

Chapter 1

"Who would've guessed kidnapping the princess would be so easy?" The question rose up from the near-deafening din of the pub and caught Vrosk off guard. The urge to simply ignore the whispers deeper within was strong, but curiosity was stronger. Vrosk pushed himself out of the stool he had occupied for the past two hours and paused, taking a moment to stretch stiff muscles. In most places, his ashen skin and faded hair would stand out, but the darkly candlelit pub cast the same shadows on him as it did on every other patron, lending him the ability to blend in that a Husk never had anywhere else. The heavy black cloak draped across his broad shoulders helped to disguise his nature even further.

Thankful for his enhanced senses, Vrosk determined the table of four from which the boasting had come, and was pleased to spot an empty table nearby. Stumbling so as to convey a greater state of intoxication than he felt, Vrosk collapsed in the chair nearest the boaster, facing away from the drunken man. A sharp intake of breath from the group around the target table told Vrosk that he had caught their attention, but a prolonged, deep sigh followed by regular snoring quickly put them back at ease.

"Stupid drunk 'ad to come bother us, did 'e?" The next moment, Vrosk heard the man spit, but showed no sign of noticing. He had planted himself as close as possible to the potential kidnappers and wouldn't sabotage any chance at gathering information. "'is snoring is gonna give me a 'eadache."

For the next few minutes, the only sound from the adjacent table was that of men drinking, and Vrosk began to worry his presence had halted any further discussion of the princess. Just as he was preparing to "reawaken", the conversation resumed. "I've always heard Prince Addan is a fair and prompt employer, but we've had the girl for a day and a half and there hasn't been a whiff of payment." This was a third voice, sounding much younger than the other two.

"Quit yer whining Squeak, he told us he would be checking she was secured in person and we haven't even met with him yet. Expect payment after we see him." This was the original voice that had drawn Vrosk over. A grumbling sound indicated that Squeak was not too pleased with this answer. "Besides, he can't be arousing suspicion with his cousin missing. The whole palace and all their estates are under lockdown while the King's Guard searches for Vitalia."

Despite his Commandant rank, Vrosk had heard nothing of a lockdown. Not entirely surprising, the royal family was notoriously private in general and further expressed an extreme derision towards their Husk soldiers, choosing to keep them in the dark as often as possible. The King's Guard was made up entirely of privileged knights of noble birth, not a member coming from the ranks of Husks who had seen actual combat. Therefore making it no great surprise that they had been unable to stop a kidnapping.

Still, previous knowledge of their hypocritical hatred of his kind, and blatant refusal to acknowledge the utility of the Husks, couldn't stop Vrosk from clenching his teeth in anger. He let no other indication of his rage escape. It was imperative that his four neighbours think him unconscious. But his mind couldn't help latching on to the mention of Prince Addan. If the gossip of these four lowlifes was to be believed, the second in line to the throne had arranged for the kidnapping of the heir to the kingdom. Vrosk couldn't imagine the logic behind such a scheme. If ever any whiff of his involvement was discovered, disinheritance would be the last of his concerns. Vitalia Orren had spent the previous nineteen years of her life being adored and

nearly deified by both the royal family and common folk alike. Nothing would save the prince from the collective wrath of an entire nation once his guilt was discovered.

"Still," muttered the youth called Squeak. "It would be nice to have some guarantee of our reward. It's not like we stole some pretty jewel, we have a princess locked in a cellar!" The sound of a hand smacking a skull followed the end of the sentence, and the fourth voice, a woman's, sounded over the din of the pub. "Idiot! Would you shut up? I can't believe you three talking like no one could possibly hear you! This isn't something we should be yelling about at the top of our lungs!"

"I don't really see the issue, Jazzy. The Wallop and Pound ain't exactly known for its pro-royal stance. I doubt you'd find a single patron 'ere who wouldn't cheer our actions. Tha's why we chose this place to lie low." This was the second voice; the man who couldn't be bothered to pronounce his h's.

