

## Prologue

### *The package*

The carriage bustled along the dry, dirt road, seeming to hit every pothole it was capable of. Its dark exterior only amplified the outside heat to the inhabitants, the walls as damp as their own skin. Another pothole was found, and the riders were thrown up from their seats, the tallest one hitting his head on the ceiling. He rubbed it gently, yelling at the driver to be more careful. 'You'll damage the package,' he warned, sticking his head out the window. The driver – a lonesome 14-year-old street boy they found on the streets of a minute town – shrugged his shoulders in an apologetic manner, and leant down to speak to the horse.

'I told you we should've taken the other road,' the shorter one of the two men piped, 'This one never gets fixed.'

The taller one stuck his head back in from the window and sat back down. 'And,' he started, 'I told you to drive, not the child.'

The shorter one slumped further in his seat and brought his hat down over his eyes. 'And I told you, I'm sick of being the driver. That's all I've done this whole time, I need to rest.'

'Need to rest?' his companion laughed, 'You drive as if you're asleep anyhow.'

The shorter one peeked out from under his hat and scoffed, signalling the end of their quarrel, the only evidence of his face being a small, pointed beard. In his younger days, he had silver jewellery braided into his facial hair as was an old custom for men of his region.

Another pothole made an appearance, and the taller one beat his fist against the wall, the gold ring he wore on his pinky finger pressing into his skin uncomfortably as he did.

‘One more and she's going to wake up.’

‘Is that such a bad thing? This journey is terribly boresome – I wouldn't mind some entertainment. Besides,’ he continued, nodding his head in the direction of the lump in the corner, ‘The knock on her head should have worn off by now. She'll rise soon.’

The taller one shook his head. ‘I still don't think her ties are tight enough. Did you wrap her wrists as I told you?’

‘Yes, Master,’ the shorter one sighed, the taller one not taking lightly to the mockery. He grunted in response as the shorter one chuckled, and watched the lump in the corner, his left eye twitching from frustration. The heat had been exaggerating this journey to no end, and the potholes in this road only made his mind more active and violently agitated.

‘We should suggest an alternate route to Eneatia so no one else has to travel as slowly as we do.’

A snort came as a response. ‘No one will have to make the journey we have; we are the loyal dogs doing it when no one else would.’

‘Still,’ continued the taller one, crossing his arms over his burly chest, his undrawn sword knocking his elbow, ‘I'd like to have a say in the matter.’

The shorter one turned away from the taller one, always the designator to bring an end to their conversations. He found the only way to pass time on the road was to sleep (when not driving, of course, contrary to his companions' counters) and sleep he did. The road had been long, too long; as to avoid crossing the sea that separated their homeland from the one they stole the package from. Travelling by land added a total of four days to their trip if travelling without rest, whilst sea only took about two, give or take a storm and such. His body had grown old and tiresome to such an assignment, no longer granting him the feats he once was able. His companion, however, was a few

years his junior. Still in good shape, his body allowed him to sit unmoving in a carriage for lengthy rides. The carriage's condition they considered fit only for the transport of slaves – illegal – since the introduction of King Fabian's enslavement laws of late.

The law being seen only as a defect in the King's intelligence, many slave traders from long lines of family trading were forced to find their work elsewhere, as the transport, distribution and payment of slaves became monitored as carefully as a child monitors their stash of sweets. The two men, who cannot seem to agree on any matter, found their mutual business amongst the King's men, implementing the dirty work others turned their noses up to.

The shorter one's rest was soon hindered by the meeting of another pothole, followed by a hasty brake of the carriage and a string of curses by the driver that no fourteen-year-old should know.

'I've had it! I'm going to wring his neck if he-'

The taller one swung open the door of the carriage and jumped onto the dirt road, his companion following to ensure he – in fact – did not wring the boy's neck. Upon descending the carriage steps, the two men found one of the wheels belonging to the carriage off to the side of the road, watching as the carriage wobbled uneasily. The taller one stuck himself under the empty space where the wheel used to be and held it up on his back, showboating his natural brute strength, whilst the boy attempted to fix the wheel back onto the carriage.

'This would never have happened if-'

'Oh, would you stop it! I've had it up to here-' yelled the shorter one, motioning with his hand to the top part of his head, '-with your complaints. Fix the wheel and get back inside.' He turned towards the carriage and stepped in, leaving a trail of dust in the space behind him. Unfamiliar

with his companion's outbursts, the taller one huffed, then strained as the weight of the carriage became heavier. Only a second or so later did its weight resume back to what it had been originally. From it, the short one appeared, accompanied by a look of worry that plastered itself over the entirety of his face.

