

ruin

BIRTH OF A LEGEND



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"A world without pain and suffering is a world without joy. Only emerging from the depths of sorrow and sadness can one truly experience the prize of elation. Following the path of subjugation every man, woman and child can appreciate the blessedness of service to the crown. Under the yoke of power they will know contentment."

- Prince Sayloo of Elohim

"Any man who tries to enslave another to his will has a weakness of the soul. Any man who dares place chains upon my flesh will unleash the beast that hungers within."

- Ruin

Chapter 1 - Exile

The rain beat an erratic rhythm against the small window panes as the wind whipped the droplets to its whim. The young man sat alone in the wooden booth clutching his hands around a pewter tankard. His vacant stare turned from the droplets running outside the glass to the bubbles that broke the surface of the golden liquid. As he breathed in, he felt the sweet smell soothe his senses. The fact that this was his fifth refill had a much greater calming effect than he would have admitted.

With each sip the pain across his back subsided slightly. He lent forward and reached back to his jerkin. It had stuck to the wounds, and he gently prized the material away. The pain was still fresh in his mind, but it was his pride that hurt the most. He had taken the lashes without a murmur of complaint. The punishment wasn't the problem. As the onlookers had laughed, a rage boiled inside him, tormenting his mind. The animal within called to him, begging him to react, to strike back at the worthless tutors and students that revelled in his failure.

Since reaching manhood he had been enlisted in the Pureian College of Arms. A path every man born in Pureia followed. The centrally controlled school taught each citizen the ways and methods of war. The island nation of Pureia was fiercely proud of its isolation and they had successfully defended their shores from all invaders since the dawn of time.

The young man excelled in martial combat. His overtly muscular physique and his unusual height had made him a natural fighter. A solitary figure, he shunned social gatherings choosing instead to train and practise his katas and patterns. He enjoyed his alienation from the other recruits and thrived on their fear when in his presence. He had no concern for their hatred and jealousy but this had made his life difficult.

He was in the last cycle of his education but had felt the lash on countless occasions during his tutelage. Only recently the Tome-Master had warned him about his behaviour. He had threatened him with exile. For those who did not or could not make the grade, deportation was the only option available.

Although he surpassed all the other students and most of the tutors in armed and unarmed combat he had struggled with the teachings of strategy, engineering and morality. The idiosyncrasies and subtleties of these subjects found no purchase on his black and white mind. It was in a morality class that the head prefect Yaytol had twisted his words. The loathsome student was a supreme debater and had enjoyed dishing out an humiliating tirade. The young man had answered the taunt in the way he knew best and had sent him

sprawling across the classroom. The thought warmed him.

The stifled banter of the tavern was suddenly interrupted as the door crashed inwards. The storm entered the small, dimly lit room and with it entered three men. The last one through turned and lent his shoulder into the door struggling to close it against the deluge. Shaking water from their clothing they unwrapped their scarves as they made their way to the bar.

"Three jars please barman" asked the lead man.

The voice made the lone man sitting in the end booth stir from his tankard. He eyed the three new arrivals and smiled to himself as he saw the bright blue welt on the side of the front man's face. He inadvertently sniggered to himself. The sound was not lost on the young man who had just ordered. He strode towards the booth sloshing his ale onto the stone floor.

"Well look who it is?" The man turned to his friends. "The freak Ruin has decided to drown his sorrows, or perhaps he has been filling his tankard with his tears." The three men laughed.

"Hey Yaylor, isn't this our booth?" asked one of the young men.

"I think you're right" replied the lead man. "Hey freak, you heard my esteemed colleague. You're in our seat. How about you move your sorry carcass? Actually I think it best if you left altogether; none of us can bear to hear you sob into your drink."

The three laughed in unison.

Ruin slowly took a sip of his mead. He placed the tankard methodically back on the table. He turned his head and then spat the contents of his mouth onto Yaylor's boots.

"How's the eye?" growled Ruin.

"You know what will happen if you step out of line once more. You'll be exiled. I can't wait for you to lose your temper, and then I'll spit on you as you are taken away from these shores forever" retorted Yaylor.

"You would have to be breathing in order to do that" answered Ruin still staring at his drink.

