juddah?”

The man was leaning on the doorjamb, his back to Ethen. Shoulders shaking and fist clenching, he took several deep breaths before he spoke. “That is not a word we use in this household. Ever.”

Ethen’s brow furrowed. “What word, Dommo?”

“That vile slur you used in reference to my Zihariel.”

“Vile slur? You mean pooni?”

“I said that we do not use that word!” Juddah spun about, his face raged. “Say it again and you will be thrown out of this house! I will see to it that you never find another appointment in all of Therk!”

“Forgive me, Dommo Juddah.” Ethen pressed respectful fingertips to deferent brow. “Some of my best friends in Kassani are Napooniri slaves. It is a word they use themselves. I didn’t know it was a slur.”

“In this household, it is.”

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Ethen held his pose. “Yes, Dommo.”

“If I hear you refer to my Zihariel as such again, I’ll have your tongue cut out.”

“Yes, Dommo.”

“Very well.”

Ethen let his pose fall. Juddah was looking down his long nose at him, his expression one Ethen had been on the receiving end of his entire life.

*You are lower than a pooni, boy, and don’t forget it.*

Juddah pushed past him and into the room. Ethen took a deep breath. “Is that her?” He pointed to the portrait hanging over a bed so grand it could sleep three men comfortably. Juddah took the painting down from the wall. He handed it to Ethen.

“An excellent likeness,” Juddah told him. “And done only last year. She has changed little.”

Ethen studied the portrait, memorizing it. The girl was no beauty, though there was nothing unpleasant in her appearance. She had the aquiline nose indicative of her race, yet the flared nostrils common among Therks who lived along the western coast; those with some Moscrean blood.

“Her hair is sculpted in this portrait,” Ethen said. “I can’t tell. Does she have the dense curls of her people?”

“Of course. Why would she have anything but?”

“She has Moscrean blood,” Ethen told him. “Can’t you see it in her features? She is Napooniri, certainly, but very few of them are pureblooded mountain people. If I remember right, the Purge she was taken in happened somewhere out on the Tinnangar peninsula.”

“Calaira.”

“There you have it,” Ethen said. “Moscrean blood. I’ll stake my reputation on it.”

“An interesting notion I hadn’t considered.”

“It’s a gift.” Ethen shrugged. “Like Finding. It’s probably all part of the same thing. I notice she has no markings. Is that still so?”

“I would have sooner marked my own face than Zihariel’s,” Juddah said. “As far as I am concerned, she has no origins outside of this household, no other purpose than to create music, for which there is no symbol even if I were so inclined to mark her.”

Taking the portrait back from Ethen, he hung it back on the wall, carefully straightening it until it was perfectly balanced. Ethen moved silently about the room, absorbing Zihariel’s imprint upon it. The girl in the

portrait was composed, almost regal, impressions he was not getting from these surroundings. Volatile. Stubborn. Afraid. And hers was not the only presence intimately laced into this room.

“Juddah, darling! Is this Ethen? Why did you not have me summoned when he arrived?”

A tiny woman, blonde and fair, fluttered into the room. *Joo-daaaaa* came his name from her lips. *Eez zees Eeessen?* Ethen had heard such an accent before, during a short-lived stint as a sailor on the Bloodbane Sea, but none so heavy as hers evoking the chill of those far northern mountains of her home.

“Ilsae.” Juddah jumped away from the portrait. “I did not wish to trouble you. I know how upsetting this whole thing has been. Yes, this is Ethen. The Finder recommended to us. Ethen, this is my bride, Ilsae.”

“It is my pleasure, Domma Luash.” Ethen took her fingertips in his hand, bending to touch them to his forehead. Ilsae offered a smile akin to the teety-dancers’ in the Charming Goat.

“*Essen,*” she inclined her head, “You will get our wicked girl back for us?”

“I will Find her. Yes.”

“Excellent. You must be certain to do so before Marta Fetta in Bosbana. I had to beg, borrow and steal favors from every friend I have on the continent to arrange the concert for her. In the Shiel household itself! Do you have any idea the prestige of that?”

“I know the name, Domma Luash,” Ethen told her. “But I’ve never been to Bosbana, let alone the honorable Shiel household.”

“Of course you haven’t.” She chuckled. *Desert rat*, she might well have added. Ethen’s face burned.

“That will be enough, Ilsae,” Juddah said gently but firmly. He pushed her less gently back the way she had come. “I will take care of this matter. Ethen will Find Zihariel and have her back in plenty of time, is that not right, Ethen?”