There was a long pause before Jazzy started speaking once more. "Princess sure looks funny without any makeup, don't she? Skin as white and colourless as a corpse." The statement was followed by a hoarse wheezing that Vrosk struggled to identify as laughter. The weak reassurances of the other thug had clearly quieted her doubts.

The four thugs went back and forth for a time, seeming to enjoy a chance at mocking a member of the royal family. Finally, Vrosk heard the sound of chairs scraping along the floor and the ruffling of clothing as four bodies rose, as if in response to an invisible cue. Any confusion he felt soon dissipated as a new, but familiar, voice rose over the din of the pub. "You claim you have done as asked, and I have come for proof."

Prince Addan. Former heir to the throne and one of the generals of the military. He was known among the Husks for being unnecessarily sadistic, and impressively stupid. It was no great shock to Vrosk to learn that thugs' earlier claims of working for him were true. It was, however, somewhat surprising that he would lower himself to meeting his hirelings in a place like The Wallop and Pound.

No more words were exchanged between the prince and his thugs. Instead, the shuffling of clothes and plinking of coins indicated they were gathering their things to leave. He continued to snore at regular intervals but paid close attention to the sounds of their movements as they got further from him. His ability to catch their trail within the next few minutes would rely entirely on his enhanced Husk senses. Not ideal, but to do anything else would jeopardize his ability to follow the thugs to the location of the princess.

Why am I doing this? He couldn't keep the thought from nagging at his mind, nor could he provide a satisfactory answer. His had been a life of slavery to the royal family with little reward in return for his service. In Gundr, the firstborn male child of any peasant family was considered state property and taken at the age of six to be made into a Husk. Vrosk had not tasted a drop of true autonomy since he had first been taken, nineteen years prior. His hatred for his oppressors had only grown over the years, and rarely had he found a redeeming quality in any member of the nobility or the royals themselves.

Only his rank of Commandant gave him the freedom to be out in a public pub as he was. Meanwhile, his subordinates were sequestered to the compound encasing the Husk barracks, and leave outside its limits only rarely granted. He owed nothing to a single member of the Orren family, as he had already given every ounce of his individuality to their forced servitude. In truth, he could find very little logical reason to feel so invested in thwarting whatever plot Prince

Addan had cooked up for his cousin. But there was no denying that he was going to track the group of criminals to where they held the kidnapped princess, and he would make them pay.

Resolved in his path despite nagging misgivings, Vrosk rose from his chair. His transformation from human to Husk had granted him the senses of a superior beast, so he stood for a moment and allowed the smells in the pub to settle over him. It was certainly easier now for him to pick out the scent he would need to follow, as Prince Addan was quite familiar to him. In addition to his duties as a general, the man was employed as a Husk disciplinarian and his presence was a staple of the barracks. His sweaty, sour, and unwashed smell was quick to pick out with a trained application of focused Power. With the scent identified, Vrosk could now follow Addan with an ease that would put a trained hunting dog to shame. The prince would not be getting away.

As he emerged out into the cool night air, Vrosk's eyes adjusted to the darkened streets of Orren's Bay, the harbor city capital of Gundr. The only place he had ever called home. He was not in a safe part of the city, and the looks he received as he tracked the prince's scent told him he was not free of suspicion from passersby. He knew he was an intimidating man. Taller than average for a Gundr Islander, he was broad and thick muscled in a way that could be seen through all but the thickest of clothing. Of course, his intimidating appearance was not without its advantages. Even in dangerous district such as The Gilded Alley, he was left alone and unquestioned.

His pace was measured as he wound his way through numerous side streets, keeping to the darkness outside the halo of oil lamps wherever possible. Vrosk knew that he could not be spotted, as the paranoia of his prey was likely peaking, so he did not allow himself to quicken his pace, even as the scent he followed weakened with distortion from the powerful spring wind. Experience told him, should the scent ever seem lost, that all he need do was search in a spiral from the place he'd lost it and he would soon find the trail again.