"What is wrong with you? Can't you see you don't belong here. Every so often nature throws up a freak like you. You should have been strangled at

birth or put to death just like your traitorous father."

Ruin pushed the table away and stood to face his college nemesis. The reason for Yaytol's jibes were now blatantly apparent. Ruin stood head and shoulders above the three men. His massive forearms flexed and the ripped muscles bulged under his tunic. He had rugged features set with a square jaw. His hair was swept back and tied neatly at the back of his head. Most disturbing of all were his eyes. They were a unique piercing yellow more akin to a Fenwulf than a human. The animal countenance continued as Ruin snarled revealing his abnormally long canine teeth.

"What are you going to do?" taunted Yaytol. "If you lay a hand on me, I'll make sure the Tome-Master flays the flesh from your back before packing you off into a life of slavery."

Ruin flashed his arm upwards grabbing Yaytol around the neck. Flexing his biceps he lifted the struggling man off the ground, slowly squeezing. The young man's friends tried to pry Ruin's constricting fingers free. They hung from his arm trying to dislodge his iron grip. With his free arm he grabbed one of the men by the face and threw him backwards across the tavern. He used his flailing victim as a battering ram knocking the other man to the floor.

His smouldering yellow eyes looked deep into Yaytol's soul as his body panicked, desperate for air. His life-force drained and a single tear ran down the face of the stricken man. His hands ceased their scrabbling and fell limp at his side as death took him. The big man allowed the lifeless body to slump to the ground. One of the friends had regained his footing and was staring down, refusing to believe what he was witnessing.

"What have you done?" he screamed. Anger welled inside him and he charged. Ruin adeptly side-stepped, and grabbing the back of the man's head rammed his face into the table. The force of the blow smashed the wooden bench. Ruin slipped his arm around the man's neck holding his head under his armpit. He jerked his body upwards in one swift movement snapping the vertebrae. Allowing the listless body to crash into the table, he stalked towards the last man.

The frightened student tried to back away, but collided with the bar.

"Please no! I wanted no part of this. It was all Yaytol. I swear" pleaded the young man.

"That's enough" shouted the barman. "I'll vouch for you. We all saw what happened. You were provoked and acted in self defence. Don't let your

anger cloud your judgement."

Ruin glanced around the room at the motionless patrons and the ruddy faced barman.

"Anger is all I have" replied Ruin. He shot out his arm smashing his open palm into the young man's nose. The power of the blow ruptured the skull sending shards of bone up into his frontal lobe. The man's eyes rolled white as he fell to the floor.

"I can't let you walk away from this son" said the barman bringing up a sword from beneath the bar. "You know what will happen to us if we do not turn you in."

Ruin was about to react when something solid thumped into the back of his head. His vision swam and consciousness fled as he toppled forward.

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The harsh reality of morning swept over Ruin like a tidal wave. His head pounded. He was unsure whether it was the blow he had suffered or the pungent mead. He went to feel for the wound on the back of his head. His arm jolted as the chain restraints chinked taught. He had been manacled at the hands and feet with a joining chain in between. All of his clothes had been removed apart from his loincloth. He struggled to his feet and looked out through the tiny barred window. The storm was still raging and the un-mettled street was slowly turning into a river of mud.

"Ah the brave warrior awakes" came a voice from inside the gaol. A weathered man walked towards the cell and pressed his face against the bars. "I knew it wouldn't be long before you ended up here once more. I think this will be your last time though. Once the Shadow-Ward arrives you'll be off. You'll fetch a good price at the slave market in Elohim, providing you live that long of course."

The old man smiled revealing a cracked and stained set of teeth. His eyebrows suddenly raised and he stared at the talisman around Ruin's neck.

"I must have missed that last night. Damn my old eyesight. Come closer, you know all belongings are now forfeit. What is anyway? Looks like some sort of cog."

"It was my father's" answered Ruin.

"Ah. Worthless then" chuckled the jailer. "I don't care what it is, I want it anyway" demanded the old man.

"Reach in and get it then" suggested Ruin.

"You don't scare me boy" replied the man reaching in through the bars towards the necklace.

