It was hot. Damnable hot. For the fifth time since leaving the coolness of the Poet’s Garden, Heimron mopped his forehead with the now sweat-dampened bit of white cloth that he always carried. He did not bother folding it and putting it back in its proper place within his robes. He would only have to bring it out again in a few moments.

He eyed the aide scurrying along in front of him with distaste. Not only was the man half his own size, he was moving along at a pace that forced Heimron to move his larger girth in ways that were most distressing. A person should not need to move at such a rate in this abominable heat. He could feel sweat dripping down his back, and in more uncomfortable places below.

Not for the first time he pictured himself back in the Garden, reclining on a bench under the shade of one of the larger apple trees, her boughs laden with the sweet, pink blossoms of spring. A cool breeze, gently caressing his forehead, stirring the flowers and the pages of his book as he heaved a sigh of contentment that reverberated throughout his entire frame, sending tingles all the way from the tips of his toes up to the roots of his hair.

Nothing was finer than a well-earned respite in the Garden, away
from the hustle and bustle of court. And this little man scurrying along in 
front of him had robbed him of that pleasure. He glared as best he could, 
hoping the aide could feel his gaze boring holes into the man’s shoulders. 
A drop of sweat threatened to mar his vision, and he quickly dabbed at his 
forehead once again. The aide never stopped, his heels clicking along the 
marble floors like a woman’s painted nails tapping against the edge of a 
table in discontent. Like one of Heimron’s wives. He half shuddered at that 
thought.

It was rare that a summons from the king came. It had only happened 
twice that he could remember since being stationed at the palace as a 
member of the Council. Heimron did not care that much for politics. He had 
only accepted the position because it got him out of Spirath and away from 
his wives and their incessant nagging. Two had been bad enough, but 
when his uncle had arranged for another pair to join the first, Heimron’s life 
had gone from unbearable to flat-out intolerable.

As an ambassador for Pelagio he had been given the opportunity of a 
lifetime: to go far away and live his life in relative peace. What were a few 
moments of beck and calls from time to time compared to the nagging of 
four women, every one of them conspiring to make his life as miserable as 
they possibly could? As dull as he might find most Council sessions, they 
were a welcome relief, all things considered.

Heimron found himself wondering why the Council had been called 
upon to convene without any prior notice. There were typically at least five 
days written notice given for non-scheduled meetings, which happened 
every Thursday after lunch, allowing the members time to arrange their 
affairs. Immediate summons were rare, and only issued by the king. But the 
king generally left the affairs of state to them, only signing off on decrees 
and papers after the group had them sent up the chain of command. 
Heimron had not heard of anything in the last few days that would have 
warranted the king calling the entire group. It was puzzling.

A sudden thought caused him to inhale sharply, the damp cloth 
pressed tightly against his forehead. The plague. It had to be the plague. 
Only an emergency could have caused the king to summon the Council
and bypass the written notice protocol. And with the abnormal heat lately, it had to be that.

The plague. Heimron suddenly felt ill. Was it just the warmth that caused him to sweat so? Or had he caught it? The sound of the aide’s footsteps faded as the pounding of his heart echoed in his ears.

The water. He had drank water from the communal fountain in the Garden this morning. So had everyone else visiting. His throat felt parched and dry. He quickly scanned the backs of his hands for markings, pulled the sleeves of his shirt up to check his forearms. Pale skin and freckles. He felt clammy, cold, then hot again. He swallowed against the dryness in his throat, his hands reaching up to clutch at his chest, protecting him from the outer world.

“Councilor Heimron?” The aide’s voice cut into his thoughts and he realized he had paused in his walking and was standing in the middle of the hallway, his clothes in disarray as he checked his body for visible signs of sickness. “Are you feeling alright?”

The man’s voice sounded shrill in Heimron’s ears. He did not answer, merely nodded his head at the man. The aide raised an eyebrow, then shrugged his shoulders and turned, resuming his pace. Heimron swallowed his panic and followed, making sure to stay a few paces back. It would not do to follow too closely, in case the other man was already infected.