Before long, Vrosk was surrounded by the most decrepit hovels in Orren's Bay. Only his Husk eyesight allowed him to see through the oppressive darkness that surrounded him. Addan's scent mingled with the overpowering smell of rotting wood and mold. No building was more than a single, rotting level, and none of them had anything to truly serve the purpose of a door. Perhaps most importantly, the foot traffic that had remained a trickle to this point, was finally completely absent. The desolation that had reached this part of the Gilded Alley was absolute, and Vrosk couldn't stop a shiver from traveling down his spine. It was more than likely that this area had served as a staging ground for incoming refugees, and refugees were rarely treated well. Often, they were sold directly into slavery, rather than given the chance to make it on their own. Even still, the waves of the displaced and destitute were near constant. It wasn't a large ship ride from the main continent which was absolutely dominated by the devastation of the Cipher Empire's quest for conquest. This area had recently been set afire, likely by one of the factions within Orren's Bay dissatisfied with the king's decree to let refugees in at all.

Teeth gritted in disgust, Vrosk rounded another rotting hovel and paused. With an increased application of Power, his eyes formed the image of person-shaped shadows across a paved open expanse that may have once been a courtyard. Five shapes huddled over something that he could not discern and the hushed sound of voices drifted over, muffled by irregular gusts of wind. "azzy...lost the key...can't...in...open...anyone!" The voice was enraged, but Vrosk couldn't discern who it was. Blurred motion was all Vrosk could see for several minutes, and no more

discernible words made their way to him. The use of more Power would improve his perception, but the more he conserved now, the more he could use when it counted. So he refrained. Then, with a clang that echoed off the surrounding decayed structures, he saw what must have been a cellar door swing open to the left of the group of figures. One by one, all but a single silhouette disappeared into the darkness. Someone had been left behind to guard.

Perhaps thinking to aid their night vision, the lone guard refrained from lighting a torch, seemingly relying on the distant glow of gaslight from the inhabited parts of the city. It would do little to help their chances against a Husk. With the calm self-assurance of an experienced predator, Vrosk carefully circled behind the guard. His height aided him as he wrapped an arm around the neck of the cloaked figure, his other arm snaking across the first and bracing knuckles against the nape of the guard's neck. The movement was so fast and practiced that the only sound the guard could make before his trachea was compressed was a gasp of shock.

With the thug's body disposed of behind one of the many crumbling shacks, Vrosk carefully lifted the door leading into the earth. To his mild relief, he realized that the haphazardly carved tunnel below him was glowing with torchlight. He wouldn't need to continue straining the Power within him any further.

The squelch of his booted feet sinking into the muddy tunnel was louder than he would have expected. Vrosk knew the ordinary humans further in wouldn't notice a thing. However, he would not risk alerting the kidnapper, and was mindful of his footfalls as he began his descent into the surprisingly extensive tunnel system. This was no ordinary cellar. It wouldn't surprise him to learn that this particular group of thugs more commonly employed these tunnels for smuggling.

The torchlight grew incrementally stronger as he wound through the subterranean paths and faint voices soon filled the air. "Not a hair on her harmed, just as you asked..." His ability to distinguish the conversation was interrupted by the sputter of a nearby torch, but Vrosk slowed to a stop to plan his next course of action. A head on assault was well within his capabilities, but the consequences might mean days of recovery, and he knew disciplinary action would follow. Even if his exhaustion was incurred in defense of the princess, there would be consequences. His superiors weren't known for being understanding or forgiving and he doubted that the revelation of Prince Addan's betrayal would mitigate that.

