

EYES IN THE NIGHT

Book 1 of the Street King



STEPHEN BACHMAN

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by
Stephen Bachman



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Street Boys

Motorius watched, hidden away in the rotting barrel. It was damp and ridden with rot from weathering. He was a short youngster, only four feet tall, arguably small for an undetermined age. He had very dark, grimy hair, dark gray eyes, and a brown tattered sailor's shirt. He had stolen the shirt from a Navy officer when the drunk had passed out on the ground. He wore a tattered old pair of pants that Rigger had stolen from an orphan child. Motorius was fast. He had survived on his own for that reason.

Turk the butcher threw the last of hog's offal into the dog bowl. Immediately, the stray dog pounced on the bowl with a starved look of deprivation in his eye. Motorius pushed out his arms in desperation, breaking the barrel he had been hiding in, and sprinted for the dog bowl. The dog jumped and yelped in surprise. Turk was furious again, as Motorius grabbed the offal, a string of sausages and a smelly, salted piece of pork, which seemed to look a bit on the off side. He was gone down the street and around the corner before anyone knew what happened. His best friend Ludwidge was waiting around the corner.

Ludwidge was rangy; he was a fair bit taller than Motorius, roughly about five feet, and about the same age. He had ash brown hair, his eyes were a deep blue, his teeth were a little crooked, and he dressed like Motorius.

They picked up their plunder and ran for Turlong Bay, their home. It was said, that a great Admiral of the sea fought off the last of some invaders 300 years ago in some mighty battle, but died of his injuries; so in his honor, they renamed the bay in his name. The previous name of the bay was long since forgotten.

Motorius and Ludwidge Bay, that is what they had called themselves, since they were both orphaned there. They had found a friendship on the street that had developed into a brothering nature, the Bay was their home, and therefore they took that name.

They strut lightly down the street Pleased with themselves with the anticipation of a full belly of food. As Ludwidge was strutting, he was talking to Motorius. Motorius wasn't paying much attention; all he could think of was the tasty sausage in his mouth. They ran along the coast, towards their hideout, a hidden but sizeable cave that kept most of the elements out. It wasn't seen by most because hills and shrubs concealed the cave mouth. As Motorius and Ludwidge walked into the cave, they saw a few of the other children bringing in their catch. Tilly, the head girl, was about fifteen years of age, from what they could tell. She was just starting to develop as a young woman, she was a bit gaunt, blonde haired, with green eyes, and she stood about five feet six. However, the years on the street had noticeably aged her face. Tilly stood at the pot and smiled when she saw the two boys come over. She seemed even more delighted when she saw the food in their grimy hands. Her eyes greedily twinkled as they passed the food across to her. They could see some of the others arrive and peer over as they came back from their day's adventures.

Rigger was a powerful youth who was about six feet tall. At around sixteen years old, he appeared to be the oldest in their ragtag group. He was not sure of his exact age; since he had no good memories from his childhood, he didn't choose to remember or care. He had a powerful torso and legs as strong as any of the sailors they saw down at the docks. He had brown eyes, with sandy blond hair that clumped together from the sea spray where he liked to go and fish. He wore a sailor's outfit, ever since he punched out a drunkard from one the sailing ships, when he had stolen his whole garb. He came in carrying his catch of approximately ten fish, a great effort for just one day.

Job, no one knew what his real name was, had been dumped in Egan when he was twelve years old by his sailor dad. He was good at any job that he was set; all the girls seconded this. It was believed he was from Turner country, a hilly country where men grew strong bodies but weren't very

tall. Job was only about five feet six, but he was powerful, and he could easily match Rigger in strength. He had dark brown hair, moody brown eyes, and similar garb, only he managed to get a coat from one of the sailors in a game of Chance. Chance was a game in which you put in any item that you can part with, everyone gets a number on the die out of six, but it can play up to twelve if you can find two dice. The first person whose number is rolled three times in a row wins.

It seemed as though Job and Rigger were joined at the hip; even the local sailors had trouble with these two. Rigger claimed to have drunk two sailors under the table; but Job said, otherwise, it was never proven. Not long after this there was a massive punch up at the Hooks and Shingles Tavern. Job and Rigger undoubtedly started the whole thing, however they made a hasty exit and claimed to have hidden under the tables and snuck under everyone's legs to the back door. Long after they were gone, the local constables had arrested everyone inside; the two boys laughed about it for days.

Rock, an aptly named boy, as he greatly resembled a large, round rock, also possessed dark hair, grey eyes, and similar scruffy cloths. He was about five feet four, and close in age to Motorius. Rock entered alongside Gillian. She had brown chestnut hair, and the promise of some nice womanly curves to her. She was a little bit scruffy under her clothes, but had a very cute, spunky aspect to her. Rock and Gillian brought in bread and cheese and celebrated a job well done. Their eyes lit up when they saw the food that the other youths had brought in. It was safe to say none of them had seen so much food in a very long time. It was the best night that Ludwidge and Motorius could remember, and it ended up being the best night for some time, since that was the night before Eyes caught them.