“I will do my best.”

“No!” Ilsae yanked her arm from her husband’s grasp to advance on Ethen, finger raised and poking. “You will not do your best. You will do it. And if you cannot, do not bother bringing that spoiled little pooni back to this house!”

“Ilsae!”

Turning on her husband, finger still raised, Ilsae made a sound in her throat, half growl, half sob. Hands falling to her sides, fists

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clenched, she fluttered away again without once looking back over her shoulder.

“Forgive my wife,” Juddah said when she was gone. “We are only newly married. She was most excited about the prodigy she found here in my household. I was content to allow Zihariel to perform locally to audiences who adore her as I do. Ilsae has other ideas.”

Ethen nodded, but said nothing. Finding or instinct, or both, certain things were falling into place. Something like discomfort thudded in Ethen’s belly; something like disgust. But he said, “I will Find her for you, Dommo Juddah. What you and your wife do with her is none of my concern.”

The man’s jaw clenched. “Come.” He gestured Ethen ahead of him. “We will discuss the matter of your fee. I am certain you will find my offer satisfactory.”

Ethen moved through the antique Merchant’s home in a golden fog. The wad of notes in his pocket was a thousand times more than he had ever begged or stolen in his life, and that was only for expenses. He was to collect an equal amount as his fee upon Zihariel’s safe return. Guaranteed. He had the signed contract in his possession to prove it.

“Gitmin will see you from here.” The eunuch who had shown him through the house showed him out again. He did not close the door on Ethen until the gatekeeper arrived to lead him away, even if he did look down his nose at him. Ethen could only smile in return; would only smile for days.

“This way, Dommo Ethen.” The quavering of Gitmin’s voice disturbed him. He nudged the older man, tried to catch his eye, but the slave would not look at him. Ethen told him, “Dommo Juddah would only hire someone else to Find her.”

“I know that.”

“She had it good here. Besides, there’s no safe place for her out in the world. Someone else will grab her, sell her, and the person who buys her might not be as good to her as Dommo Juddah has been.”

Gitmin turned pained eyes on him. Before he could speak, a weak call turned them both around.

“Rilli?”

A woman, enormously pregnant, leaned against the wall near the scrolled gates. Gitmin reached her first, instantly putting his arm under hers to lift her to her feet.

"I came to find you. You must let me out, Rilli. Please. You did it for Zihariel."

"No, I did not, little one. And I cannot do it for you either. Come. Let me help you back to Nani and Bibi. They will deliver you."

Ethen feared touching her. He followed when Gitmin guided her to the side entrance built seamlessly into the wall. Only a thin, silver lever and a dim brazier marked its existence.

"Please, Rilli. I cannot do it again. Please!"

"Once, Dommi-sa believed my innocence. Twice, he will not." Gitmin's voice remained gentle. "Do you ask for my death?"

"No. No." She began to sob. She clung to the gatekeeper, doubling over. In that dim light, while Gitmin kept her upright, while the pain spasmed through her body. Compared to Gitmin, her skin was quite fair, more Therk caramel than Napooniri brown. Only the inked symbols along her cheekbones and forehead marked her as a slave.

A circle at the corner of her eye.

Two dots within the circle.

A breeder.

Two live births.

Tomorrow, another dot would be inked either inside the circle or out, depending upon whether the baby lived or died. She could be no more than sixteen.

"Shush-shush, Leele," Gitmin crooned when she could breathe again. "Shush-shush." To Ethen he said, "Wait here, Dommo."

Opening the door, ushering her through, Gitmin and the laboring girl were swallowed by the darkness beyond. Ethen waited. The silver eflaute tucked into his boot pinched at his skin. He'd have to construct some kind of sheath for it, possibly amend a dagger strap. For now, uncomfortable as it was, it stayed. He'd take no chance of losing it. The lovely bud vase he had swiped was going immediately to the nearest sneakfingers market.

The gate man returned and moved past him without even looking up. Ethen hurried after him. "She called you Rilli."

"This way, Dommo Ethen."

"But you said your name is Gitmin."

"It is. Here. In this life."

"Oh."

Gitmin, Rilli, chuckled, a sound that raised the hair on the back of Ethen's neck. "Because I am old, you think I have been a pooni all the years of my life?"

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“I only thought—”

“You do not think!” Gitmin snapped. “No one thinks. Not even I do.”

Taking up the keys, Gitmin unlocked the lovely, scrolled gate. He pushed it open. “Safe journey, Dommo Ethen. May the desert gods never catch you sleeping.”