Ruin reacted quickly opening his mouth wide and biting down on the man's outstretched arm. He sank his long teeth deep into the flesh. The old man cried out and tried to pull his arm free. Falling backwards he screamed in pain, as despite colliding with the metal cage Ruin stubbornly refused to release his jaw. He pulled back with his huge neck muscles and shook his head violently from side to side. The motion tore a large chunk of the jailer's arm away. Ruin spat the chunk of meat onto the floor. The severed radial artery pumped blood high into the air.

The old man panted as each beat of his heart squirted his vital liquid onto the dirty flagstones. He tore a strip from his shirt and feebly tried to stem the flow.

"What kind of man are you?" screamed the jailer.

"Who said I was a man?" replied Ruin calmly licking blood from his lips.

With tremendous effort the old jailer crawled as far away from the cell as he could. With each passing grain his life neared its end until finally his breath gave out. He slumped forward into the pooling blood. Ruin stretched out his shackled leg but even without the chains he could not reach the body. As he returned to sit on the stone bed the door thrust open and in walked the Shadow-Ward.

Every large town or city had at least one. They were appointed by the Chief Magister and had the powers of arrest and sentencing. They were the keepers of morals and the dealers of justice within Pureia. They guarded their positions of power jealously and operated a zero tolerance approach to all breaches of the peace. Chosen for their devoted attitude towards the Prayer of Pureia most were incorruptible. The man that entered now was one such zealot. Ruin recognised his face. He was called Talweer.

He stepped over the body of the jailer and turned to face the prisoner. He wore a long leather cloak over a padded gambeson with armoured pauldrons and vambraces. A white cross was daubed across his chest signifying his position. He had dark hair, sunken brown eyes and a neatly trimmed beard. His short

cropped hair showed flecks of grey as he ran his gloved fingers over his head.

"What a fool" he muttered to himself looking down at the dead body. "I suppose this is your handiwork?"

Ruin remained silent.

"Look my young friend. We have encountered each other on more than one occasion. I warned you the last time we met your bursts of unprovoked anger would not be tolerated. You left three students dead in the tavern last night. From the reports I have gathered, you killed one in cold blood. Is that correct?"

Still Ruin refused to answer.

"It matters not. You have forced my hand. You know the sentence for murder." He looked back at the dead man. "Perhaps we should be making it two counts. I like you young man, you have never had an easy run of things what with your appearance and your, how shall we put it, demeanour. But I must act or I would not be true to my office. Because of your special circumstances and that of your father before you I will waive the penalty of death by stoning. However you leave me no choice and I hereby sentence you to a life in exile. You will be sold to the slave traders in Elohim. May the Seraphim of the Pure grant mercy on your tortured soul."

The Shadow-Ward placed the key into the lock.

"Have you nothing to say?"

Ruin stood and walked towards Talweer.

"You talk of justice, and being true to your office. It was you who sentenced my father. You knew he was innocent and yet you did nothing" snarled Ruin.

"No-one is innocent young man. Your father atoned for his sins in death, as you will in a lifetime of service" replied Talweer.

"I will never be a slave" stated Ruin.

"Even the strongest of men can be broken. I have seen it many times. You are no different. You will succumb to the bonds of your master."

"Any man who tries to enslave another to his will has a weakness of

the soul. Any man who dares place chains upon my flesh will unleash the beast that hungers within" growled Ruin.

"Then you have a short life ahead of you" replied Talweer calmly.

"Maybe so. But better to die living the life you were destined to live than living a lie" answered Ruin. "You preach morals and judge the so called guilty, but who judges you?"

"My position is above ordinary justice. My lifetime of service gives me the wisdom to keep the peace and decide the fate of those that sin. I don't expect someone of your young age to understand."

Ruin laughed.

"Yes maybe the young are naive, but your generation are conceited. I promise you this Shadow-Ward, I will return, and when I do I will bring vengeance and judgement on the corrupted heart of Pureia."

It was Talweer's turn to chuckle.

"I think not." He drew his sabre. He beckoned for his prisoner to move towards the door. The Shadow-Ward forced Ruin out into the street to the waiting caravan. A long string of carriages and carts queued in the muddy street. In front of the gaol was a long wagon with two metal cages on the back. In one, languished a woman curled into a ball shivering from the cold rain. The other was open awaiting its next occupant. Ruin reluctantly climbed in and the door clanked shut behind him.