After the high, they had decided they would lounge around the cave. They got comfortable by piling together whatever they could find to soften the lumpy cave floor, bundles of

clothes, and stacks of bags and old newspaper. Feelings were pretty good; no-one had had a full stomach in a long time. After some discussion from their various perches around the cave, they decided to go out for one more score. Motorius knew of the danger, it was every street child's worst fear to be caught because no one knew what happened to you. It was said by the children of the street that either a coat grabbed you or a constable caught you, and you were never heard from again. Not one person ever saw those who were taken again, they simply vanished. They guessed of course. They sometimes pretended it could have been good for the one taken; maybe they were given nice homes to live in. The children all knew of the harsh reality, no one dared to speak it though.

Ludwidge was running over the plan again, "Okay, Motorius, I'll do as before. I'll run into the shop and yell there's a fire on the wharf, and then I'll run out the door. Meanwhile, you take up a good hideout; make sure it is not the same place as before, he'll look there. Then when he's comfortable that you're not there, he'll place the food in the dog bowl. As soon as his back is turned, make your move. Don't hesitate, because if you're slow that old mutt that hangs around will grab it. That dog isn't going to share any pork sausages, so be fast, Motorius."

Ludwidge was in the shop. It was a cold morning, the street cobbles were a bit damp, so his thoughts wandered to Motorius; he hoped he had found a spot out the back of the shop that wasn't freezing. Ludwidge had followed the plan to the letter, he'd requested to examine some meat and dropped the food on the ground and just as he was about to make his escape he was hit in the neck by something. He raised his hand to the pain as it pulsed up into his skull. He pulled out a dart of some kind, with a long thin shaft, and that was all that he could remember.

While Ludwidge lay unconscious, old Turk didn't even look for Motorius as he was placing ruined meat into the dog's bowl. Motorius felt starved just thinking about the food, so he took it the same as before, only he had hidden

in the garbage this time. Next thing, old Turk was as fast as lightning and tripped Motorius. As he went past, he tumbled into Eyes. That was how he thought of the man, for that was all he could see; nothing else except those emotionless, unforgiving eyes. Later, Motorius couldn't remember anything else about the man, not his height, not his hair color, although he did remember a blue sailor's coat with yellow stitching. Eyes grabbed him before he could shout, and pressed a knife against the boy's back, covering his mouth with one hand. Eyes looked up at Turk with an evil grin, and Motorius started shaking with fear, shaking so bad it rattled his spine. Turk said, "I told you he was fast, fast as Old Killer." Turk looked at his dog, who was now feasting on the meat. The boy felt so hungry now watching the dog eat, he didn't even listen to what they said.

"You were recruiting again? I just want my reward, and then I'll go back inside. This one's clever." He looked inside the shop at Ludwidge. "They have robbed me blind three times already."

Eyes said, "Not that smart though, they came back here again." He let out a low chuckle. A pouch flew out of his hand and hit Turk in his oversized stomach reasonably hard. Turk caught it but with a disgruntled look on his face. He looked inside the bag and said, "Fifty pieces of copper, twenty pieces of silver and a piece of gold."

Eyes said, "That's fair Turk."

Turk thought about arguing, but then he hesitated and just looked at Eyes with a grumpy glare and said, "Have a good day, sir."

Eyes disappeared into his doorway and asked Motorius, "Have a name you, and the other boy? Or are we just going to have to call you boy from now on?" He took his hand off Motorius' mouth, but the blade remained.

"Motorius Bay, and my brother, Ludwidge," Motorius said.

Eyes considered the boy for a moment, thinking. "Okay Motorius, now heed this. I have a knife, just aching to kill or

silence you. Make a fuss and you and this Ludwidge will be floating in the bay before you can blink. Go in front of me, and walk normally.”

As Motorius turned to do as he was told, he felt a sharp pain in his neck. At first, he thought the man had stabbed him and he couldn't move. Everything went black and he knew no more.

When he woke up, he was laying next to Ludwidge in a room that was pitch black. He couldn't judge the size of the room. There was a desk with a candle lamp on it and a man shrouded in a hood was observing the boys. There was no way of seeing the man's features. “Eat,” he commanded. His voice was grainy and he seemed to have trouble talking. He didn't speak at all fast, “Motorius is it, and Ludwidge Bay? Fine names, for such fine young men,” he paused as if the words hurt him or he was thinking; it was hard to tell. He spoke again, “Tell me for your own benefit, is there more of you?”

As they was watching this strange hidden man, sitting still and speaking in a slow grainy drawl, Motorius dubbed him Shadow. Ludwidge, who seemed to be a little confused or still a bit groggy, it was hard to tell, just sat, his eyes lazily looking from wall to wall. Motorius stood up and spat in Shadow's face. Shadow didn't respond at first. He just sat there and then started chuckling “Hmm . . . there is some spirit in you two. I think we can have some fun with you, we can fix that, I think. Apprentice, come here.” Eyes appeared out of the shadows, “Divide and conquer,” he said, “Make them talk. I want them to be sure their stories match.”

Eyes chuckled with Shadow. “Come with me,” Eyes said, “Remember what I told you today, Motorius? No fuss, no trouble.” Eyes led him into a room; it looked the same as the previous room, but with a chair instead of a desk. Eyes held a lamp, paused, and motioned the boy forward. He said, “Remove your clothes.”