“Uh, thanks, Rilli.”

“Gitmin.”

“But you said—”

“Good night, Dommo.”

Closing the gate behind Ethen, Gitmin shuffled solemnly back to his gatehouse.

*Buggled old pooni. I'll bring him back something nice.*

Ethen patted the wad of notes, real notes and not the worthless coins that jangled dangerously. He had never held a real note before. Only copper dints. Only silver crowns and halfcrowns and quartercrowns. He needed a purse, a leather one, to keep his fortune safe. Nothing ostentatious. Something simple. Something plain.

And clothes.

Yes. Clothes that fit. Clothes that did not smell like they once belonged to a sick old man during the last vomitous days of his life. And a horse that would make traveling much faster. No. Not the horse. He was off to sea, to Moscrea; the map unfurling in his head told him Zihariel journeyed there. He could almost see her on the deck of a ship, huddled under a tarp for warmth.

Starting back to the squalid yet more familiar southern end of Pashni'it, screams and taunting coming from one of the adjoining streets pricked Ethen's euphoria. He moved cautiously towards the commotion, in the center of which were the flashes of crimson cloth worn by the emperor's Hounds; they had caught something. By the sobbing that took the place of screaming, and the sudden absence of encouraging shouts, whatever that something was had been finished off.

Ethen shuddered, but he moved closer as the crowd disbanded. A pool of blood, sticky and still expanding, stopped him from getting near the body so beaten it had no face to identify. A dead hand twitched; a strong hand; one that had been pulling Ethen out of trouble since he was a slippery little boy left to survive alone on the streets of Kassani.

“Dolek?” He whispered the name like a prayer to the desert gods. Oblivious to the gore, he moved closer to squat at the dead man's side.

Dolek's throat was slit wide; Ethen could see through to spine. Around that severed neck was a crude sign, the words written in the poor man's blood:

*unsankshunned spice dealer*

"Come away from there, boy. Before they see you."

Ethen turned away from Dolek's pulped form. A teety-dancer he recognized from the Charming Goat beckoned.

"The Hounds will beat you first, then ask what interest you have in this matter. Come. Hurry."

Ethen looked again to Dolek, then to the woman. Rising to his feet, he did not look back again. The dancer took his hand, hauling him faster than his feet wanted to move.

"Did you see?" were the only words he could find.

"Enough." She tugged harder at his hand. "Poor man. All for a small packet of varium those scorpions will sprinkle in their soup tomorrow."

*Varium?* Hard to get, but not impossible; and now apparently among the forbidden. Ethen knew too little of such things to guess at why it had changed. Food was hard enough to come by; spices were a luxury he could not afford.

"Where are we going?" Ethen asked.

"Back to the doovah, of course."

Ethen pulled his hand from hers. "The Charming Goat?"

The woman rolled her eyes. She was small and plump and her breasts were quite large. Ethen shook his head to stop his mind from emptying. "I can't go there. I promised not to."

"But you were there earlier. I saw you."

"I promised after that. Besides, there's someone looking for me there. Thanks all the same, but I'm all right now. I'll find a place to stay."

The woman threw up her hands. "If that is your wish. Just stay away from that poor man. You can't help him, and if the Hounds catch you—"

"I know. Beat first, question after."

Ethen touched fingers to forehead and started away. He did not go back to where Dolek lay; where he would lay until the carrion birds left his skeleton. Only then would those living in the area be permitted to toss his bones out into the desert, sign and all. There was nothing Ethen could do for him but keep his final promises to the man who had been if not quite a father, then a friend.

Patting the wad of notes in his pocket, he vowed, "I'll do it, Dolek. I'll change my fortune," and headed instead to the western end of town to

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spend the night in a place that did not stink like death, sweat, and yesterday's milk.

ETHEN BLINKED OUT OF HIS DOZE, his face buried in a pillow that smelled of soap and sunshine. He closed his eyes and burrowed deeper into the softness. Something hard, like a button, poked his cheek.

"Watch it now," a sleepy voice purred, "or I might have a mind to get another go before heading back to my duties."

Ethen smiled and bit her nipple through the sheet. The girl, whose name he did not recall because he had not asked, squealed and wiggled and grabbed at him. She got another go whether she truly wanted one or not.

His body seized again quickly. She bit his shoulder. Pain and pleasure mingled. She held on to his hips, held him inside of her until he was spent. When his body allowed his eyes to open rather than roll spastically in their sockets, Ethen collapsed into the enormous mounds of her breasts.