The Council chamber was behind the throne room. Heimron was surprised to see so many people gathered within the great columned hall as they passed one of the doorways opening into the chamber. The massive wooden doors were thrown wide, allowing visitors free access. Why weren’t they all at home, shuttering their windows and locking their doors against the coming tide of death?

He pulled his eyes away from them and waddled after the aide as he led them into one of the side hallways that ran parallel with the throne room. They turned right at the intersection and the smaller man finally stopped, giving a slight bow as he gestured towards the main door into the chamber. Heimron dabbed his forehead one final time and scurried past him, eager to be away from him and in the safety of the inner sanctum.
“My dear Heimron, you look as though you are going to be sick. Might I offer you some water?” Councilor Muralin’s voice was full of concern as he gestured towards the crystal pitcher and matching long-stemmed glasses that rested on the great stone table in the center of the room. As usual, the delegate from Teramil was resplendent in his stark white robes, his long, raven-black hair sleek and falling nearly to his waist.

Not for the first time Heimron wondered if perhaps the man had been chosen for this position specifically for the contrasting effect his appearance and clothing had on others, to throw them off guard. He shook his head in negation and quickly moved to his own chair at the far end of the table. He sat down and re-arranged his tunic. Strangely enough, no one else looked as if they were in the least bit concerned with the epidemic. He forced himself to slow his breathing and cast a wary glance around the room.

The other three Council members were all here, gathered around the table. The king was nowhere to be seen. There were twelve chairs around the table, carved from the same stone. Legend told that once upon a time the Dwearhe had carved that table and the chairs out of the heart of the Rithcullmarin Mountains when they built the city a thousand years ago, but it was so long ago that no one really knew if the legends were true.

It had been over five hundred years since anyone had seen either of the Elder races, according to the history books. Now there were only five seats filled, one for each of the kingdoms that remained. Everyone seemed to be completely at ease, as if there were nothing wrong. Heimron adjusted himself once more within his chair, resting a hand on the edge of the granite table as he scooted himself into a more comfortable position. The stone was cool beneath his touch, and he marveled at the rich brown surface, veined with thick, ropy strands of greens and reds that coursed through the rock like rivers of color. Not unlike the swampy earth from his homeland, the kingdom of Pelagio. He wished he was back in the capital city, in Spirath. Even his four wives were more attractive than the plague.

A gentle cough from across the table drew him back into the present. Councilor Erith inclined her head slightly, her pale grey eyes lowering for a
moment, then coming back to rest on his face. “Are you feeling well, Councilor Heimron? You look a bit pale.”

He swallowed as he felt his pulse slowly returning to normal. He still did not feel as hale as he did most days, but at least it was cooler in this room, and he was not sweating as profusely as before. He leaned forward as far as his ample stomach would allow. “Have you not heard?” He whispered loudly. “I fear the plague has taken over our city!”

Erith frowned slightly. “I have heard no mention of such. Councilor Tremen?”

The grizzled horse-lord turned his head, his grey-streaked beard reminding Heimron of a surly badger freshly woken from his burrow. “Yes?”

“Have you heard any mention of a plague?”

“Have you heard any mention of a plague?”

The bearded Councilor from Rumar looked puzzled. “A plague? Where did you hear of it?”

She gestured towards Heimron, rolling her eyes for effect as she did so, unaware that he noticed. He was suddenly conscious of how he must appear to the others. He knew that he was not a handsome man. His hair was thin, his frame twice that of other men his age, and he sweated more than a cargo-hold of slaves on days when others wore their robes with comfort.

He was also not the smartest of men, but he was not entirely stupid, either. He just took time to work things out in his mind. He knew they viewed him as nothing more than a fat cow, a hand-picked delegate put in place not because his opinions really mattered but because it was a convenient way to remove his bumbling presence from the inner workings of Pelagio and to fulfill the need for representatives from each kingdom.

No one really cared about him back home and here everyone found him slightly more appealing than a worm. He squirmed under their scrutiny, feeling very much as though they were all birds of prey, waiting for him to twitch in just the right direction before snatching him up in their beaks.