Motorius looked at him, afraid of the man's intentions. “NO!” was all he could utter. A fist came out of nowhere and

collected him on the jaw, leaving his head swimming. As he lay on the floor, he could feel rough hands stripping his body. Then he felt himself being placed on the chair, with ropes restraining all of his limbs. His head hurt, and felt four sizes too big, and his eye hurt and was beginning to swell. When he collected his thoughts, he saw that Eyes had completely stripped him and bound him to the chair. The room was dark and Eyes had left, the darkness made it hard to judge the time. He sat there, trying to determine how long it had been, dozing on and off in the chair.

Suddenly, huge splash of cold water shocked him out of his stupor. Freezing cold drops of water came out of nowhere, slithering their way down by his body. He felt as if it hit his bones, it stung his eyes and made the pain in his head intensify. Eyes spoke into Motorius' ear in a low, raspy voice, "Now that you've had a shower, you don't smell like shit, soaked garbage." He chuckled at his own wit. "You might want to tell me if there are any more of your kind. I have done you a favor, now you can do me one."

It was at this stage that Motorius started to cry. He tried to hold his sobs in, but he was alone, wet, cold, naked, and bound to a chair, with a head throbbing like an earthquake in thundering waves. For all his street child bravado, he couldn't withstand this man. Eyes let him weep like a small boy before the man rasped into his ear again. "Little Motorius, all I want to know is if there are others like you?" He slapped him across the face again and the boy slumped forward in the chair.

Motorius wept as he spoke. His mind whirled, torn between self-preservation and his natural reluctance to betray his only friends and family. He wanted this to end, he couldn't resist anymore. He spluttered as he tried to make his mouth form words. "Yes, there is a whole group of us. They are at the cove. There's a cave; it's our home. Please don't hurt them." He desperately pleaded in a voice that raised several octaves.

Eyes spoke again, "No, no, no, don't worry about them. It is yourself and only yourself that you have to be concerned

about.” Eyes’ attitude seemed to have softened; he untied the boy and gave him a fistful of straw to wipe down with. He passed him a robe and some pants that were as dark as the night, and led Motorius into a room with a straw bed. Motorius couldn’t even think of sleeping on the bed until he saw Ludwidge. Later, he learned that his brother matching clothing, only he didn’t have a black eye. The door closed behind him with a thud. There was a small plate of food in the corner of the room. Motorius sniffed it apprehensively, and dug into it with a ravenous appetite. Even a wolf would have considered his eating behavior bad mannered. Eyes had left a dull lamp in the room, so Motorius held it out, waving his hand in front until he found the door. He put his ear to it, and could hear snippets of a muffled conversation. “The little one told me of others. I’ll find them; just give me a couple of days, that should be enough. Once I’ve got them all, we can start.”

Then Shadow’s distinctive voice said, “It may not be easy, but this is the beginning of the future. You will do well, soon you can start their training.”

Motorius couldn’t hear them talking anymore, they had moved away from the door. Suddenly a wave of isolation overcame the boy, and the day’s events seemed to catch up with him. He decided to give up. They hadn’t decided to kill him or Ludwidge, but he had given up the location of their friends to save himself. He had felt defeated and his friends would pay the price. The tiredness overwhelmed him and exhaustion forced him to the bed, into an unsettled slumber.

Captured

Ludwidge woke up. Motorius was still asleep, but his eye had started healing. No one came into bother them. A robed man left them some food occasionally. Ludwidge nudged Motorius to wake up. Motorius slowly opened his eyes, blinked several times, and stared ahead. “What?” he muttered.

“We have to get out of here,” Ludwidge said, bluntly. He then fell into silence, pondering their situation. How were they going to escape? He thought their new clothing was as dark as the night; all they had to do was sneak past the guard as he came in to deliver the food. They would have to be fast. But they were used to operating in high paced situations. That was how they survived on the streets for so long. Ludwidge went over the plan with Motorius; his words seemed to bring a bit of life back into him. He hadn’t had much spirit lately, and he’d seemed preoccupied and much quieter than normal. Ludwidge had assumed that being trapped in the bleak room with little understanding of what was going on was sucking the life out of him.

Motorius contemplated Ludwidge’s plan. There was no other way. “Ludwidge, are they going to kill us if they catch us?” Motorius asked in a weak voice.

“Probably, but we’ll surely die here. Look what they did to you. They aren’t keeping us here for nice reasons.”

“Yeah, that’s true, but what of the others? That creepy Eyes guy will catch them as well. I mean . . .” his voice trailed off. He hung his head low, avoiding looking at Ludwidge. “Eyes knows where they are. I told him. He broke me. I’ve betrayed my family. It’s entirely my fault.” The words tumbled out of Motorius in a soft and rushed tone.

Ludwidge was quiet for a moment. “More reason for us to escape, mate. We’ve got to warn them.” Ludwidge fondly punched Motorius in the arm. “It’s okay; they’re survivors, like us. We’ll all get through this crazy mess.”

The latch on the door started to move. Motorius and Ludwidge cowered out of sight, lurking in the small shadows of

the room. Eyes walked in, scanning the room. He carried two plates of food, holding one in his right hand, balancing the other on his right forearm. Ludwidge moved towards the door, Motorius only half a step behind him. They both held their breath. Eyes looked around; his body had tensed. He said, nothing, but tilted his head. Ludwidge quickly crept out the door on tiptoe. Suddenly Motorius slipped on a wet stone right behind Ludwidge. He crashed to the floor with a thud. This spurred Ludwidge forward. He ran, sprinting now. He turned a corner, his head swiveling, trying to find his bearings.