She kissed the place she had bitten him. "You're a bad, bad man," she whispered. "You forgot to pull out like you promised. Again."

Ethen picked up his head. The little black hairs above her lip glistened with sweat. Piggy eyes were sunk like buttons in her pillow face. Ethen held his smile. He even managed to kiss the lids of those piggy eyes. Anything was better than looking at all those blackened teeth; anything but paying for what he had just gotten for free. Twice.

"I could get pregnant, you know," she cooed, her rank breath tickling his throat. "I might be right this moment, yeh?"

The shudder running up his back pooled like bile in his gut. Pushing off her, out of her, Ethen swung his legs over the side of the bed and hopped down.

He had been down to his last crumbled notes before he realized how easy they were to spend. By the time he disembarked in New Innsmoor, Moscrea's chief port, his wadded fortune was little more than a few crumbled notes, crowns of all denominations and the copper dints he had once begged for. The world of meat and vegetables and rich sauces, of sweet wines and smooth spirits that did not burn going down, of beds and blankets and a warm body to share them with had been easy to fall into. Ethen liked that world. He belonged in it. He refused to sink back into the world of copper dints. The Idiotic Imp was not the finest establishment in New Innsmoor, but it wasn't a flea-ridden pile of rags in the alley. The homely kitchen maid wasn't one of



those beautiful women he'd coaxed or paid into his bed, but she wasn't some poxy scab desperate for human contact. And she had giggled whenever he smiled at her.

Now she was singing to herself like a child. Ethen washed the smell of her off him. She was a nice enough girl if a bit silly. Perhaps simple. He was grateful for the use of her voluptuous body. Big breasts and round bottoms were nice, so nice. Better such lavish softness than a pleasing face. Of course, it was always best to get all in one.

Dressing while she continued to hum, he strapped Zihariel's eflaute to his leg. Now that he was in Moscrea itself, he would have to narrow his search further. The eflaute would tell him. Even now just thinking about it put images into his head.

*A rocky coastline. Lights in the dark. A town overlooking the pounding sea. A small figure fighting the briny wind. A homestead in the gorse.*

"What's that?" The girl had stopped singing to come up on her elbow. Ethen blinked away the images.

"This?" He touched the instrument. "It's an eflaute. A musical instrument."

"Why are you strapping it to your leg like a dagger?"

Ethen grinned. "For much the same reason; to keep it safe and secret."

"You play, yeh?"

"No. It's not mine. It belongs to a girl I'm here in Moscrea to Find."

"A girl?" Her lip quivered. Her eyes opened as wide as such squinty orbs allowed. "You already got a girl?"

Ethen laughed softly. Laying on her side, eyes glistening, her beautiful, naked breasts pressed together. The curve of her waist curved deeper. She was not quite as homely. As long as she did not open her mouth to display those teeth. He sat on the edge of the bed. He tweaked one big, pale nipple. "No, I don't," he told her. "You're the only girl for me."

"Really?"

"I'm a Find—" He coughed. "—a sailor. This belongs to a friend of my—my sister's. I told her I'd return it while I was on leave."

"A sailor?" Her face brightened. She sat up in the bed. "You have a job, yeh? For money?"

The enormity of those bobbling breasts mesmerized. He was already hard again. His brain liquefied. Ethen heard himself grunt, "Lots of money."

"Oh, Ethen! How wonderful! I've always wanted to be rich."

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She dropped back into the pillows. The acrobatics of her breasts were too much to resist. Ethen yanked at his trousers. They only got as far as his ankles before he was on her again, his face buried in her extravagance, saturated in lust. He knew no reason, no caution, and certainly, no preference.

Ethen waved to Inanse. He had a name for her now, learned when her proprietor father who currently stood in the doorway, brow furrowed and arms crossed, had burst into the room screeching it. Once the glory of her breasts were safely hidden away, he was left with the hairy upper lip, the piggy eyes, the blackened teeth and a furious father whose very sharp and scary knife had insisted upon his hasty departure. “Come back,” the man had whispered while Inanse sobbed, “and you’re dead. Yeh?”

“Remember your promise!” she called. “We’ll be married when you return. I love you, Ethen. Forever and ever!”

“Come away from there, you fool of a girl!”

Ethen turned to her father’s growl. He had her by the arm, hauling her back towards the Idiotic Imp. Ethen turned away, picked up his pace.