“Surely that is the reason the king called this meeting,” he sputtered, wiping again at his brow with the dampened cloth. “There is no other explainat....” He cut off as the king himself walked through the doors into the chambers.
King Teril Denmar was every inch nobility. His hair was luxurious and thick, falling in waves down to his shoulders with only a slight streaking of gray despite his age of sixty-two. His jaw was square, his features stern. He was broad of shoulder and taller than most, and he carried his weight gracefully. One of the youngest commanders to ever lead the armies of Lucimia, from the time he was fifteen until he was thirty seven he had served on the front lines without a scratch, and that strength showed in the dark gray eyes that swept across all of them. Heimron felt them pierce into his very soul. His back straightened slightly in his chair. There was no room for weakness when faced with the king. Only nobility. Heimron tried to quell the feeling that he could crawl away and return to his quarters.

“I am glad to see you all gathered here.” Teril’s voice was deep, powerful. Just like the rest of him. Heimron sucked in his breath and sat up even straighter in his chair. He was here to represent his country after all. He tried to ignore his feelings of inadequacy as the king continued, an edge of anger bleeding through into his speech. “Because one of you can explain to me how it is that I was just ambushed in the Great Hall during a formal seating with the public by an unannounced ambassador from Sunaria seeking official diplomatic negotiations!” The king stopped, his hands resting on the back of Heimron’s chair as his voice echoed slightly in the chamber and looks of confusion spread around the table.

Heimron sat up even straighter still and hoped the sweat was not pouring down his forehead as rapidly as it was down his back. He locked his eyes on a spot on the far wall, where the lines between two of the stones revealed a small pocket where the grout had flaked away. What the king had just mentioned was impossible. There was a general truce with the Sunarians, one that had existed since the end of the Island Wars some twenty five years past when Teril had personally led the armies of Lucimia in the defense of the Island Nations, but there was no official trade, nor official diplomatic ties. How one of their ambassadors had managed to arrive in Finglis Mirror unbeknownst to any of their intelligence networks, much less anyone from the Islands sending word ahead, was troubling. And asking for official diplomatic discussions? That was unheard of. He
could see his own line of thinking reflected in the faces around the table, as the other members murmured their surprise.

Teril’s voice continued from above him, calmer than before, but laced with concern. “With the prince’s coronation festival a few days hence, I find myself questioning the timing of their visit. If we give validity to the request, it could be seen as an invitation to attend, and while I am perhaps being overly cautious, I cannot know what to expect. Is this just a ploy to get close to the prince? We cannot outright deny them, not if their petition is legitimate, or we risk our truce with them. What are your thoughts, Councilor Heimron?”

It was several moments before Heimron realized the king had asked him his opinion on the matter. There was a moment of panic when he saw everyone’s eyes turn to him. He mopped at his forehead with a trembling hand and forced his voice to work. “Ah, my opinion, your Majesty?”

His mind spun. What did he know about Sunaria other than what the school teachers taught? He did not keep current with the affairs of state, nor the political relations of kingdoms that lay across the entirety of the sea. Caution. Yes, that was the best. “Perhaps, given the timing as your majesty has mentioned, we should simply tell the Sunarians that we need time to consider their request. It should not be too difficult or unrealistic to delay such proceedings until after the coronation festival.” He felt his heart pounding within his chest as though a battering ram was being swung by ten giants. Even stranger than the king asking his opinion on such an important matter, was the fact that the rest of the Council were nodding their approval of his idea. He felt a sudden flush sweep over his body.

“Delaying the proceedings until after the coronation event was my thought as well. I see no reason to rush into this, especially given our history with the desert nation.” The king’s voice was thoughtful. He finished his circling of the room before continuing. “But there is still the matter of whether or not the Sunarian should be allowed to attend the festivities. Tremen? Your thoughts?”