Shadow was waiting for Ludwidge; they nearly collided as Ludwidge catapulted blindly around the corridor. Ludwidge turned to run back, but Shadow had already grabbed him by the arm. He threw Ludwidge into the wall. Ludwidge lay winded on the ground, his whole body racked with pain. One of his teeth wobbled dangerously. Shadow said, something, but Ludwidge couldn't hear him. His whole head seemed to be vibrating. Shadow's voice floated around him, "Mind your surroundings, boy. You must be more patient." Shadow dragged Ludwidge back to the bleak room and hurtled him through the door. Ludwidge sprawled to the floor with a thwack, nearly landing on Motorius.

Motorius was in a similar position. He looked no better, and had another black eye. Ludwidge was pleased to notice as Eyes left the room that he was slightly slouched, with a hand gingerly cupping his groin. Ludwidge smiled weakly. *Take that, you bastard*, he thought to himself. "What do you want with us? What are you going to do to us?" The words had escaped from Ludwidge. Eyes said, nothing as he walked out, locking the door behind him. The sound of the lock clicking shut echoing through the cold room.

Their food remained on the floor where Eyes had left it. "What happened?" Motorius asked. "We failed, we failed." He was about to cry again; his voice shook and he slumped on the floor.

Ludwidge was giving up hope as well. That was the only plan he could think of. There was nothing in this room to

help them, only the darkness. Without a lamp, their eyes were adjusting well to the dark. Ludwidge thought they might be able to use this to their advantage. Maybe Eyes and Shadow couldn't see as well in the dark.

Motorius looked up and smiled. "You're up to something. I can see that look in your eye."

Ludwidge whispered his thought to Motorius, "We have an advantage, we've been left in the dark for days now, and we can see quite well. Eyes and Shadow can't, they carry a lamp with them. Their eyes can't have adjusted like ours." Motorius thought about this. Yes, they could see quite well. They would only have to get out the door and find somewhere to hide.

An old hooded man, known as Ottomon, was talking to Eyes about the boys' attempted escape. "Who knew the little one had so much fight in him?"

"Yes, that punch hurt," Eyes said, carefully readjusting his sitting position. "I don't think it will take long for the others to try an escape of their own, not that it will matter if we let them get past us. Rogen and Tade are guarding the main exit. They will listen to our teachings soon enough. Unfortunately it might take a while, but they will comply."

Ottomon chuckled, "I trust you ensured that the little one, um Motorius, learned lesson one."

"Yes, Leader Ottomon," Nolen, who Motorius had nicknamed Eyes because of his steely gaze, muttered, his cold eyes twinkling.

"Oh, by the way, because Rogen is guarding tonight, I need you to take care of the little matter that he was organizing." Master Ottomon took something from an inner pocket of his robe. "Here are the forms, Nolen," Master Ottomon said, as he handed the forms to Eyes.

"It will be done," said, Nolen.

"Good, it's most important that this is done. These things can take time. Nolen, you are my number one, I wouldn't have asked you if I thought you couldn't handle it."

"Our plans are already in motion—things that can't be undone. We shall rule one day," said, Eyes.

“Did you take care of the butcher like I instructed?” Otomon asked.

Nolen laughed. “Of course, as requested. I laced the inside of the coin bag with poison. I also soaked the coins in it. The fool will be dead within the week. There weren’t any witnesses. As for Motorius and Ludwidge, no one knows where they went. I doubt very much that anyone will notice a couple of missing street rats. In fact, I’m sure they’ll be happy to have less of their items go missing. It is exactly how we have planned.” Nolen paused and smiled. “Those friends of theirs have a lot of potential, don’t they?”

“They’re perfect, each and every one of them.” Master Otomon rubbed his hands together. “Especially the little girl, she will become one of the most deadly weapons we have. Finally, this is happening . . . it’s excellent.”

Nolen gave a gentle sigh. “Good night, Leader,” he muttered as he turned and walked away.

Success

Nolen moved with a purpose down the main street of Egan. He was the number one assassin in the Sykle, standing six feet two, with an athletic build, strong and limber like a dancer. He had powerful shoulders and a lean torso. His hair was light brown and his eyes were a piercing blue. Today he was dressed in a gray tunic with blue leggings. He had his favorite boots on, an old musty pair of work boots and he had probably over worn them, but they were still exceptionally comfortable. At twenty-six, he was a fully trained assassin. He had begun this life at thirteen years old when Ottomon had plucked him out of the market street, groomed him in the art of killing. He was a master of his weapons and poisons alike, and he already had five high-profile kills to his name. Master Ottomon had given Nolen the most important task to date. Rogen, a much older and more experienced member of the Sykle was going to do this job, but leader Ottomon had instructed Nolen to do this instead. This pleased Nolen a great deal and insured a lot of confidence in him from the others as well.

Nolen approached the first checkpoint into the castle when an old friend approached him. “Ah, my good friend, Nolen, a message from Oroke, I presume?” Nolen had used this lie on so many occasions that they must have considered him as the official messenger from Oroke.

“Yes, sergeant, may I enter?” They both shared a laugh. Oroke was a major nation; rarely did any news escape, so anyone bearing news was considered important enough to warrant a hasty entry.