*She’ll forget you soon enough*, he consoled himself, but he had seen the bloody sheets when she stripped the bed after her father caught them at it. Inanse would never forget him. Whether she waited an eternity or opened her legs for any other man content to ignore her ugliness in exchange for a warm place to port, Inanse would remember him every moment of every day; because he would forever be her heartache; because he was the first, and he was never coming back.

Ethen trotted, then ran towards the town center. He needed a ride. The image of cliffs given him by the eflaute could only be Moscrea’s northwestern coast, near or in the Moval Strait. It would take weeks to reach on foot; Ethen did not have weeks to spare. He’d wasted time along with his notes getting to New Innsmoor.

“Going north?” he called out, turning this way and that. “Going to Moval?”

No one responded, but for one very large man who had growled at him. The market bustled with carts being loaded and unloaded, with vendors and shoppers, the former being mostly slave-marked. He’d only been to Moscrea once, while working that Merchant ship, but Ethen did not recall so many marked faces.

“Going north? Going to Moval?”

"I am, boy. I am. Need a ride?"

Ethen's spin stopped short at the site of crimson coats walking towards him; but they continued on past, chuckling as they did, leaving only the man leaning against a rather small cart. A long-limbed fellow of obvious Therk heritage, his long hair black and unruly as raven feathers, receded slightly from his temples. Sharp featured, dashing in the high, shiny boots and tight-fitted jacket boasting more brass buttons than there were buttonholes, his smile was at once friendly and dangerous.

Ethen found his voice, called out, "I do, Dommo. Where are you heading?"

"I'm going as far as Oesty."

"Is that anywhere near the cliffs?"

"Slightly south."

Hefting his bag higher onto his shoulder, Ethen jogged closer to the man and his cart. As he got closer, he noticed a little dark-haired boy hunkered down on the floor of the driver's seat, playing with two wooden figures.

"I'm in your debt." Ethen extended his knuckles to the Merchant. "I'm Ethen. And I'll be glad to help out in whatever way I can in exchange for my passage, but I want to warn you up front that I've no money to pay you."

"Company is what I need most, trekking through open country. I bore easily." He touched Ethen's knuckles with his own. "I am Rury Raleven. This sturdy pup is my boy, Nyael. Can you say hello to Ethen, son?"

"Hello, Ethen." The boy's voice was husky, his skin Therkian-dark, but his eyes were as blue-gray as Ethen's own. He offered the child his knuckles just as he'd done to his father. Nyael smiled, revealing two missing front teeth, and touched them.

"It seems we're going to be traveling companions. Is that all right with you, Nyael?"

The boy nodded enthusiastically. "You got yellow hair. Like my mamma."

"Do I?" Ethen turned to Rury. "Your wife is a Northwoman?"

"My wife is not." Rury's smile was slightly strained. "But Nyael's mother is, was. She lived in Sisith. I've just come from there. And now I'm off to Oesty with the cargo of fine woolens that I managed to acquire while up north fetching the boy, because a smart Therkian trader never wastes a trip. Isn't that right, Nyael?"

"Right, papa."

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“Fahti, remember?”

Nyael was playing with his figures again, steadfastly ignoring his father. Rury shook his head but ruffled the boy’s hair. “As soon as the grocer arrives with our provisions, we can leave New Innsmoor behind us. If you’ve anything you need to do beforehand, do it now.”

“No, Dommo. I’m ready to leave right this minute.”

“Then if you’ll stay here with the cart and my boy, I’ll see what’s keeping the grocer.”

“Sure, Dommo.”

Ethen did not watch Rury Raleven walk away, his attention instead focused upon the little boy with startling blue eyes. Leaning on the side of the cart, he said, “Those are some fine toys. Did your fahti buy them for you?”

“Papa made them, himself,” Nyael said without looking up. “Mamma said so.”

He smashed one figure into the other, making the one cry out as if in pain. Ethen watched him play, remembering things he hadn’t thought about in a long time; details of a life he thought conveniently forgotten.

“You miss your mamma?”

The boy shrugged. Ethen asked him, “Can I tell you a secret?”

The boy shrugged again.

“My mahti was a Therk,” Ethen told him, “But my papa was a Northman. We’re the same, you and me, except turned around a little.”

The figures in Nyael’s small square hands dipped at odd angles, temporarily forgotten. “Did your mamma die too?”

Ethen nodded. “A long time ago. I was just a little bit older than you are.”

“Did your papa come for you?”

Ethen chuckled, the sound catching in his throat. “No, he didn’t.”