“Oddly enough,” Tremen said dryly, as he turned to address the king. “I find myself in agreement with Heimron.” His gray beard bristled as he
turned his head towards the other members. “It would be wise to delay such matters until more thought can be put into it. As for whether or not the ambassador and his party should be invited, it would likely be seen as a slight to bar them from attending, though I would caution against having any Sunarian in attendance, as I think everyone here will agree.”

Erith snorted disdainfully. “I think you are being overly paranoid, Tremen. And I am not ashamed to say the same to you, Teril.” The woman was notorious for her lack of protocol. Heimron could not stand her, but she was the duly appointed representative of Kirthug, so she was allowed her say in the chambers, regardless of how crass. “You sound as bad as Heimron here with his blabbering on about some ridiculous plague that is nothing more than a figment of his wine-addled imagination.” She waved a hand towards the king. “Let them come. Let them see how powerful we are compared to their shriveled, barren land of sand dunes and camels. We have nothing to fear.”

Teril smiled, a mirthless movement of his lips that did not reach his eyes. “Your opinion is noted, Erith. Muralin, what say you?”

Muralin’s hands were peaked, his chin resting upon the fingertips. He was silent for a moment before answering. “While I understand the need for a show of strength on occasion,” he looked pointedly at Erith. “I, too, can understand the need for caution. We should be vigilant in regards to our dealings with the Sunarians, your majesty. There is no reason to rush into anything, and whether or not we offend them is not a matter of great concern, at least to me. The Island Wars may be behind us, the cost of which was far beyond what any of us here could have anticipated. It would be political suicide for them to be offended given their situation, if their intent is genuine and they are indeed here on a diplomatic mission. The ambassador is surely aware of the precariousness nature his current footing provides.”

“Indeed.” Teril nodded slowly and was silent for a long moment. “I will take these thoughts into consideration. The coronation is in three days. Until then I suggest you act as cordially as possible in regards to the ambassador and his retinue.” The king reached down and poured himself a
glass of water and drank half of it before continuing. “I will make a decision regarding his attendance of the festival after I have slept on it.

“As for hearing the terms they are requesting for their treaty, I think this may be the perfect opportunity for Prince Jerion to prove his worth. I will have him draft a proposal for your consideration after the coronation, once we have the Sunarian’s terms.” King Teril bowed his head slightly towards the table. “That is all. Thank you for coming, Councilors.” He turned to leave.

“Your majesty?” Heimron’s voice was loud in his ears, but it must be asked. The king stopped near the doorway and turned his head. “What of the plague?”

The king’s voice was flat, emotionless. “There is no plague, Heimron. It is simply a warm spring. I would suggest drinking less wine and spending more time in the shade.”

The walk back through the courtyard was a long one. He could not wipe the sneers off their faces no matter how hard he tried. It was frustrating to know that they viewed him as beneath them, a lap-dog among lions. It made him wish he had spent more time paying attention to the economic and social relations between the kingdoms. The distance from his wives notwithstanding, there were more dangerous involvements in Finglis Mirror than he could have possibly imagined back in Pelagio. He let his footsteps carry him to the fountain and enjoyed the spray of the cooling water as it misted over him.

The figure standing in the center of the spraying mist was ancient. There was likely a historian somewhere who knew of its origins, but that did not interest Heimron. For now he simply studied its chiseled features, the proud, angular lines of the face that gazed south, out across the terraces of the city as they marched down the hillside towards the Fingil Bay. Arms crossed over a muscled chest, one could almost forget that the regal giant standing with his stoic resolve was not flesh and blood. The texture of the statue was flawless, glistening with water that beaded like sweat upon its cream-colored skin. The only thing which gave away its lifelessness were the eyes that stared outwards, down towards the sea.
Heimron sighed, and looked around him. To the north beyond the cobblestone courtyard lay the ambassadorial quarters and his rooms. The bustle of mid-morning was beginning to fade as people made their way from breakfast to their various positions within the palace. He could not hear it from here, but he knew the market past the inner walls was in full swing by now. He had a sudden craving for parif nuts. He would have to send Berlon to get some. He nodded his head as he began to make his way back to his rooms. At least he was not sweating at the moment.