“Of course Nolen, perhaps after your delivery you can come over to the Champions Tavern and have a pint with the lads and myself.” The Champions Tavern was a prosperous soldier’s tavern. It ran up more business than any other tavern in all of Egan, probably because there was no dress code. If you had money, you could get in, and if you started a

fight, you had to finish it in the ring, of course. Egan was the soldier's capital of the realm.

The city of Egan was capable of housing 10,000 soldiers and the nation could raise the force to 50,000 if it came to all out war. It was why it was unofficially considered the major government of the area; if any other nation were to challenge Isdane's decisions, there would be that army to contend with; alone. The support staff of the army was so large they had their own separate guilds and rules to follow. Nolen moved on from Sergeant Flinders' post, agreeing to come to the tavern after he had completed his task. He would need a good drink once he was finished. When he was out of sight, Nolen slipped around a corner; he knew there was a hidden access tunnel leading into the old wine cellar. The tunnel was built so that the so-called nobility didn't have to see servants going about their normal day-to-day duties. Nolen had used the entrance before on one of his high profile kills. The target had been a fat old lord of Arkane; a realm that looked down on most others because they devoted most of their wealth to the arts and entertainment, which was their passion in life. They had recently brought a new form of entertainment to Isdane, called theater. It was old in Arkane but new to Isdane, where people dramatized realities. Nolen only thought about how that might go if there were a man cheating on his wife, only to have his wife come home with his best friend, and when the wife looks under the covers, she finds her best friend or her sister in bed with her husband. Nolen decided not to have an opinion on such things until he saw this theater for himself. The man Nolen had killed was a fat lord named Sir Toolike. He enjoyed the finer things in life too much, but he also ruled with a stern hand and was well-respected in his nation. His death was necessary and Arkane had been unstable for many years before the Sykle could safely strike in that region. The region was stable now, but as master Ottomon predicted, no matter how stable a nation is, with a weak leader it would soon again fall into turmoil, and would collapse. But anything that falls over can be stood up again

and when the Sykle ruled, it would fix all that was lost. Nolen poisoned the fat bastard lord, but he had no pity for him; he may have ruled well, but it was well known that he cheated on his wife and no doubt, some of those theaters were probably about him.

Nolen sat in the dark pondering. He was waiting for the right time to move. He was deep in the castle now, the wine cellar brought him into one of the cooks' warehouses, as it was known; a huge kitchen devoted to feeding the lords of Isdane Egan.

Egan was the central hub of all the great nations; it was why the population of Egan grew to such huge numbers. People from all over Isdane flocked here for the chance of a better life, and it was why the Sykle had to take control here, as it was the very center of power. Nolen checked the small sand glass he kept. Another hour had passed and people were going to bed. It was time to make his move, the room he had to reach led right by the barracks, but he was well armed for this mission. This mission was vital; he was not going to fail. Up the stairs to the left, and past the barracks; his target was to get to the room filled with all the city's legal documents.

Once a document was logged and stored in this room, it was considered legal. It was also where the city housed the petitions for people applying for a title or a position, making it probably one of the most important rooms in the castle. Not much was said, to be in the room but a large desk and some shelving and drawers; most items that came into the room might not be read or processed for years. The licensing documents for politics—the documents that Nolen had—were the basis for how anyone rose to a position in the council. The system was flawed though, an individual could petition for a title, but it would cost substantial quantities of gold to even get it into this room, or to have the petition read in council. However, you had to have friends in council to agree to read the petition and even then, it took time. A member of council represented one guild or more guilds. No one would ever officially elect a guild of assassins, but if the council members

were pushed, and if they thought that they needed the assassins to maintain their power, then that might change. If the Sykle received even a whisper of power, they would move Heaven itself into Hell if it were the only way to receive the title of King. In the land of Isdane, kings weren't born; they were elected.

When their ruler became ineffective, they were replaced, but this hadn't happened in hundreds of years. In fact, Nolen thought it had stretched over 500 years before someone had challenged the ruler for the title. Nolen knew that the council was made up of very old rich families; to keep them in power, they only ever voted for a family member or friend. The council had not received a new family guild member in over 400 years and the kingship was passed down from one family only and was why the nations of the world were stagnant and weak. It was why the Sykle had aimed to work towards one goal. If a guild voice from another nation noticed your petition, then they would vouch for you on the podium. This would mean you got a chance to speak and vote, and you could put your own proposals forward. If enough guild representatives liked you, you could put a list to challenge for authority. If this happened, then the five most important guilds would challenge the king's right to rule.

Nolen had developed a good sense of patience in his time at the Sykle; while he was waiting in the servant's chambers, a few of the guards were reminiscing before going to bed. They had just started heading off when Nolen heard the first patrol coming; the soldiers talking weren't supposed to be up. Nolen had pulled out his foot long knife; it was a typical assassin's weapon, painted black to blend in with his clothes. He waited for the patrol to pass him, and as long as they weren't checking rooms, he would go unnoticed.