The child’s clear blue eyes stared at him a moment longer with the trust and innocence only very young, much-loved children could manage.

*Were my eyes ever so clear?*

“You want to play with this one?” Nyael held out one of his wooden figures. Ethen took it carefully, setting his pack onto the ground at the same time.

“Sure, thanks.”

“I’ll be the Merchant and you be the customer.”

“Ah, yes, yes! I will buy your oranges. How much?” Ethen mimicked Ilsae’s far-northern accent, making the boy laugh and attempt the same.

They played while the moments ticked by, making funny voices and performing impossible antics with the wooden figures. Neither Ethen nor the little boy noticed those moments passing; and neither Ethen nor Nyael noticed the long-limbed Therk watching carefully from behind a cart just there to the left before, satisfied, moving off to find the Hounds he had sent on their way to answer Ethen's call for a ride north.

ETHEN LEARNED QUICKLY that it was not Rury Raleven who needed occupying, but Nyael. While father often disappeared into his own thoughts, son rarely stopped talking or playing. It was Ethen's job to keep him entertained, especially during their deliveries. In each town they stopped in, Rury left carrying wrapped packages tucked under his arm, and firm instructions to keep Nyael out of sight. He returned with sweets and toys for his son, a wink for Ethen and a smile that lasted the rest of the day.

On these occasions, Rury Raleven was the greatest of traveling companions, eager for conversation. Occupied with his new toys and sweets, Nyael played by himself. Those were the afternoons most pleasantly spent. Then morning would come and Dommo Raleven drifted back into thoughts he never shared, and Nyael required entertaining. Still, Ethen could not complain. Rury fed him, housed him, and carted him where he needed to go. Coming up on Oesty, Ethen was sorry to part ways.

"I have one last favor to ask of you before you leave us, Ethen." Rury looked over his shoulder at the child in the cart bed.

"Of course, Rury. Whatever you ask."

"Oh, my friend, never say that to anyone unless you know what it is they will ask." He laughed. "It is a simple task, but a very important one. I need you to make the delivery in Oesty for me."

Warning jabbed Ethen in the ribs, knocked him on the head, but he said, "My pleasure. It's the least I can do."

"Excellent." Pulling off the road, Rury stopped the cart in the shade of a half-dead tree. The ground beneath was cleared. Large stones circled a fire pit. An obvious resting place, it hadn't seen any recent use. Hopping down from the driver's seat, Rury went to the cart bed and lifted the tarp. Ethen joined him there and saw another wrapped bundle, this one bigger than the others had been.

"Sisithian woolens?" he asked.

Rury winked. "The finest."

"Can I ask why you won't be making the delivery yourself?"

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“I’d be suspicious if you didn’t. It is a long and ridiculous story that will bore you completely. Let’s just say that I have an arrangement with a man who would rather that his stubborn old father, who knows me well, not know about. The bond between father and son can be terrible things when turned on itself.”

“I wouldn’t know.”

“Be glad of that, Ethen. Very glad. Now then, you must listen to me carefully, because if the old man gets even a wisp that I am involved in this, there could be trouble.”

Ethen carried the bundle on his back, his arms looped through the cords bundling it up tight. The tree under which Rury would await him was a short walk from Oesty. Already he could see the clutch of town buildings rising up from the gorse. There was no farmland in Moscrea; only acres and acres of gorse pocked now and again with scrubby trees, and clay. Huge deposits of beautiful, red clay.

Ethen had never been so far inland. His experience with this conquered country remained on the coast until now. Moscrea, he decided, was better left to the Moscreans. He’d take the Strip any day.

But for the crimson-coated Hounds positioned at the edge of town, no one paid him any undue attention when he entered. Oesty was a largish trade hub not far from the western coast. Of course the emperor would have a few of his Hounds in such a place. Ethen was just another trader carrying a rather large bundle on his back. They did not follow.

*Main street. Third right. Count seven storefronts on the left. Go around back. There’s an alleyway between buildings seven and eight, and a cellar door about two thirds of the way down. Stomp on it. Say that your name is Nyael, and you’ve come with the woolens. If you get any answer but, “I’ve been waiting all week for you!” run like you’ve never run before.*

Ethen was no fool no matter how innocent his face. It was exactly that face Rury Raleven had responded to when he’d heard him calling for a ride north. But looks were deceiving; he was no innocent, and Rury Raleven was no woolens dealer. Ethen knew exactly what to do if things went awry.