As he stood debating his plan of attack, a distinct sensation he had missed on his approach promptly overwhelmed him. Every cell in his body tingled with an intensity like thousands of tiny needles embedded subdermally. Shocked, Vrosk stumbled against the dirt tunnel wall behind him, nearly setting himself alight on a torch. A husk? The thought didn't make sense. Not only was his physical response infinitely more intense than it had ever been, even to the strongest Husk, but no one here could be a Husk. Husks were state owned slaves, created by Gundr's military. An escaped Husk was hunted by other Husks, using this same sensation that now overwhelmed him, and executed. The princess? Unable to contain his mounting wonder, Vrosk stumbled to the next bend in the tunnel, beyond which he was sure the Prince and his thugs had congregated.

Five figures stood on the other end of what appeared to be a large underground storehouse, although the rows of tall wooden shelves stood empty. Through the gap between two thugs, Vrosk spotted the princess and their eyes magnetically locked. Despite the distance between them, he could discern that she had been bound to a chair, and she was clearly gagged. The

tingling under his skin became nearly unbearable as he found himself unable to tear his eyes from Princess Vitalia.

Her porcelain skin seemed to glow brighter than the torches lighting the room. There was a faint aura around her, where she could be seen around the guards, like a prism refracting light. Her lilac coloured eyes were wide with fear, and they too seemed to produce their own light. Belatedly, Vrosk realized that he was witnessing the drawing in of immense Power, a realization supported by the searing pain engulfing every nerve in his body. There was no time to brace himself as the storehouse and surrounding tunnels imploded.

Vitalia's eyes watered in the dark, cold confines of the underground storehouse. She was blindfolded, but her special sense was as acute as ever. She knew from the movement of air over her skin that she was in a large, cavernous space, with a single entrance at the opposite end of the room from her location. She could guess that the ceilings were around fifteen feet high, and that the distance from end to end was around fifty feet. In her childhood, her parents had often made a game of her 'sixth sense', seemingly fascinated by her ability to describe her surroundings without her sense of sight. Her accuracy in sightlessly assessing the distances between objects was unrivaled.

If she focused, she could do more than feel the air movement. When her concentration was at its peak, she could feel the earth around her like an extension of her own skin. She'd made the mistake of telling a boy at court of this ability, and he had called her crazy. Since then, her ground sense had remained her secret and she had refrained from using it unless she knew no one would see her enter the trance its use required.

She felt no hesitation in using it now, and knew that the guard left behind by her kidnappers was in a chair some twelve feet in front of her. She could feel the four legs of the chair, the two legs of the human, and the four legs of a table like they were pressed against her own skin. More disconcertingly, she could feel the combination of her own legs and the chair she was tied to against the earth beneath her. It took a significant amount of focus to not fully dissociate from her body when she tapped her earth sense, but the nexus between her body and that of the earth was always the most challenging in this regard. It had taken years of practice to stay grounded in herself. An additional challenge would present itself whenever she tried to push her earth sense beyond one thousand square feet, which the storehouse itself was quite close to. Her solution was to narrow her awareness into thinner, but longer strands. By doing so, she was able to feel under herself (she could only extend the sense out from the nexus of her body), in a straight line to the guard, to the exit, and up along the winding tunnel until her awareness split around the edge of an opening. At its widest, her snake of awareness was perhaps three feet.

She kept her trance, happy for the blindfold. The guard would not notice her wide, vacant stare as she meditated. Nor the light her eyes produced, which she was tangentially aware of as they glowed against the dark fabric tied around her head. Sight was incidental when she was in her trance. An afterthought.

Despite her intense focus, her mind could still wander. She thought back to her kidnapping, and her mouth closed around the gag in an attempt to grit her teeth, forcing her to suppress a cough. She didn't know who was behind it, her kidnappers had been careful not to mention any names when in her presence, but she knew it had to be one of the people involved in assigning her guards. The kidnapping had been clever. Over the last number of months, several new

guards had cycled through the regular roster, never at the same time. Finally, on the day she was kidnapped (she still couldn't guess how long it had been since the kidnapping), three of her kidnappers had formed the core of her guard. It was hard to discern, due to whatever concoction they had used to sedate her, but she was fairly certain she had been whisked from her rooms in the palace when most of the staff was in bed for the night. It had made for a simple escape when the guards could merely tell others on duty that they were taking her to see the physician after she fell ill from bad shellfish.