As the procession made its way through Kolongor towards the harbour, citizens that had braved the weather stood and watched the spectacle. Handfuls of mud, detritus and rotten vegetables were thrown at the caged criminals. Ruin shielded his head as he was pelted with stones. A small child ran out into the road and spat through the cage at him. The child laughed. Ruin quickly grabbed the bars of the cage and bearing his teeth roared as loudly as he could. Terrified, the child fell backwards into the mud. Ruin Laughed.

The coastal city of Kolongor was one of the main trading ports in Pureia. The city was vast and had sprawled out inwards eventually swallowing the College of Arms that had initially stood separately on the hills behind the port. The carnival of prisoners had to run the gauntlet on the long road to the harbour. Ruin could smell it before he saw it. The overpowering smell of fish mixed with the unmistakable sea brine. As the cart clattered along the cobbled harbour, Ruin removed the organic missiles that had been thrown at him from his cage.

The rain had already washed most of the grime from his body and as it continued to lash down the cold water trickling over his muscles was almost refreshing. The small woman in the cage next to him had stopped shivering. She had stopped moving altogether.

They moved further into the harbour passing large wooden warehouses and huge tall ships anchored in the multiple marinas. Despite the howling winds and torrential rain the docks were alive with activity. Traders bartered whilst trying to shelter beneath torn canopies and ship's crews were busy loading and unloading. The caravan came to a stop next to a four masted galleon. Ruin looked up at the tall black wooden vessel. The ship was called the 'Pride of Vardhan'.

Geography was another subject Ruin had not been gripped by, but he knew that Vardhan was a city of the East coast of Elohim. They would have to cross the Mako Sea in order to reach it. That would take at least two tides. There would be plenty of opportunities to escape. He pushed his back into the cage and folded his legs up against the bars. He flexed his quads and felt the door move slightly. He was confident that he could push the door open when needed. Before he could relax he felt a sting across his back. He turned in his cage.

"What do you think you are doing?" barked a guard holding a whipping stick. He shouted across to another man. The crewmember hurried over with a heavy chain in his hands. The guard took the chain and climbed onto the cart. He wrapped it around the door and the frame and secured it with a hefty padlock. "That should keep you from causing any trouble" smiled the guard.

Throughout the morning the cages and supplies were loaded on board. Ruin was transported on a wheeled cart next to several smaller cages containing poultry. As he was taken up the gangplank he looked back to see the port workers open the other cage on his wagon and drag out the dead body of the woman. He could see the Slave Master berate the workers whilst two others tossed her body into the sea as if it were a simple piece of litter. As Ruin was moved along the ship his attention was caught by a ruckus below on the harbour side.

A blonde haired, white skinned woman inside a similar cage to him was screaming and shaking the bars. She had somehow slipped her manacles and the workers were trying to get close enough to subdue her. Each time they got close she lashed out scratching and clawing like a feral animal. Ruin smiled to himself. He wanted to see how the situation ended but his cage was lowered into the dark hold.

Hundreds of crates and cages were loaded into the huge space. Some cages contained other slaves but most contained various beasts. Within a short time the smell from the defecation became overpowering. One of the last cages to be lowered contained the blonde woman he had seen on the dock side. She was unconscious and had a small cut across her forehead. Her cage was moved across the floor and slammed next to his.

He had never seen a woman quite like her before. She was tall, well muscled and had broad shoulders. If not for her comely face and shapely female curves it would have been easy to mistake her for a male, at least from the back. As he studied her still form he noticed a series of brand marks across her shoulders. Her skin was a milky white colour and series of black patterns were tattooed upon her chest and neck. The light suddenly disappeared as the hold doors slammed shut.

It took a while but Ruin's eyes slowly adjusted to the reduced visibility. Light shone down in single beams from the various cracks and openings above. It was enough to see. The ship suddenly lurched to one side and the animals squawked and grunted their fear. They were underway.

Ruin once again put his back against the cage door and pushed. The rusty lock easily snapped as he had predicted but the extra heavy chains that had been wrapped around held firm. He strained with his legs as he felt the metal bars digging into his flesh.