Third right. Seven storefronts. Ethen turned into the alley between seven and eight, and just as Rury said, there was a cellar door. Hefting the bundle higher on his shoulders, Ethen pounded on the door with his foot.

No response.

Ethen pounded again. He heard something bang below. “Who’s there?”

"It's Nyael! I've come with the woolens!"

Ethen waited, heart hammering, ready to run.

"I've been waiting for you all week!"

Footsteps came up the stairs. Ethen stepped back as the cellar door lifted open and a man's head popped out. A red head from cowlicks to chin. A flame struck in the darkness.

"Come on, come on," he said, waving Ethen down the steps ahead of him.

It took a moment for Ethen's eyes to adjust, but it was not dark in the cellar, only dimmer than it had been out of doors. It was a workroom. Curls of wood scattered about the floor and crunched underfoot. Puppets hung from the ceiling. Dozens and dozens of puppets in all manner of completion. Painted faces smiled down on him. Male faces, female faces, jesters and kings and milkmaids. There were animals too; dogs and horses and lions and sheep and cats and birds. A whole population of puppets like Ethen had never seen before.

"You like my babies, yeh?"

Ethen blinked. "Babies?"

The man was quite a good deal larger than Ethen and had to stoop as not to knock his head on the joists from which his puppets hung. He waved his hand to encompass the workroom. Ethen said, "Oh. Yes. I do. They're a little creepy though."

"Creepy?"

"They're all looking at me."

The big man laughed. "You must have a guilty conscience then! My puppets are never judgmental. If they were, I'd be a blithering wretch. Now, then, you have something for me, yeh?"

Ethen shrugged the bundle from his shoulders. The redhead helped tug it off his back. Taking it to his workbench, he shoved the tools and shavings and puppet parts aside to unwrap it. He soon lost patience with the careful knots and instead picked up one of his curved carving knives and slit the strings. Curiosity knew no caution. Ethen moved in closer. The man unwrapped the outer layer and indeed there were woolens within. He then peeled away the woolens to reveal the red-brown brick of truth that Ethen had carried on his back, past the Hounds. Something like anger, like excitement shivered through him.

"Cassia?"

The man nodded. "Not just cassia. The purest cassia the Empire has seen in fifty years."

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Ethen inhaled the spicy-sweet scent, remembered the flavor spreading across his tongue like fire on a dry branch. "I remember cassia," he said.

"You seem too young, and if you're with Rury, too poor to have ever smelled such a thing. Cassia has been scarce since I was a child, forbidden since before you were."

Dolek's face, his lack of a face, hovered in his mind's eye. What would those Hounds have done to him had they caught him with this, the rarest of all spices? Ethen was quite certain that neither Rury Raleven nor this puppet-maker had the Imperial favor necessary to acquire the sanction.

"Want a taste?"

Caution vanished. "Really?"

The man straightened, rubbing his hands together. "I'm feeling generous. Ah, I've the perfect thing to mix it with."

Moving to a shelf free of sawdust and wood curls, he fetched a cup and bottle made from the deep red clay Moscrea had been conquered for. He tipped wine from the bottle into the cup, added the tiniest pinch of cassia to it. He swirled it steadily, releasing the mellow tang of grapes and spicy-sweet cassia. Lifting it to his shaggy lips, he sipped. He sighed. He smiled and held the cup out to Ethen.

"Cassia," he said. "Go on. Have a taste, yeh?"

Ethen took the cup. He brought it to his lips. The scent brought him back to a half-eaten bun swiped from an abandoned plate. His empty stomach churning, grateful. The taste making him cry like no eight-year old boy cried in public. Tipping his head back as the puppet-maker had done, Ethen let the cassia-tinted wine wash over his tongue.

"Better than sex, yeh? Yeh?" The big man was laughing. Ethen blinked. And then he laughed too. He offered the cup back but the man held up his hand. "I've enough here to sell and enough to keep," he said. "You finish that. Just reward for the young man Rury duped into carrying his ill-gotten goods."

"How did he get this?" Ethen asked, sipping again.

"If I knew, I wouldn't tell you. I'll make my fortune with this, finally be able to get out from under my father's fist." His jaw tightened, but his smile quickly eased it. "I'm Dane, by the way. Dane Isri. And you are?"

"Ethen. Just Ethen. And it was worth being duped for the privilege of this." He held up the cup he could be killed for; would be killed for it he were caught. A shudder trembled his hand, making the spiced wine jump in the cup. He tipped the last of it into his mouth. "Thank you, Dommo Isri. I won't soon forget this."