Vitalia was drawn back to the present when she felt a jolt of energy at the edge of her awareness. The kidnappers had returned. A moment later, she felt the impact of an additional set of feet. Their employer? With some effort, she extended her earth sense to the ground above the tunnel, and there felt another set of feet. A guard. Good. She would soon discover the identity of her captor. Anticipation caused perspiration to slick her skin, despite the cold. The glow against the blindfold grew stronger, lilac on black. She knew from many late nights of experimentation that her skin, when seen in close quarters, would be iridescent. The power of the earth was being siphoned into her whole being, igniting her senses. It would surely destroy her.

There was no time to think of supposed risks. Vitalia couldn't guess the intentions of her captor, but they certainly weren't innocent. She would not be made subject to the machinations of some criminal with the audacity to kidnap the heir to Gundr. If she should die, then she would be sure to take them out with her. She steadied herself for her kidnappers' approach.

"Remove the blindfold." The voice was dull, bored, and familiar. As the blindfold slipped from around her glowing eyes, Vitalia stared daggers into her arrogant cousin. If not for the gag, she would have spit at his feet. Even in his peasant rags, he was the picture of a proper Gundr nobleman. Broad shoulders, short black hair, deep chestnut skin, and a cold, detached demeanor. "Hello Vitalia, you're looking well." The comment was accompanied by a self-satisfied smirk, and Vitalia could hardly suppress unleashing a tremble through the earth. but there could be no warning of what was to come. At the same time, another set of feet impacted on her ground sense, through the hole in the earth. This newcomer felt...different, somehow. He seemed to reverberate with the same energy as the earth, if only faintly. There was no doubt that he had a stronger connection with the earth than the people surrounding her.

"Boss, the plan worked so well. She didn't suspect a thing!" The guard that had stayed with her throughout her ordeal giggled and jolted Vitalia from her analysis of the new presence. By the torchlight, she could see a glint in his eyes that betrayed mania. He was not mentally well.

Addan ignored the comment, appearing to savour his moment of triumph. "You stole my throne, little girl. I'd like it back." He raised a perfect eyebrow, as though waiting for her reply. Nostrils flaring, Vitalia snorted with anger and snot escaped her nose. Addan's lip curled at the impropriety. "Disgusting. Grandfather would have the kingdom believe you are an angel, sent to save us. But you're as filthy as the rest of us." The statement punctuated the start of a drawn out silence, as Vitalia and her cousin stared each other down.

The manic thug twitched for some time, growing increasingly animated as the silence stretched on. Finally, he could not contain his thoughts any longer. "What of our reward? She's been delivered just as requested. Whisked away from the palace in the dark of night. No easy feat, you know. You might have got us into the palace, but the planning. It, it was endless. And

look at her! Not a hair on her head harmed, just as you asked!" The youthful kidnapper was jabbering now, excited. He didn't catch the glare Addan shot him.

"We can discuss that, when the ransom is in." Her cousin's tone was final, and it silenced the thug. Vitalia had no further interest in what her kidnappers had to say. She would be ransomed, she had to assume, to her grandfather. So Addan can retake the throne? The thought was ridiculous. Such a plan would never work. Not only was the king stubborn, but he would lie to get her back, and then recant and arrest his grandson. Addan's leverage wouldn't work, unless she disappeared. There had to be more to the plan, but Vitalia would not allow events to progress to its fruition.

Over the course of hours, Vitalia had been drawing the earth's energy into herself. Despite her limited practice, she had long ago learned of the internal kinetic energy of the earth, and it was ripe for her use. By now, she could see the glow of her skin, which was drenched in sweat and vibrating with power. As her earth sense reached out, and beyond any capacity she had ever attained before, her eyes locked with those of a figure cloaked in distant shadows of tunnel torchlight.