"Do not waste your strength, the chain is too thick" came the voice behind him. Ruin spun around and saw the woman removing her long hair from her face. As she stared back he saw her eyes. They had no iris, and were jet black. A more stark contrast he had never seen. Two glistening dark orbs against her snow white skin.

"What's the matter? Haven't you seen a woman before?" she asked.

"Not like you" admitted Ruin.

She smiled.

"I am Kantanese, that is probably why. My name is Efferial. My friends call me Effi."

"I can't imagine you have that many" replied Ruin.

"What do you mean by that?" she asked clearly angered.

"I saw you on the dock side. It looked like you created quite a stir" said Ruin.

"Ah Yes" she smiled. "One of them is now missing an eye."
Ruin laughed and sat back in his cage.

"You are a long way from Kantan. What brings you to the Pure Isle?" asked Ruin.

"I was hired to protect a shipment. Everything was going well and after we had delivered the goods to the City of Peace I sought my payment. The merchant refused to pay. He claimed the cargo had been damaged in transit. So I took what I was owed. According to the Shadow-Ward who arrested me that is not how disputes are settled in Pureia. Your people have a skewed view of justice."

"They are no longer my people" replied Ruin.

"Of course" replied Efferial. "I imagine you have a similar story. You don't strike me as a thief or murderer."

"I am not sure what I am" said Ruin honestly. "So, you are a sword for hire?"

"Does that surprise you?"

"Yes. You are a woman" stated Ruin.

"And a woman cannot fight? Is that your point?" replied Efferial clearly offended.

"Yes, absolutely. A battlefield is no place for a woman" said Ruin confused by her rising anger.

"I can best most men in combat, and with my bow I can hit a moving lupin at well over a league" she defended.

"Then I would suggest you have yet to meet a real man in combat" laughed Ruin.

She glowered at him.

"Yes you are correct. I have yet to meet a real man anywhere that I have travelled." She turned her back on him signalling the conversation was over.

Ruin was awoken abruptly as he slammed into the side of his cage. He stretched out his arms and braced himself. The ship was lurching violently from side to side. The animals were panicking and the noise was deafening. Outside he could hear the storm tear at the wooden hull. Water sloshed across the hold deck as the ship swayed forward once more.

"I wondered when you would wake up" shouted Efferial.

Ruin looked across. She had braced herself in a similar way and was trying hard to remain upright as the wind battered the galleon.

"This is a bad storm. We need to get out of here. I have no intention of drowning trapped in a slave cage" she continued.

"Me neither" barked Ruin. He looked down at the fixings holding his cage to the deck. Moving to one side he then shoulder charged the bars. The prison cube rocked and the long nails holding the brackets in place moved slightly. He repeated the movement.

"What are you doing?" screamed Efferial. "If your cage comes free you will be tossed around the hold like a piece of flotsam."

Ruin ignored her warning and slammed once more into the cage. It ripped free from its mooring and rolled over. Before he had a chance to steady himself the ship tilted and the cage rolled across the hold. Another brutal surge forward sent him crashing into the bulkhead. As the ship was buffeted by the storm Ruin's caged rebounded throughout the hold, smashing open other crates and boxes. He protected himself as best he could but was bleeding from several cuts and contusions. As the cage slid once more into a supporting timber he finally heard the sound he had been waiting for. The slight snick of snapping metal.

The damage to the cage had stressed the crude welds and with several hefty kicks Ruin freed himself. As he tried to steady himself water poured in through the gaps in the hold door above. He turned to see the small doorway into the hold open and a swinging lantern start to illuminate the space. He ran towards the door and before it was fully open he slammed into it sending the guard on the other side crashing into the steps. The lantern he was holding smashed against the timber and flames leapt up the walls. As Ruin opened the door a torrent of sea water washed down the steps extinguishing the fire but washing the guard and Ruin back into the hold.

Reacting first, Ruin grabbed the man's hair and slammed his face into the deck.

He repeated the attack splintering the helpless guard's teeth and nose.

"Crude, but effective" shouted Efferial. "Get his keys!" she yelled. Ruin removed the ring of keys from the dead man's belt. He fumbled with the lock as the ship lurched again. Water was now pouring into the hold and the ship was starting to list badly. He threw his shackles into the darkness and headed towards the door.

