

## PROLOGUE

The talons on his hand flexed in time with the palpitations of his newly beating heart. He worked his jaw, tasting salt and bile on his tongue. His vision hadn't completely cleared, but after spending nearly five hundred years buried in an ancient throne room beneath a mountain of rock and ash, it was a minor irritant.

About to rise, he paused, his head turning toward a noise from the other end of his recently unearthed prison. In the flickering torchlight, he made out a black-robed figure nimbly picking his way through the boulder-strewn cavern toward him.

"What news, Timlach?" he rumbled in a voice like an approaching storm, shifting his muscular bulk back into the rough-hewn rock chair. While he abhorred the fact that he owed his life—or more aptly, his rebirth—to this man, Timlach had proven a capable servant. Five hundred years of whispering in the dark recesses of other's dreams had finally found those who would find and follow him—again. But the monumental task of locating his stone prison, paled in comparison to the effort required to break the spell that had bound him. It took a thousand voices, chanting a long-forgotten incantation for days upon end, to open the crack that would allow him to break free. A thousand voices, and then a thousand deaths. A thousand lives for his. The thought made him smile.

Timlach stopped several feet from the low dais and briefly dipped his head before speaking. Torchlight danced off his silver breastplate. "The legions are gathering," he replied. "Once assembled, they will await your command."

Rimyaroth turned his massive head and fixed his lidless amber gaze upon the man. "Any objections?"

Timlach shifted his feet, but his face remained confident. "Some of the villagers were not . . . cooperative in volunteering themselves to your service."

"You've brought them here?"

"Yes, as you requested." Timlach turned and gestured, the movement quick, spare.

Two black-robed men along with half a dozen bristling guards entered the cavern, prodding a handful of terrified villagers forward with their swords. They stopped beside Timlach, the two black-robed men flanking the prisoners. Their breastplates, too, glittered in the torchlight—one gold, one bronze.

Rimyaroth rose from his chair and ambled slowly forward, stopping within a foot of the foremost prisoner. The young man stood defiantly, though his body shook with fear and cold.

“You choose to stand against me, boy?” Somehow, the young man managed to raise his chin in defiance. “Then so be it.” Rimyaroth’s muscled arm shot out, and his clawed hand seized the young man by his throat.

A horrified gasp rippled through the remaining prisoners as Rimyaroth lifted him off the ground with a roar. The young man’s feet kicked the air and he pawed uselessly at the beast’s thick arm as the breath was squeezed from his lungs. With a soft crunch, the youth’s neck snapped.

Opening his hand, the beast let the body drop. He turned and strode back to the dais.

Muffled sobs rose from the watching prisoners. An older man rushed forward, only to be cut down by the man in the bronze breastplate. The body hit the ground hard and rolled to within a foot of the young man’s corpse. Leaving the two dead men sprawled on the floor, their guards ushered the remaining prisoners out.

Timlach turned back to the dais. “We’ll dispatch the rest of them.”

“No!” Rimyaroth’s shout echoed off the walls of the cave. “Let them live to tell others what they have seen here. All must know there will be no mercy.”

“As you command.”

“And what of Radwich?” the beast snarled.

The man in the gold breastplate nodded and took a step forward. “The city is unprepared, and will be caught unawares.” Timlach bobbed his head. “We will not disappoint you, Rimyaroth.”

The corners of the beast’s mouth twitched briefly, revealing a row of razor-sharp teeth. “Find the boy...and the

Talisman. Then on to Tivedon . . . I will have my revenge.”

## TIVEDON

Jayl nervously eyed the twelve heavily armed soldiers surrounding him and his sister. “Is all this really necessary?” he asked his father.

“It can be a dangerous journey, and you and Myah are my only children—the future of Braelt. This city will celebrate your return.” Ryjke Fillomen answered.

Jayl hoisted himself onto his horse, already missing home. He had never spent more than a few days away from the Fillomen manor, and now he’d be away for the better part of a year—a long time indeed.

“Now take care, the both of you,” Aunt Roan said as she handed a small pack to Myah, who slung it over the pommel of her saddle. “And watch out for each other. Tivedon can be quite...overwhelming.”

Grasping the horses’ bridles, Sir Ryjke looked directly at Jayl. “And if there’s anyone there from Radwich or Brant-Fiord, you pass on my greetings. It never hurts to reaffirm alliances. The Free cities still mean something here in the north.”