This figure was the odd presence she had felt at the lip of the tunnel. A Husk. She realized, as her enhanced sight revealed his grey skin despite the lack of light. Never had she been allowed contact with his kind and had always been taught to fear them. But he did not appear to be the deadly monster her parents had always portrayed. Even at a distance, she could see awe expressed plainly on his face. Certainly not an emotion befitting the embodiment of destruction. His eyes were locked with hers and she felt a glimmer of regret as she pulled at the edges of her earth sense, attempting to flex the earth like she would a muscle. The result was the world around her contracting to a finite end.

Vrosk awoke, drowning. Except, he soon realized, despite his panicked state, that he was not drowning in water. Gundr's military power was largely in its navy, so he was no stranger to the perils of the sea. But what filled his lungs now was much heavier than water, and it burned with an intensity he had rarely experienced.

As the realization dawned that he was choking on chunks of dirt, Vrosk drew on copious amounts of Power. Enough of it to guarantee he would be Hibernating for at least a week. The increased Power energized his muscles to beyond human limits and he began to claw his way upwards, a direction he could sense without really knowing why. The same instinctive sense of direction had saved him from drowning when naval battles had not gone his way.

While the Power that now flooded him could sustain his life despite the utter lack of oxygen, an extended period without would still do extensive damage to his health. His body was burning as it yearned for a breath of air. In the utter darkness of the earth, his eyes produced hallucinated bursts of light that provided their own source of distraction. Despite the pain, he never wavered in his climb upward. It was no small feat, to move through an incalculable amount of earth.

As the pain within swelled to a crescendo that would imminently incapacitate him, his hand broke the surface of the disturbed soil. It was an involuntary spasm that allowed his head to break the surface and begin coughing up dirt.

Despite the darkness, the fading light provided by distant gas lamps was nearly blinding after the utter darkness of his earthen internment. It was especially disorienting with so much Power

still actively igniting his senses. At the edges of his field of view, the gray world presented by his superhuman eyes blurred into a darkness that he knew forecast Hibernation. It wouldn't be long before he collapsed. Rarely had he been taken so close to the edge of Power overconsumption, especially without a battle to necessitate its abuse.

As he sputtered out a last chunk of dirt, Vrosk groaned and let the sensations of his body wash over him. He knew he couldn't be too far from his location at the time of the tunnel collapse. Logically, the princess had to be nearby, even if his ascent to the surface hadn't been direct. However, the tingling that had been so intense even some distance from her was now hardly a prickle. She was alive, but certainly no longer actively drawing Power. And, unfortunately, his best guess had her located well below him. He was not done digging through the earth, so he began again.

His progress was slow. With his body so close to Hibernation, Vrosk could draw on no more Power than that which enhanced his senses. His vision continued to blacken as he moved chunk after chunk of broken dirt. It was a detriment that his ability to sense others using Power could not truly tell him a direction, so while he dug down, he also had to dig outward. All he could be certain of was that the princess was below him, as the only intense tingling he felt was in his feet.

Any doubt he had harboured about saving the princess was now gone, if only out of necessity. To fail to save her now would assuredly be his end. If he were to return to the barracks covered in dirt and needing a week long Hibernation without explanation, he would become the prime suspect in her disappearance, particularly now that the prince was missing too. Neither his lack of motive, nor his inability to gain access to the princess would stop the populace, or the king, from condemning him. Husks made perfect scapegoats. Every ordinary citizen of Gundr was taught to fear them from early on.

So Vrosk dug, guided by the slow build in tingling intensity. Only once did he waver, when a burst of the sensation spread up to his lower back. It was quickly gone, and Vrosk had to assume the princess had unconsciously drawn more Power, likely to further stave off her impending death (though that could not explain why it would so quickly fade). However, he was single minded in his task, and never allowed himself to stop.