The hallways of the ambassadorial building were practically empty. He passed only servants on his way down the hall. Thankfully his rooms were on the first floor, or he would have been sweating all over again.

The entry room was decorated in traditional Spirathian style. The walls were covered in a wavy, dark-green plaster that was textured to resemble the waves of the ocean. There were several reed-statues in each corner, hand-woven to resemble the mighty Krugial which roamed the swamps, although these days they were a rarity to find since they had been hunted to near extinction. When he was a child those statues had given him nightmares, but now he found comfort in their gaping jaws and clawed feet. It reminded him of home, or at least a semblance of home that he could use as a catalyst for summoning up memories of his youth.

There was also a hand-woven set of reed armor, the blood-red lacquer giving it a deadly appearance. He had tried to wear a set once but his girth had made him less than ferocious when all was said and done. There was a heavy wooden wardrobe lining the wall to his right, along with several elaborately carved wooden pegs for coats set in the wall. The entry was well-lit, with a window looking out across the courtyard. The table had several chairs around it and sheaves of paper on its surface, no doubt loose work left by Berlon. He would have to remind the fellow to be more careful about leaving papers just lying about, in case a stray breeze from the sea sent them fluttering across the room.

The sitting room beyond was dim. The shutters had been drawn and a few slits of sunlight peaked through the slats. The floor was stone, covered by a thick Kirthugal rug, dyed a rich yellow that was darker than
gold. There were two chairs beneath the window and a table in between them. On the far wall were two couches and a low table between them. He frowned. “Berlon?” He raised his voice slightly as he called out. Perhaps the man had gone out for supplies already.

There was a short hallway after the sitting room. To the left were Berlon’s quarters, as well as a small guest room for any visiting delegates from Pelagio. He went right to his own quarters. There was no point in waiting for the man to return. His first priority was getting out of his sweat-stained robes and into something more comfortable.

He was halfway through disrobing before he realized that he was not alone in his private quarters. The shutters were only partially open and the seated figure’s face was hidden by the darkness. Heimron clutched his flowing tunic to his chest like a woman covering her breasts. “Who...who are you,” he stammered. The nausea that had threatened to overwhelm him earlier was back.

“I am not here to harm you, Councilor Heimron.” The man’s voice was smooth, and low. “My intentions are purely conversational, I assure you. My name is Darr Valek. I am the ambassador from Sunaria.” He leaned forward slightly, revealing his face.

Heimron wished he had paid more attention when he had tried to learn the sword. As it was, there was a dagger underneath his pillow. He considered diving for it, no matter his girth. His heart was in his throat as he looked upon the stranger. The man’s face was a myriad of tattoos, the different colors swirling together in a nauseating myriad of symbols. They almost seemed to glow within the dim light of his room. He swallowed.

“Where is my servant, Berlon?”

Darr Valek rose. He was tall, and looked to be well-muscled beneath his robes. “He went with my aide to bring some darnis from my quarters. I have heard you enjoy it. I am glad that you find our drink to your liking. It is reassuring.” His long legs carried him forward swiftly. He stopped just short of Heimron, who felt naked, exposed. The man bowed slightly before him. “I apologize for the intrusion, but I thought it best to introduce myself privately to you since I have not yet spoken with the other Councilors. I will
wait in the sitting room for you to reassemble your attire.”

Heimron hurried to dress himself. He could not slow his heart. Why had the man been in his personal chambers? What did he mean he had not spoken with the others? Spoken with them about what? What could a Sunarian possibly want with him? He chose a pair of loose gray breeches and matching tunic and cinched the belt tight beneath the bulge of his belly, then grabbed the dagger from under his pillow. He slipped it through his belt beneath the fold of his shirt, though what good it would do against a Sunarian’s magic, he had no idea.