'She's gone.' he announced, however too quiet for the taller one and the boy to hear, the taller one rolled his eyes.

'Talk louder, Levinson,' he said, making no attempt to hide his annoyance, 'no one can hear you at such volume.'

Levinson stuck his head through the door of the carriage and then popped back out as if she would materialise from the air. 'I said "She's gone."'

A beat of silence followed as the unaccounted-for disruption was understood. A murder of crows landed from overheard and watched on, cocking their heads as they waited for a body to drop that could become their lunch. With the way the taller one's temper had evolved, it would not have been much of a surprise.

Eventually, the silence was cut.

'WHAT!' exploded the taller one, standing up from underneath the carriage, their transport consequently falling on an angle to the dirt. The boy had barely dodged the massive weight as it fell, pushing himself from his knees back onto his bottom and attempting to scoot away. The horse tied to the carriage neighed and strained against its reins as they attempted to drag the horse down to the dirt, and the boy darted off to free it.

'What do you mean she's gone?'

'I mean, she's not here.'

The taller one ran a hand through his hair, sending black strands in all directions out of frustration. He kicked his leg in the direction of the crows, telling them to 'Get' - his Southern accent making it sound more like 'git'.

'I don't understand,' Levinson said, scratching his head as if to rid of an itch, 'We are the only ones on this road, far past what the eye can see.'

The taller one scrunched his face and looked towards the sun. They were losing daylight, and they still had a day's ride ahead of them before they met the receiver of their package. But how can you deliver a package no longer in your possession? They could possibly turn around, or ditch the carriage and stage it as an attack. One of the wheels was already off, so they were part of the way there, and if they gave the boy some more coins to buy his silence, he could ride off with the horse to a nearby village - wherever that may be.

As for him and Levinson, accepting a grim fate was undoubtedly expected.

'Okay okay okay,' started Levinson, 'Let us just take a step back and assess the situation.'

The taller one nodded and wiped his palm across his mouth, sweat forming on his top lip from the stress of the situation. How could they have been so careless? So disappointing to the Crown under its orders? They were given one job - quite simple really. Steal the package, and deliver the package. How could they get it so wrong? They would be frowned upon if they arrived at their destination without what was required, and if they didn't arrive at all, that would bring even more shame to their names.

'I say we turn back.' The taller one spoke up, turning away from Levinson on his heels. 'Return the boy to a village with some coins to keep him quiet and we can catch the next ship to \_\_\_\_ and no one would even know we were gone until the carriage was found -'

He turned back to his friend to find him sprawled across the dirt, his hat off to one side, and his eyes barely open.

'I beg to differ,' came a quiet voice from behind.

There was a sword at his throat. The steel was cold and pressing into his skin. He tried to reach for his own in its scabbard but it was gone. Blast. This was not the day for him.

Unprepared for such an attack, the taller one scrambled his brain for ideas. You could say that a man in his profession should not have to spend such important time idled by his unpreparedness, but he was entirely caught off guard. Levinson and himself had not arranged any plans to be implemented upon being attacked, as their journey brought them through the middle of – *absolute* – nowhere. When considered, they were ultimately bound to the confinements of their carriage unless needed - such as picking an urchin off the street and paying him to drive.

He couldn't see his attacker, nor did he know how many they were and how they were able to attack Levinson in the short time he wasn't facing him. From where he was standing, he could see the faintest of lumps on the forehead of his friend.

The taller one raised his hands in surrender, signalling to the unknown man behind him that he possessed no weapons on his person. Maybe if he died out here, his name would not be dragged through the mud but instead praised for his acts of service to the Crown.

Even if the Crown was unaware of his doings.

'I'm sure we can work this out,' he gulped, a second before sending his elbow behind him, aiming for the gut of his attacker. However, this move was pre-meditated and he made contact with only air, the sword at his throat disappearing smoothly as he stumbled around. A boot made contact with his chest and he landed on the ground not too far from Levinson, whose sword was also out of his custody.

The sun was beginning to set behind the trees, casting the shadow of his attacker upon the ground, making it hard to see who or what he was up against.

They stood in view, sword in hand pointed to the chest of the taller one. Levinson groaned as consciousness flooded back to him, his hand pressing into the lump on his head as his surroundings unblurred.

‘What the-’

‘If it means anything to you, your bounds were not tight enough.’

The two men on the ground slowly turned their heads towards each other, Levinson opening his mouth first.

‘I told you the knock had worn off.’