The patrol passed by. Nolen waited a few beats of his heart before moving; he knew if he moved with the look of having a purpose, no one usually challenged him, and he had just gotten to the top of the stairs when he bumped into a soldier. He had no time to be challenged and each moment

lost was a moment towards failure. Nolen wasted no time, as he rammed his blade into the surprised soldier's neck. Blood immediately spurted onto the floor and all over Nolen's clothes and face. Nolen couldn't waste any time now, and moved into a swift jog. This however was an unfamiliar area for Nolen, because any spy work or assassinations never usually required anyone to be there. This part of the castle was forbidden to servants; only castle officials and nobility were permitted in the area. Nolen saw a door to the left; he quickly looked inside but only found a jakes, with some clean straw to one side. Nolen then scanned the corridor and saw an elderly man exiting a doorway about sixty feet in front of him. He ran as the old man turned and saw Nolen's blade flying towards his head. The blade hit with a sickening thud and the old man fell, lying gasping and dying on the floor. Nolen retrieved his blade as it had struck the old man in the throat. He wasn't a threat to Nolen, but Nolen knew he could have no witnesses. He moved into the room where the old man had come from—this was it, he knew. It fit the description and there was no other room like it. All he needed to do now was place the documents in drawer number 247. He wasn't sure what it held, but the instructions were specific. Master Ottomon told Nolen that this drawer held all the names of council members who were going to rule or govern for the next ten years. Although council families hadn't changed position in over 400 years or so, they still needed to formally renew their claims. The next so-called change—what a joke, things hadn't changed in such a long time, and it was merely a formality—was supposed to happen in five years. Nolen and Master Ottomon decided to place the document half way in a pack, which would raise less suspicion.

Nolen found the drawer in a corner of the room and placed the document about midway in the stacked documents, like he wanted. As he was closing the drawer, he heard a woman scream. Nolen didn't wait. He moved swiftly and saw her. She was a very beautiful woman; she had curly brown hair, green eyes, and was about five feet four. She was very petite

and had a cute little up-turned smile, which had turned into a gasp of horror at the sight of Nolen. Nolen had already moved his blowpipe from his robe sleeve to his mouth and blew hard, hitting the unfortunate woman in the stomach. It was filled with snake venom, fast acting, recently milked from a cobra. She crumpled to the ground almost immediately, her body going into shock. It wouldn't take long for the poison to take hold. Nolen was looking for a window to climb out of when he heard cries of anguish and shouting

Shortly after, he started to jog, moving away from the stairs and further into the forbidden area. The corridor seemed longer than it first appeared and the room seemed to have no windows at all. Finally, he saw a stained-glass window up ahead. He heard enraged shouts behind him. He wasn't sure what was on the other side of the window, but it didn't matter, as long as it wasn't soldiers. He flew through the window running at full sprint, crashing through. The fall was almost immediate and he hit a roof hard. He could taste blood in his mouth, and felt a couple of his teeth were loose, his head rang, his jaw stung and half his body ached. Shouts from the window quickly brought him back to his senses. He looked and saw he had fallen about twelve to sixteen feet. One of the guards pointed to the other—a brave corporal by his rank—who ran and jumped out the window. The soldier also fell hard on the part of the roof where Nolen had previously fallen. Nolen, who by now had regained his composure, stomped the corporal on the head as he tried to get up again, stunning him. Nolen then looked down to the area surrounding the roof. He was looking for the sewer canal, which he knew ran under the castle. If he managed to get into it, he knew he would eventually be carried into the bay. Quickly he ran north since that was the direction he was sure the canal was located. He could also smell the foul bilge, even through his bloody nose. It was in an easterly direction towards the city, he thought. Suddenly his vision started to go a bit blurry—the fall must have hurt him more than he had realized. Nolen ran harder still when he could hear water

movement, but his leg was hurting badly. He heard shouts from behind him! The corporal had recovered and was again running towards him.

Nolen took up a fighting stance near the edge of the roof. He said, "Stop in the justice of the king! Not another step, corporal, or you won't go home to your family."

The corporal laughed, because he had a crossbow pointed at Nolen's chest. "Don't have a place to go, spy? How about I make this quick?"

Nolen looked at him, and then dropped off the roof, much to the corporal's surprise. The man ran over to where Nolen had seemingly fallen from, and immediately felt an incredible pain in his left foot. As he looked down, he saw a knife blade sticking out of his boot, and he began losing his vision. His mouth began foaming and soon he couldn't breathe. The last thing the corporal thought of before hitting the ground dead was his wife and children smiling and saying goodbye to him as he left for duty.

Nolen grimly clung to the roof's edge with his left hand; and he coldly watched the corporal fall to his death. He had previously poisoned that knife to make sure it would quickly kill. He was now positioning himself for the jump to freedom, and his shoulder burned as he put his feet to the wall. The jump he reckoned would be at least eighteen feet, if he aimed correctly and landed in the middle in the canal. He hoped it would be deep enough for him to land safely. Summoning all his strength, he tried to put all his remaining power into his push off from the wall, but as he kicked out hard, his leg buckled, and Nolen fell into the shallower part of the sewer.

Past

Nolen awoke to find the room was dark. His body hurt all over. He had a god-awful taste in his mouth, and he saw Master Ottomon carrying a lamp into the room. “Awake, are we?” Nolen wanted to vomit up his stomach’s contents. Master Ottomon sat nearby on a chair. “Well, it’s good to see you’re still amongst the living, it was touch and go for a while you know . . .”

Nolen nodded and wearily replied, “How long?” The moment he spoke, he realized what a mistake that was, his head started pounding, and the gut-wrenching feeling in his stomach made him want to throw up again.