The ambassador had seated himself in one of the chairs and was sipping a glass of water. Heimron settled his frame into the opposite chair and studied the man nervously. His skin was certainly darker than any Lucimian’s, though not as dark as the Islanders. His hair was thick, black ringlets that fell to his shoulders. And those tattoos.... Heimron forced himself to avoid shivering. The backs of the man’s hands had similar markings that disappeared into the sleeves of his robes, and the lines of runes that criss-crossed his face crawled up into his hairline as well as ran down his neck beneath his clothes. The ink looked black in the light of day, but in his chambers they had appeared to be glowing different colors. He brought his eyes back up to the man’s face. The Sunarian was smiling pleasantly back at him.

“I assume I pass inspection, Councilor?” He chuckled. “I am not offended. The markings of my people are indeed strange to you. It can take some getting used to.”

Heimron nodded in agreement. “I am sorry if I seem taken aback. I know very little about your land, your culture, or its people. And not to be rude, but it was a bit of a shock to find you in my personal quarters just now.”

Darr Valek inclined his head slightly. “My apologies. When I arrived your servant told me to make myself at home. I had actually only just sat down to rest my legs when you arrived.”

Heimron waved a hand in dismissal; it would not do to appear cowed, no matter how his heart was thumping away in his chest. “It is nothing,
please do not apologize.” It was rather strange, and unsettling, but Heimron found himself somehow liking this man from the kingdom across the sea despite the invasion of privacy, and his fear of the man’s magic, and the reputation of the Sunarian people and the decades of war that had passed between their kingdoms. Darr Valek’s voice was pleasant, even soothing. Heimron felt strangely safe in the man’s presence. A warm tingle began to spread over his body and he looked out of the window. The midday sun was moving towards its summit. He brought his attention back to the dark-skinned man. “What exactly can I do for you, Darr Valek of Sunaria?”

The Sunarian ambassador’s teeth were brilliantly white as he smiled. “It is not so much what you can do for me, Heimron, but what I can do for you.” A burst of color shone through his robes as one of his tattoos flared to life, and Heimron found himself smiling warmly towards the tattooed man from across the sea, feeling as though he had known the man his entire life.

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“Did you hear the one about why women’s feet are so small?” Ephrin groaned inwardly. Kelin was always one for joking at the worst possible moment, with this being no exception. The girl who moments earlier had been casting him smoldering looks out of her brilliantly-blue gems slammed their mugs down on the table, sending the ale inside sloshing over the rims. She turned and stomped — tried to stomp anyway; her shoes made little more than a muffled thump against the packed sawdust of the floor — off towards another table.

“I have heard it a hundred times before, Kelin. You need to learn some new jokes.” He grasped the handle of his mug and lifted it out of the mess on the table and wiped the bottom with his hand. At least it was cool, and the mug was still nearly full. He took a long swallow and heaved a sigh of contentment. The Grapevine had some of the best ale in Finglis Mirror, even if their service occasionally left one wanting. He glanced in the girl’s direction once more but she was completely ignoring their table. He gave a
slight shrug and took another swallow; there would be others.

“Maybe.” Kelin chuckled and took a sip of his own mead. “Besides, you would not have wanted her as your bedfellow tonight. I hear she is a little too friendly with some of the help around here.”

Ephrin grimaced into his mug as he took another drink. Bad jokes and no tact. It was a wonder Kelin hadn’t managed to end up on the wrong side of a bruising, but somehow the man always managed to worm his way out of the worst circumstances. How he did it was beyond knowing. Ephrin wiped his hand across his mouth. “Remind me to thank you for saving my virtue.”

Kelin grinned as he smoothed his well-trimmed moustache and goatee with his free hand. “Think nothing of it, kind sir. When you wake on the morrow without scratching yourself in odd places I am sure it will be the first thought that enters your mind.”

Ephrin shook his head in partial amusement and cast his glance over the crowd. It was normal clientele for this time of year. Sailors, merchants, locals, and even a few off-duty men from the Watch — the black shield tailored onto both their leather sword sheaths and rust-colored tunics marking their station — were clustered around most of the tables, drinking and eating and enjoying a respite after another hot spring day.