Myah gave Jayl a wink. “We will. And don’t worry about us, Aunt Roan, we can take care of ourselves.”

“We’ll be sure to keep a lookout for both well-wishers *and* evil minions!” Jayl grinned, and they turned their mounts and started down the road.

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Growing up near the Uli mountain ranges, the siblings were used to seeing the type of massive white-capped peaks that now rose up before them as they neared Tivedon. What they weren’t prepared for was Tivedon itself. Jayl had heard it described by his father and others, but nothing he heard quite captured it. Even though they were still a few miles outside of the city, he could just see the tops of the twin towers of the school that bore the city’s name. The towers stretched high into the sky like two massive fists reaching into the heavens.

“It’s breathtaking!” Myah exclaimed as they trotted up the last rise and surveyed the gold and green valley spread out below them.

Even from this distance, the city seemed to be bustling with activity. The lush green of the valley surrounding Tivedon contrasted with the vibrant buildings and structures. Most rooftops were colored — from deep red and orange hues to bright purple and blues. Like a carnival, but stoic and regal at the same time, Jayl thought, as he angled his horse down the winding road that led into the city. With a final salute to the Braelt soldiers, Jayl and Myah crossed the last few hundred yards to Tivedon’s gates.

A large guardsman greeted them at the main throughway. He was as brightly attired as the city itself. His surcoat was white with thick, dark purple stripes and ended just above the knees. His tights were a deep maroon, which oddly enough, went well with the peacock feathers that made up the plume of his polished steel helmet. A lance rested lightly over his shoulder. Jayl dismounted awkwardly, feeling the stiffness of the last few miles. Myah, however, smoothly swung down from her mare and landed lightly on the gravel road.

“Ho there, my young travelers, and state your business,” the guard said.

“Uh, hello there, sir, I’m...we’re... that is, we...” Jayl mumbled.

“I am Myah Fillomen and this is my brother, Jayl. We are here representing Braelt and are attending school here in Tivedon this year,” Myah said, straightening.

“Oh, you are, are you?” The guard replied, cocking his head to one side and half closing his right eye as he studied them.

“Yes, we are.” Myah shifted her feet uneasily.

“And how is it that I’m to be sure you be telling the truth now?” he drawled, suddenly leaning in close to Jayl and forcing him to take half a step back.

Myah cast a questioning look at Jayl. The guard’s face pinched tighter, and his stare intensified.

“Because of this!” Myah exclaimed, pulling her hand quickly out of her pack and thrusting it towards the guard.

Hanging down from Myah’s outstretched fingers was a

band of twisted black leather, carved with fine, intricate patterns. At the end hung a small, silver medallion. For a moment nobody moved.

“Oh yes!” Jayl spluttered, “I almost forgot the medallion!”

The medallion itself was about the size of a Braelt monarch and about as thick. It seemed to be made of silver, but depending on which way the light struck, it seemed almost translucent.

Jayl remembered the day the package had come. “To the attention of Mr. Jayl Fillomen and Miss Myah Fillomen”, the writing on the simple brown paper had read. The contents inside, however, were anything but simple. The letter, handwritten in gold ink with the official Tivedon school mark melted in a dark red wax circle in the top corner, officially stated their acceptance into Tivedon for the following school year. Along with the letter was another, smaller brown envelope that jingled. Jayl had slowly turned the envelope over, and read aloud the words printed on it: *The Sigils of Tivedon. Use to enter.* ‘Enter what?’ he had remarked.

Inside were what at first appeared to be identical small silver medallions, although, upon closer inspection they were found to be quite different. Jayl’s Sigil — he knew it was his thanks to a little bit of ribbon bearing his name — was beautifully engraved with the image of the twin towers of Tivedon and the city below. On the back was a differently styled image of an eye with two inverted V’s stacked one on top of the other. Myah’s Sigil bore the same towers on one side and on the other, a stag on a rocky outcrop, holding a set of scales in its mouth. Jayl had made fun of Myah for the next week about having a “manly” Sigil, but secretly he thought he’d rather have hers. He couldn’t quite figure out what his image was or what it meant.

Now, having answered his own question of what the Sigils were for, Jayl hastily reached into his jerkin, withdrew his own, and held it before the guard’s face. “Here’s mine!” he said, quickly.