“You’ve been out for about two days. A local sewer worker boy spotted you and dragged you out.”

“Did you thank him for saving my life?”

“Yes, and luckily he won’t remember your face, you were unrecognizable.”

“Good . . .” said, Nolen, feeling hugely relieved.

“I’ll leave you to rest and you may feel uncomfortable for a while, but the Physician said, you would soon get better.” Master Ottomon slowly got off the chair and walked out, leaving Nolen alone with his thoughts and pain.

Nolen again passed out. He was dreaming of himself as a very young boy; he remembered that he was a rangy kid and had dark black hair; he also had dark blue eyes and stood about five feet five. His skin had become rough from always being out in the weather, but there was just something indefinable about being outdoors that made Nolen feel free and happy, and he clearly remembered this feeling. Nolen was an energetic youth who, ever since he could remember, had lived on the street. His mother was a local whore, and he believed his dad was a sailor, although he never found out for sure and never asked, but he put two and two together. He knew she had worked down at the one night shack, the local whorehouse where most of the sailors went to relax and unwind after a voyage out at sea.

When Nolen was about five, he used to ask the local sailors about their sea trips, but they didn't usually tell him much whilst waiting their turn with the women. They sometimes told him stories about sea monsters or tales of the how the wild weather they encountered nearly blew their ships into rocks or even themselves off the ship itself—just silly fancies to keep his young mind occupied. Nolen knew what his mother did, but he didn't care and it wasn't important to him. It was all she knew to keep food in their bellies, and she loved him unconditionally. That was the happiest he remembered being for a long time, but one day when he was about six, a brutish sailor only known to Nolen at the time as Big Nate, came in late at night. Once he had left, Nolen went to see his mom before he went to bed as he sometimes did. To his absolute horror and shock, he found her lying dead with her guts spread all over the room! Her intestines were even hanging off the chandelier and her beautiful head, the one that always had a smile for him, had been decapitated. There was blood everywhere and her mangled body showed severe signs of bruising all over. She had died a horrible death, which not even an animal deserved. Nolen became enraged with a cold fury and vowed revenge. He didn't know what to say or do, and he didn't cry, even though he really wanted to. He couldn't, there was nothing to say or do. His mum was gone, and Nolen instantly knew with a heavy heart that he had no one else to love or care for him for the rest of his life. There was only him.

The other women at the shack—fully appreciating the terrible turn of events for Nolen—quickly took him into their fold, and brought him up as if he were their own child. Nolen appreciated this immensely, even though he knew they could never give him the love his mother always gave. He missed her more with each passing day. When Nolen was about ten, Big Nate came back for another visit. The girls always remembered what he had done to his mum, and didn't want the same thing happening to them. They fooled him by offering a good beverage they said, would relax him some before

they got down to business, giving him a draft filled with a sleeping potion guaranteed to make a horse sleep. When Big Nate finally awoke, he found to his fear and horror that he was tied to a bed, and stripped of all his clothes. Nolen was standing over him with a heated blade with a cold fury in his eyes. There was also mild acids based alcohol for stopping infections on the bed. Nolen swiftly cut Big Nate's genitals off and fed them to him while he screamed in agony; Nolen made sure he didn't bleed to death after that slice, but he viciously carved, burned and beat Nate until his fury subsided slowly. Nolen never cut out the man's eyes, for he wanted Nate to see what was happening to him, knowing where the pain was. It took Nate a full fifty-two hours to die a terrible lingering death, after Nolen finished with him. They later fed Nate's body to the local pigpen. Nolen was eternally thankful to the girls for letting him exact his long sought revenge his way. They had showed him that some people still had something left of a soul and they didn't begrudge him anything he did. No one even asked about Nate. He had the reputation as a local black market dealer who traded with Turner Country, so there was no official investigation. After all this had happened, Nolen put his mother's death in his past, since there was no more he could do. Revenge was served.

His memory then shifted to when he was walking down an alleyway. He could hear footsteps behind himself and he quickened his step to test what the footsteps did. They stopped, Nolen again slowed and he knew there was no one after him. He was worried about nothing. Nolen ducked behind the old bakery on the alleyway, trying to have a look at the person he thought might be following him. But there was no one there. Nolen began to worry again that he had the sickness that miners suffered from when they were in the dark too long. The miner's sickness was not physical, they suffered badly from delusions; they saw things that weren't there, or heard things that didn't exist. They were usually pulled out of the mines when this happened and sent to rest

with their family. Before he realized it, there was a large hand on his shoulder. Nolen felt clammy inside that someone had followed him without him knowing it. He made a split second decision to act, and bit down hard on the man's hand. The reaction was immediate; the man let go with a large shout and Nolen ran off hard down the alleyway. There was a friend he knew who lived in the area. He flew past Mrs. Jollex, the owner of the marketplace nursery garden. She nearly fell over with such surprise when she saw him, while Nolen's heart was pounding with adrenalin. He couldn't really stop to ask for help. After all, who around would help the local ex-whore's child, and who would believe him anyway? He was just another street kid playing stupid games as he was running full flight past the stalls and around corners. Boulevard Street, he was halfway there. It was the same place where he had found a young woman being raped. He had carried a long dagger and had fought the attacker off. The woman, Nico, had been his friend ever since. She worked and lived in a tavern called The Odds and Ends. She told him it was because you got all sorts of people from the market place and they left all sorts of odds and ends there. Some sailor had left a large preserved fish, known as a swordfish, on the wall. It didn't matter to him now, there was a man chasing him and Nolen was getting tired. He hadn't eaten all day and the man was catching up fast. He ran even harder because he could hear the man's footsteps close behind him and more shouts—there were so many people around he didn't even see who was shouting. Nolen finally saw the door he was looking for and dived through the opening.