Summer was still a couple of months away but the weather had been growing steadily warmer, proof that nature’s long arm was indeed reaching around once again. He raised the mug to take another swallow and paused as he saw Terif coming through the doorway of the inn. The man was large, well over six feet tall, and muscled like an ox. Odd for an associate of the Birds, but the jobs he managed did not usually involve sneak-thievery or sleight-of-hand. He was a blunt weapon. Ephrin fought to keep a grimace from his face. He disliked the kind of work that involved the brute. “Finish up, Kelin. Terif just walked in.”

They both emptied their mugs and stood. The night was young, but there was work to do, and Terif was not a man to keep waiting. Ephrin mumbled a greeting to the larger man as they filed past his muscular frame into the street. The setting sun was down past the horizon but a faint glow
still lit the western sky. Terif’s single eye glared down at them, the patch over his other nestled snugly in the grooves worn over time into his face. His left hand rested on the hilt of his sword and his right reached back and scratched at the nape of his neck like some great ape. Ephrin nearly snickered out loud at the thought, but stopped himself by remembering how large those fists were and how much it would hurt should one of them land aside his jaw.

“Let’s go,” was all the one-eyed man rumbled as he strode off towards the docks. Ephrin let Kelin follow first, then filed in behind.

They met three others on the way to the waterfront. Jerid was an average-looking fellow with a closely-trimmed beard that matched his brown hair, and carried himself with an almost too-graceful gait that had some folks wondering if he wasn’t of the feminine persuasion. His lilting speech did nothing to help with the image. Mention it to his face, however, and one might not live to talk about it. His skill with knives was second to none within the city.

The other was Pertil. He was an ugly man, a livid scar running diagonally across his face from chin to forehead, but he was solid in a fight, and his service over the years to the Birds had been undeniable. Bringing up the rear was Utern, a small, mousey man barely five feet tall, but quick as a snake and his darts just as poisonous.

The six of them waited under the eaves of a warehouse building, the brick wall going up nearly four feet before giving way to tight-fit wooden planks that climbed horizontally to a brown-tile roof. Pertil’s pipe gave off the foul odor of poor-quality weed; he could never afford good tobacco. Kelin grumbled about the smell and Pertil glared at him, the scar across his face seeming to writhe like a snake in the glow of the smoldering plant within his pipe. Kelin hushed. Terif leaned against the wall, an oxen statue waiting. They were all waiting. Waiting for his signal.

Ephrin glanced at the group of men gathered around him. Bad men, the lot of them, at least according to the Watch, but good to have on your side in a tussle in his opinion. He might not like Terif’s tactics, but he had to admit that the man fetched results, and usually in his favor. The Birds did
not use his services frequently, as a quieter and less bloody approach was more their style.

Seeing the men who had been tasked with this job, Ephrin had no doubt that this evening’s task served a purpose: there was a message that must be delivered. And if that message involved blood...well, let it be on Terif’s hands. He wished that he had not been called upon to assist in this matter, but when the Raven spoke, the Blackbirds flew. Even if it involved working with someone who wasn’t part of the actual guild. He swallowed his distaste and tried to focus on the task at hand.

Marton Flemer was a merchant of no small esteem, but he had run into some bad luck two years back and borrowed money from the wrong people. He owned three ships that operated out of Finglis Mirror ferrying goods up the Rithcull River and then down the Whitemist River to Whitehall. Mostly he traded in Spirathian wines and swamp lumber, as well as tobacco from Forinmere. But the rarest was the latest fad among the nobles, the strange new drink called darnis. Ephrin had tried a small glass a fortnight ago and was not impressed. It had also set him back two night’s wages for a small cup, and the drink had been black as night and far more bitter than any concoction his mother had tried to force down his gullet when he had gotten sick as a small boy. Not to mention it was apparently supposed to be served hot. Why any person in their right mind wanted to drink something hot when the weather was equally so was beyond him. In any event, Marton’s fortunes had begun to pick up with the newest addition to his trade, but he had still not paid his debt. The Blackbirds had been hired to collect.

Pertil was midway through his second bowl before Terif finally grunted and cast his one-eyed glance over them before motioning with his head in the direction of the docks. Several moments passed as weapons were checked, Pertil’s pipe stowed, and final glances cast around.