He felt utter relief as the soil beneath his questing hands finally parted around the outstretched arm of the princess. A burst of energy aided him in quickly uncovering her head and he was about to attempt to clear her airway, after pulling the gag free from her lips, when she began spontaneously breathing on her own. Astonished, Vrosk stared at her. It was as though her time interred in the earth had not affected her at all. Certainly not like him, with his lungful of dirt and impending coma.

The thought of Hibernation jolted him back to action. "Princess, we have to get you to safety," he said it loud, determined to wake her. When his words elicited no response, he began to shake her shoulder and repeated his command to wake up. The thought that she was herself in a state of Hibernation occurred to him and he felt a stir of panic. Undoubtedly, she had used an excessive amount of Power. Any normal Husk would have been consumed. To get away with only Hibernation as a consequence would be incredibly lucky. Princess Vitalia was not ordinary.

Resigned, Vrosk drew back. The princess was not stirring. He would have no protection from the wrath of his superiors without her to vouch for him. His only option was to run. But where?

There was no good answer. Anywhere he ran would only serve as a temporary sanctuary. His comrades would hunt him down.

A recollection of hushed legends told in the Husk initiate barracks flooded him. At the peak of The Dragon's Fang, the tallest obsidian spire in Gundr, a flock of wyverns made their nest. Supposedly, a Husk of sufficient Power mastery could bond with one of these vicious creatures. Vrosk had always doubted these claims. If this legend were true, then the Gundr army would surely be filled with bonded Husks. A strong navy such as theirs could only benefit further from aerial combatants. However, he had to acknowledge that he would seek out any solution to his current predicament, rather than resign himself to a swift execution. Not that he would be able to get much further in his current state.

Even so, he could not leave the princess exposed to the elements as she was. Getting her somewhere resembling safety would further push him past his limits. The futility of his situation made his shoulders slump. Death to the Husk that covets Power. An initiate's mantra; a warning against overconsumption. Failure to heed a child's warning would be his undoing.

Vrosk brushed aside the remainder of the soil covering Vitalia and pulled her into his arms. His night of drinking his woes away had certainly gone awry. As he rose, his feet carried him towards distant lamplight while the acuity of his vision continued to fade. Time was running out.

With senses fading by the step, he didn't notice a large rock intercepting his path. Before he could do anything to brace himself or protect the princess, Vrosk fell. Vitalia's limp form landed awkwardly under his weight, and his stomach turned in dread at the result.

"What. The. FUCK?" The exclamation was unexpected, but relieving. Also unexpected was the strength with which Vitalia was able to push Vrosk away. With practiced ease, she had drawn her shins and forearms together underneath him, rolled to her right hip, and used her left hand to push herself off his shoulder, and out from under his weight.

It was all Vrosk could do not to collapse from the weight of his relief. "I'm sorry, Princess. I had to dig you out of the rubble you created, and then, when you wouldn't wake up, I decided I would need to carry you into town." As he spoke, Vitalia pushed herself to her feet and brushed dirt off the thin, dirty garment that covered her from shoulders to mid thigh. Belatedly, Vrosk realized that the only thing insulating her from the cold night air was a nightgown.

Vision fading further, Vrosk stumbled to his feet and clumsily pulled the cloak from around his shoulders and offered it to the Princess. "I'm cold, so you must be really cold." Was all he managed to say.

"You are not well, are you?" Vitalia asked as she wrapped herself in the heavy fabric.

"Perhaps I can now return the favour you did me by pulling me out of the ground."

Unexpectedly, she grabbed his arm and wrapped it around her shoulder, a maneuver clearly meant to support him. "I will ensure you are properly rewarded. I am sorry for what I had to do. I did not wish to hurt you."

Vrosk grunted in acknowledgement, but could make no further sound. The trivial effort of catching himself from his fall, and then getting back up, was the last he could muster. All he could manage now was an attempt to not completely collapse against the princess as she tried to guide him back into town.