"You're welcome. And you can drop the Dommo. You're in Moscrea, not Therk."

"We're all in Therk."

"So you say, yeh?" Dane returned the cup and bottle to the shelf. He wrapped the brick of cassia back up again. Ethen wandered about the workroom, inspecting the beautiful, silly, creepy puppets hanging from the joists. He stopped beneath one whose pointed wooden feet were quite a bit larger than all the others around it. Taking a step back, he saw that it was a warrior, complete with sword and shield. Its long legs were bowed, as if it had spent too long in the saddle; its arms extraordinarily burly. The puppet's face was painted a swarthy tone. Its horse-hair wig was black, long and unruly. Ethen smiled. Yet if Dane had meant it to look like Rury, the puppet fell short. The Therk was not brawny, for one thing; the nose was all wrong too. In fact, the longer Ethen looked at it, the more the puppet reminded him of blunt-featured, Therk-dark Nyael.

"How much for a puppet?"

"Which one?" Dane asked.

"The warrior that sort of looks like Rury."

Dane laughed and took it down from its nail. "One of my favorites. Since we're co-conspirators now, I'll let it go for a quartercrown, two dints."

Ethen did not have to look. He knew exactly how much money he had left. Parting with even that little bit was more than he could afford. Still, he pulled the coins from his pocket, he looked up at Dane.

"All right," he said. "But I wonder if I could ask you to paint its eyes blue."

By the time he got back to the scrubby tree where Rury and Nyael waited beside a low fire, a couple of cappos roasting headless and footless over it, Ethen decided he would say nothing about the cassia or the Hounds or the chances Rury had taken with his life. What was there to say? In the end, he hadn't been caught, and he'd been amply rewarded.

Birds eaten, fire crackling, he and Rury leaned back on their elbows and watched Nyael play with his new toy.

"That was very nice of you, Ethen," Rury told him. "I know Dane. He didn't give it to you."

"He gave me a bargain."

Rury chuckled. "That's Dane. Though, to be fair, if he'd known it was for Nyael he'd have sent it along as a gift."

"He knows Nyael?"

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“Since birth,” Rury told him.

Ethen’s tongue itched, but he kept his curiosity to himself this time. “You heading back to the Strip from here?” he asked instead. “Or have you more business to attend to?”

“I accomplished what I set out to do,” Rury answered. “Now we go home. I have an empire to build, and he has a new mahti to woo.”

“He won’t have any trouble. He’s a sweet kid.”

“You don’t know my wife.” Rury chuckled. “Or our son. I’m not sure which one will give him a harder time.”

Ethen smiled. Nyael would win them over. He was certain. “I guess I should get some sleep. The going gets a bit harder for me come morning.”

“You could always go back into Oesty and see if you can find another ride. Dane might be able to help.”

Ethen looked at Rury Raleven, trying very hard not to smirk. “I thought it’d be better to get away from this particular city at this particular time.”

Rury did not crack a smile. “Understood.” He got to his feet, brushing off his hands. “Nyael, time for sleep.”

“Yes, papa.” Instant obedience. It startled Ethen every time. Holding the puppet against his solid, little chest, Nyael slipped into the bedroll he shared with his father.

“Will you still be here when I wake up?” he asked Ethen.

“At least that long, though not long after.”

“Thank you again for the puppet. I’ll keep it nice and I won’t let the strings tangle. I promise.”

“Just have fun with it, Ny. Don’t worry about keeping it like new.”

“I won’t worry,” the boy amended, “but I’ll still mind the strings.”

Rury Raleven laughed softly. “Nothing like his brother. I love them both equally, but that one?” He looked over his shoulder. Nyael was already mostly asleep. “There’s my heart.”

“He’s a good boy.”

“And here we are again at the beginning of this conversation,” Rury said. “So I’ll say good night, Ethen.”

“Good night, Rury.”

Crawling into the bedroll, Rury Raleven took his child into his arms and held him just as Nyael held the puppet. Something squirmed in Ethen’s belly. He looked away, putting more scraggly wood onto the fire before settling into his own blankets. The association leaned precariously close to affection. He was eager to continue his search.

The eflaute strapped safely to his calf quivered as if summoned. Closing his eyes, Ethen let it feed him images until those images became dreams he would remember come morning.

*A Napooniri girl with Moscrean blood. High cliff walls overlooking an angry sea. A musician. An escaped slave. Alone. Afraid. Hungry.*