Ephrin could see no movement on the docks, other than the faint rocking of the boats in their slides. There were lanterns raised on posts strapped to several of the dock-way intersections but the light was flickering at best, barely piercing more than ten feet into the darkness of the night.
The dock workers had finished up their last tasks more than an hour ago. He double-checked his daggers in their sheaths, making sure they were loose and at the ready. No doubt there would be guards about the boat, since she had just arrived this afternoon and had yet to be unloaded.

Terif moved out, the men behind him, and Ephrin cast a glance up towards the sky. The moon was a mere sliver of silver crescent in the cloudless sky, and he could see the stars winking back with merriment. He wished he could share that sentiment, but there was dark work to be done this night. He steeled his nerves and followed.

The creaking of the boats and the gentle thuds as they rocked against their moorings were the only sounds other than their muffled footsteps echoing softly on the planks. Marton's boat, Seffira, was the fifth one down the row. Terif raised his hand and they halted, all eyes on him as he glanced around to make sure no one was watching. The darkness of night covered them like a blanket and other than the lamps of the street a hundred feet away there was nothing but shadows and the stars above. Terif motioned silently and they made their way onto the vessel.

The deck was clear of guards, which was odd but not entirely out of place. They could be below, and Ephrin was not one for taking chances. He kept his footsteps as silent as possible, stepping over a pile of coiled ropes with as much grace as he could. There were a few barrels on the deck, along with the ropes. Everything was neat and tidy. Ephrin caught a glimpse of Terif beckoning from the corner of his eye where the larger man was standing next to the hatch going down below. The larger man gestured for Ephrin and Kelin to keep guard on top, and beckoned for the rest of them to follow below.

He disliked the rocking of the boat beneath his feet. Kelin started rummaging through some of the barrels but Ephrin kept his mind on the task at hand, his eyes darting every which way, making sure that no one caught sight of them. Every so often he had to reach a hand out to steady himself against the railing. A sailor he was not, and not ashamed to admit it. Man was meant to have firm ground beneath his feet, not the heaving planks of some contraption that could sink at the merest hint of temper from
the seas or sky.

He heard Kelin grumble in distaste about something, but he ignored the man’s complaints. Instead he focused on the faint sounds of the men below that were drifting up through the hatch. There was mostly silence, but he could hear the muffled sounds of them moving boxes and crates, could feel their movements vibrating up through the wood into the planking beneath his feet, though faint. Hopefully they found what they were after soon, because he wanted back off the boat and solid ground beneath him. He smiled against the darkness at his own paranoia. The solidity of the docks was only ten feet away and here he was squirming like a little girl who had just had a toad slipped into her dress. He shook his head in self amusement.

A slight rustle caused him to turn his head. Kelin had sat down and was leaning his back against one of the barrels. The lazy sod! Ephrin hissed at him softly but the man paid him no mind, simply leaned his head forward so that his chin rested on his chest. And then his head simply rolled clean of his shoulders, landing on the deck with a wet thump. Ephrin stared in disbelief. Was this a dream?

He took a step forward and there was a sudden stinging sensation across his stomach. He stopped and looked down. Why was his shirt wet? He put his hands down there and felt warmth. His legs went out from underneath him and he started to fall. A quick hand upon the railing kept him from falling completely. Damn boats! He needed to get his feet back on the ground, so he could stand properly, without heaving and rocking.

He tried to stand, but his legs would not go where he wanted them to. Gods-cursed boats! He looked up as something darted out of the corner of his eye. Moonlight glinting off a sword and the oddest thing...several glowing tattoos on a face beneath the hood of a cloak. Moving towards the hatch. Ephrin tried to yell, to warn the others, but all that came out was a gasping whisper. His hand slipped free of the railing and he fell to the deck. That damned deck. Reeling and spinning beneath him. He turned over to look at the sky, to calm his stomach and get his bearings. The stars winked back at him past the sliver of the moon. He smiled back.