Nico was inside serving drinks. Nolen began shouting and crying at her to draw her attention, since he didn't know what else to do. Seeing him, she immediately came over and while some of the patrons just stared Nico hugged Nolen close to calm him down. She whispered, "Shh, shh," into his ear and took him over sit at a table. Nolen however couldn't understand what Nico was saying. She was also arguing

with Larden, the bar the owner; she gave him a death stare to mind his own business. He immediately changed his tune and came over with a pint of ale.

Later, time went on, every now and then Nico would try to sneak more ale to Nolen as a treat who had since settled down. She said, "Here try this I added something extra for a different flavor" Nolen, gratefully drank the ale down as fast as he could. He began to feel a bit tired, and thought he couldn't help himself to wake up. In fact, he felt like he could fall asleep right there in the chair. As he struggled to keep his eyes open, he noticed the other patrons were whispering and smirking to one another.

Nolen soon dozed off, but not so deeply that he couldn't vaguely feel Larden picking him up. He also heard a few muffled conversations, "You said you would be discreet. The only reason I told you was because I wanted him to have a chance, since I owe him my life."

"He surprised me, and damn, woman, I didn't know he could run so fast. Look, you know how it can be when you've had your share to bring in."

"Well, I want you to treat him well." From that memory, Nolen fell into a deeper sleep, memories of his childhood slipping back into his subconscious.

Nolen soon began waking up. He couldn't help but want to throw up again, his mouth was burning, and his head was spinning. Next to his bed, there was a glass of herb water. Master Ottomon must have left it, he thought. Nolen got out of bed but felt sore down his left thigh to his knee, and he could feel a couple of teeth missing. He touched his forehead and it had a cut down it about three inches long. Meanwhile, his ribs hurt, although his stomach flux thankfully seemed to have gone. Nolen walked down the corridor. He was thirsty still, so he made his way to the cookery room, where Rogen was talking with Tade. Seeing Nolen, they stopped talking and looked at him. "Is it really that bad?" asked Nolen. All three of them had a chuckle.

“Well Nolen, I’ve seen better looking corpses,” said, Rogen.

“Wasn’t that man you killed last week in a better state?” Tade added humorously, “Nolen what happened?”

Nolen told them that the run-in with the guard he had expected, one unlucky soul to be in the wrong place at the wrong time, but not four. He then told them about the woman, the old man, and the brave corporal.

“Well Nolen, it was a job well done and no one suspects anything. There was just the usual talk of the princess from Turner Country who was visiting and was the target of some unknown enemy. The people think Oroke is behind all of this, and they had no idea that she couldn’t sleep and was wandering the corridors.” Rogen paused, he was thinking aloud saying “Ahr, yes, you must remain low for a while so as to draw attention away from the investigation. If they put any of these events together, they might also figure the legal documents room being tampered with, and then who knows what might happen.”

Nolen asked, “How long and how are the children doing?”

“As long as it takes, and well enough. They are healthy enough to start training,” said, Rogen.

Nolen replied, “Good, it’s time we all had a talk with them, and while I heal and lay low, I shall be diligent in their training. A good and a wiser teacher they will not find.”

Rogen smiled and knew the frightening truth of those words.

Motorius awoke. There was a knock at the door; the daily food was being brought to them. He couldn’t be sure, since his stomach no longer hurt from hunger pains and he felt stronger than he had felt in his whole life. He still didn’t trust any of the food providers, because they had mostly left Motorius and Ludwidge to their own devices during the last few days, but thankfully they had been moved to a different room, one with two good straw beds. It even had its own jakes room and another room for them to wash. There were

also a few games in there to play, but all this made Motorius very uneasy. He couldn't work out what was going on. Suddenly, Eyes walked in. He seemed to be hurt; his shrouded face even looked as if it had a tinge of grey to it. "You two follow me," he commanded.

Motorius followed Ludwidge quietly and he couldn't help it that he needed answers so bluntly. He blurted out, "Are you going to kill us now?" Ludwidge stopped cold in his tracks.

Eyes chuckled, "Why are you so eager to die, young Motorius?"

"Well, you've been feeding us well for god knows what reason, you have beaten us and locked us up, then only thing you haven't done is kill us!"

Eyes looked down at Motorius. He moved towards the boy as he reached into his coat. Motorius wasn't going to flinch—he was going to face his death like a man. Eyes pulled out a skin of water and took a swig and then said, "Would you like some water?" Motorius just glared at him. "Come with me boys, all of this is about to be explained." Motorius looked at Ludwidge who just shrugged his shoulders. They began following Eyes, and like a hawk, Motorius watched everything Eyes did. If he made one move towards them, the other would bolt and hide in a doorway or room. Then when Eyes ran past, they would double back to the other and find their way out. Eyes quickly led them to a doorway where they could hear voices on the other side.

"Is that . . .?" Motorius asked.

"Yes," Eyes said, as they moved inside.

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