Vitalia had never been so utterly grateful to another person before in her life. Despite the rudeness of her awakening, she could not keep from smiling as she supported the weight of a very exhausted Husk. However, with him incapacitated, she would need to keep her guard up. She was well aware that her nobility would make her a target in the seedier parts of Orren's Bay.

The sounds and smells of the inhabited parts of the capital flooded her senses as she finally emerged into the light of gaslit streets. It was apparent that she was in one of the more destitute districts. Luckily, the time of night meant that very few people were active and the cloak Vrosk had given her would help disguise the strangeness of her appearance.

Not allowing her lack of familiarity with her surroundings to hamper her, Vitalia struck out towards the most concentrated source of light she could find. She needed to find the city guard, and fast.

The hovels that had marked the edge of the Refugee Zone soon changed into proper masoned buildings, though evidently still improperly cared for. Even in the lamplight, she could see the dirt and grime that had gathered as the owners and occupants alike neglected the area. Filthy streets such as these were a foreign world to a woman raised in the opulence of the palace.

Ignoring her turning stomach for the time being, Vitalia kept her head down as she guided her new companion through the town outskirts. As she made her slow progress, she soon noticed that the rags littering the streets belonged to the sleeping forms of the city's most destitute. This latest realization did nothing to help her mounting nausea.

A deep breath steadied her nerves and fueled her forward. By now, she was clinging to her companion as violently as he clung to her. He was all that kept her from bolting. In. Out. She had to get her focus away from these poor, forgotten souls. Breathe. She had never felt so overwhelmed. In. Out. A moan from a crumpled form shattered her concentration, and she couldn't stop the instinctive use of her earth sense. She quieted the moaner, and her stomach clenched. Dead? No! She needed to be back in the palace. She needed to never again encounter these wretched souls.

She was shaking as she rounded a bend that revealed a cobblestone-paved street. Here, the light overwhelmed her enough to make her realize she had been artificially enhancing her senses. Another gift from her earth sense, one she'd never been able to make sense of. Her grip on the Husk tightened as she tried to pull the two of them forward at a faster pace. To the east, the sun began to peak over the top of the Dragon's Fang, casting the faint light of dawn on the sprawling street. Luckily, she had seemingly stumbled onto a busier thoroughfare, and horse drawn traffic was beginning to emerge.

Hope swelled within her. If she could guide herself and the Husk to a guard station, she would then be promptly returned to her family, and this whole awful ordeal would be done. Still pulling the cloak around her to keep passersby from immediately recognizing her, she pulled the Husk close and crossed to the other side of the street. In this direction, she could see a great concentration of light further along the road. Most guard stations were quite central to their districts, allowing the policing units to better strategize their patrols. The centre of any given district also tended to generate the most light. She was finally finding use for the assumedly useless knowledge her urban planning tutor had bestowed upon her.

Luck was on her side as she turned off the thoroughfare and onto a wide side street. A tall, gray brick building stood at the end of the road, illuminated on either side by elaborately

decorative gas lamps. To the right of one, a black obsidian shield was erected proudly, the symbol of the guard. Her ordeal was coming to an end.

The entrance was two large, thick wooden doors, and she barely managed to keep a hold of the Husk as she pushed one side open. There was always a guard on duty at the entrance to the stations, and the man stationed at this one rushed to her side, after assessing her disheveled state, as well as that of her unconscious companion. As he drew close enough to make out the unusually pale features of her face, he gasped and dropped to one knee, right hand in a fist over his heart. His head was bowed in deference before Vitalia could protest. "Princess! You're safe! And who is this?"

"A Husk. The man that saved me! Please, sir, rise that I may speak with you properly. I must get back to the palace immediately, and this man is to come with me. He must be rewarded for his efforts. Fetch a carriage for me, please. My grandfather will be ever so relieved. Hurry!" It was a burst of excited commands that she could hardly control. The man scrambled to do her bidding, yelling at other guards to help fulfill her requests. Before she could truly process what was happening, Vitalia and the Husk were in a carriage destined for the palace further up the slope of Orren's Bay.