"Where are you going?" yelled Efferial. The other captives were also yelling at the free man for aid. "You cannot leave us here. We will drown" pleaded Efferial. Ruin hesitated holding onto the door frame. He ran back across the rolling ship and dropped the keys into her outstretched hand.

Ruin returned to the stairs and struggled to climb them as the water poured in from above. He emerged into the night and chaos was erupting around him. The sails were torn, ropes flailed across the deck. The few remaining deck hands struggled to stay upright as massive waves crashed over the rails. As the ship listed violently once more, two men disappeared over the rails and into the raging ocean. Most of the rope-bound cork life rafts had already been deployed. The final couple on the prow were strewn with desperate men trying to unleash them.

A towering wave smashed over the galleon washing one of the rafts and the men clinging to it over the edge. Ruin rushed onto the deck grabbing a wayward boat hook as he moved. He reached the ship's rails and looked over. Way below the sailors were scrabbling onto the raft. The boat rocked upwards and he waiting until it dipped down once more before jumping out into the sea. Still holding the boat hook he swam towards the raft. As he approached he kicked his legs launching himself from the water. He rammed the barbed hook into the chest of the nearest sailor and pulled him back into the water. As they fell backwards he twisted the wooden shaft. The weight of the impaled victim snapped the makeshift weapon. With one hand grabbing onto the rope he swung the jagged wooden spike over his head ramming through another man's foot.

He hauled himself from the water using the screaming sailor as an anchor point. Once upright he landed a vicious upper cut into the man's jaw, sending him flying into the black ocean. The remaining sailor cowered on one corner of the raft. Ruin turned and snarled baring his fangs. The man thought quickly and dived into the water. Ruin removed the stubby paddle from under the knot-work and began making distance between the raft and the now sinking ship.

As he crested a colossal wave he saw a body thrashing in the water. Initially

ignoring it he continued to paddle. Then he glimpsed the white skin and realised it was the Kantanese woman. Cursing he paddled towards her. He reached down grabbing her arm and unceremoniously hauled her onto the raft. She coughed and spluttered trying to rid her system of the salt water she swallowed.

"Thank you" she splurled.

"Don't thank me yet" replied Ruin as he fought against another white topped breaker. "Secure yourself under the rope. We have to hope we can ride out the tempest."

Ruin pushed the paddle back under the rope and wrapped a loose end around his wrist. He looked back for the first time. The lanterns on top of the masts could just be seen as they crested a huge wave. As they disappeared down into the trough, walls of water were all they could see.

The two escapees rode out the storm for the remainder of the night clinging tightly to the buoyant raft. As the morning light brought a new tide and the storm dissipated they both fell asleep exhausted.

Ruin awoke to see Efferial paddling at the corner of the life raft. He looked ahead and saw the clear outline of land. Dark cliffs rose up ahead. Wherever they had ended up it was not Pureia. Of that small mercy he was grateful. He decided not to alert his companion that he had woken and closed his eyes once more.

The breaking waves woke him some time later and he sat upright.

"Looks like we made it" said Efferial.

"Looks like it" replied Ruin. He unwound the rope from around his wrist and dived into the sea. In only a few moments he was wading towards the shore. He ran his fingers through his hair and wrung out the water from his top knot. Efferial was doing likewise, although her skin seemed whiter than usual. Her lips were blue and she was shivering violently.

"Are you okay?" asked Ruin.

"I am fine" she chattered.

"Only it looks like you are freezing" he suggested.

"As I said, I am fine, thank you" she insisted.

"As you wish" shrugged Ruin and he started to run up the beach.

"Where are you going?" called Efferial.

The young warrior stopped and turned and shrugged his shoulders again.

"Do you even know where you are?" she asked.

"I have no idea" he replied. "I will find out soon enough."

"I was thinking I could accompany you. I know this land. This is a very different place than Pureia. A guide could be useful?" she suggested.

She could visibly see him ponder her proposition.

"Thank you, but I prefer my own company. We will both stand more of a chance alone I believe." With that he turned and starting running.

"This is Elohim" she called after him. He raised an arm signifying he had heard. "Chauvinist Idiot" she cursed.