“That’s better,” the guard replied, leaning back and smiling. The appearance of the Sigils had seemingly altered

his mood for the better. “It’s best to keep them handy while you’re here, and show them to anyone who asks. They’re door openers, for sure,” he finished, stepping aside swiftly, despite his large stature.

“Thanks, I will,” Jayl said as he and Myah led their horses through the gate.

Jayl quickly forgot about the guard as he became swept up in the throng of people bustling through the streets. Vendors and hawkers filled every nook, offering spices and trinkets and things Jayl couldn’t even describe.

“Let’s stow our gear and explore, Myah,” Jayl said, as he pointed to a livery across the way. “How many monarchs did father give us again?” he said, as his head swiveled wildly, trying to take everything in. “Let’s spend some!”

“Slow down, Jayl. We’re going to be here for a whole year, remember? And besides, we don’t have that much and we’ve got to make it last. I’d hate to be the one who sends word back to father asking for more because we spent it on some useless thing you fancied,” Myah said, winking.

Jayl paused briefly and looked at Myah. “What?”

“Nothing,” Myah replied, chuckling softly. “Come on, let’s head towards the towers.”

Reluctantly, Jayl turned and followed his sister along the main street that wound its way to their destination. They passed a multitude of shops, inns and an ample number of less than respectable looking pubs and taverns. Jayl couldn’t help but gawk. Braelt was of a decent size, and its main street was nothing one could easily dismiss, but Tivedon’s size and exotic flavors were almost overwhelming. Jayl couldn’t wait to wander through the city and explore.

Quite suddenly the noise and bustle of the crowded streets seemed to fade. The shops and people thinned out, and an almost eerie calm descended. The ground under their feet — which had a moment before been made of hard-packed, crushed stone — gave way to old cobblestones.

Rising up before them like an aged giant was Tivedon. The castle was massive. The two towers rose up almost endlessly into the sky. The enormous walls stretched far to either side before disappearing around corners. Parapets and crenellations of heavy, cut sandstone dotted the tops of the

walls. Jayl squinted as his eyes were drawn upwards to the top of the gatehouse, which housed the machinery that raised and lowered the huge ironbound portcullis. He gasped as he realized they weren't alone. A dozen silent sentinels stood along the length of the school's front wall. A dull glint reflected the sun off their steel helmets and the lances that stood rigid beside them.

"Are they real?" Jayl whispered, not willing to move a muscle or his head for fear of potentially losing it.

"I think —" Myah started to reply.

"But of course they're real," an old and softly accented voice cut in, startling them. "And welcome to Tivedon. I am Sir Timmaren Salvren. And you are?"

Sir Salvren was slightly taller than Jayl, with a slim but strong build and silvery grey hair parted in the middle and flowing straight down past his shoulders. He wore a billowing, white robe with a sheen to it that played tricks on Jayl's eyes, and seemed to change with each slight movement. But Sir Salvren's most striking feature by far was his face. His eyes were a deep green, like emeralds in an aura of ice. His face was lined with age, but to Jayl, he seemed to be both old, yet youthful at the same time. His nose was sharp, but not harshly so. And his radiant smile was hard to look away from.

"Well...?" he intoned again, softly.

"Myah...Jayl," Myah managed to say, her face reddening.

"I'm Jayl and she's Myah," Jayl said quickly, not entirely sure what had gotten into his sister. It was usually he who was easily flustered. "We're here from Braelt."

"But of course you are. The Fillomen pair, correct?" Sir Salvren replied, his focus remaining on Jayl.

"Uh, that's right, but how do you know...?"

"Actually, I know all about both of you."

"You do?" asked Myah, looking even more embarrassed then she had a few moments ago.

"As you'll soon see, it's a small class of students this year. And I take a great interest in all who come here. Tivedon is so much more than a school that teaches the finer points of diplomacy. It's our responsibility to shape students such as yourselves into everything you can be." Sir Salvren



said, again keeping his focus squarely on Jayl.

“And what would *that* be?” Jayl asked, shifting his feet under Sir Salvren’s penetrating gaze.

“Oh, you’ll find that out soon enough,” he replied with a wink. “Now, enough standing here. I’m sure you are quite tired from your journey. Let’s move inside and get you settled, shall we? It looks as if the weather’s turning.” And with that, Sir Salvren turned and walked beneath the gates.

Jayl stole another glance at the silent soldiers and turned his collar up around his neck as he led his horse after Sir Salvren. The weather was indeed turning.

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