

Chapter 6: The Drunkard

Jack led Kallwyn down a maze of side-streets and back alleys, so fast that Kallwyn couldn't memorize the route if he tried.

Kallwyn pulled away from Jack after three or four blocks, he couldn't exactly tell, and said, "What's going to happen to Jonas?"

"Jonas made his choices, kid," Jack said at length. "We can't change that."

"What's the Enri—" Kallwyn stopped. "The Enri Jeer? And why did Jonas leave it?"

"The Enri *Djirin* is the Overking's grand army. Jonas, from what I've heard tell in taverns and the like, didn't want to keep burning Turrellian villages like the Overking wanted the Enri *Djirin* to, so he left. I think he was some sort of officer," Jack said. "Now I did what I promised. You're safe. So I'm leaving. Good luck, kid."

He started to walk away when Kallwyn said, "Stop!"

Jack kept walking.

"I'm going to rescue Jonas. Will you help me?"

Jack turned around and raised an eyebrow at Kallwyn, a skeptical look on his face. "And how, exactly, do you expect to get past the full might of the *Dji'Ento*?"

"The jee—what now?"

"*Dji'Ento*," Jack said slowly, as if teaching the word to a toddler. "The Overking's personal guard. Second to none. And I also forgot to mention that three brigades of the Enri *Djirin*'s cavalry division patrol the land surrounding the Overking's castle, and that the Enri *Djirin* itself has thousands of soldiers in the countryside roundabout."

"What are you talking about?" Kallwyn asked. "I wasn't planning on going to the King's castle. I was just going to ambush the soldiers as they took Jonas to the castle, you know, somewhere in the high country?" He looked at Jack. "I was thinking about it on the way out here."

"You don't have any weapons, kid. And Jonas would have kept you around to fight if you had any skill."

“I have this,” Kallwyn said, drawing the knife he had pilfered from Jack’s residence. “And I can find a sword, too.”

“Isn’t that mine?” Jack asked, his eyes narrowing.

“It was,” Kallwyn said, flipping two welrik to Jack. “Now it’s mine.” He looked at Jack, his face set with determination. “And you’re coming with me.”

“Why would I do that?”

“Jonas is quite the profitable investment for you, no?” Kallwyn asked slyly. “So if he gets captured, what’s that gonna say for the people who think you two are partners? That he’ll protect you if they try for their money back?”

Jack’s eyes widened, then went back to normal. He sighed. “I’m good as dead without him to place my bets on, anyway. I’m in.”

The convoy slowly trundled along the road that wound through the high country.

It had been two days since Jonas had been captured by the Enri Djirin and Jack had found some of his “acquaintances” to help them out in the operation.

Kallwyn had spent forty-seven courah and one welrik on a longsword – the blade tempered till it was tinged blue. As Kallwyn was an excellent blacksmith he knew that it was a very good sword, though the hilt was unwrapped and he spent a further two courah and two welrik on a bundle of leather strips to wrap the hilt in.

Jack had scowled during the purchases, likely because Kallwyn drew directly from the fifty courah that Jonas had extracted from Jack’s extensive funds, but Kallwyn didn’t mind his expression. It had been a while since he had held a sword before, and he had only held such a fine weapon three or four times before. He had trained with the sword from a young age in the yard behind the blacksmith shop where he worked.

Jack’s “partners”, or as Kallwyn preferred to think of them, “partners in crime”, all knew Jonas and all had debts to Jack. This was key, because none of Jack’s friends who didn’t owe him were willing to help.

They were able to convince three people to accompany them on their adventure. Spread out throughout the trees were Rob Delts, an ex-smuggler whose boat was sunk by an uncharted area of shoals when moonlighting with a cargo of imported spice; Ethan Edwards, a petty thief who lost his left ear in an unfortunate accident involving a drunk soldier and a tavern; and Stewart Goldman, a former miner who had almost been hanged for making off with too much gold. Edwards was skilled with a knife, and had once escaped a castle dungeon with an old nail and a little rum. Goldman could swing a sword as well as a pickaxe, and Delts was worth his salt with a crossbow and short sword. Delts and Goldman were positioned on opposite sides of the highway as it entered a forest for two miles, while Edwards and Jack would stop the convoy halfway through the forest, demanding money and allowing Goldman and Delts to sneak up from behind. Meanwhile, Kallwyn would sneak aboard the jail carriage and rescue Jonas.

Jack was vaguely aware that three other fugitives, high-ranking officers who had deserted the Enri Djirin around the same time as Jonas, had been captured, yet neglected to tell Kallwyn. He didn’t feel it necessary and it didn’t sit well with him to be taking orders from a kid, so he did it as a sort of personal revenge. But the boy was growing on him, so he did what he had to do – besides, Jonas was a source of income for him and if they failed he could be captured, so he had to try.

The convoy entered the two-mile stretch of woods. Over the past day, Kallwyn and Jack’s entourage had followed it and done reconnaissance, largely on foot (though Edwards did have a packhorse that they carried equipment in) and they had deduced that the convoy consisted of three carriages: one for the

prisoners, one for the commanding officers of the unit, and one that carried supplies. Each was pulled by two horses, and there were an additional three horses, each ridden by a soldier, and it seemed like there were about twenty or so men in fighting condition (they had counted three wounded during their reconnaissance). The odds were bad but if Kallwyn could free Jonas quickly, he and the other prisoners would be a huge advantage. Delts would try to pick off commanding officers from a distance, but he didn't have a whole lot of bolts for the crossbow and so it would be a game of chance.

Kallwyn had returned to the *Raj Gipling* at sundown that first day, after purchasing his items, and informed the watchman on duty (Captain Turett had gone to a tavern to drink the night away) that he'd be leaving and would likely not be coming back. The next day they had set out, the motley crew they were, and followed the highway to the first camp of the company of soldiers, which was deserted by the time they made it there, and by making quick time through the countryside and it had been child's play, really, to find where they had been and where they were going.

As the convoy reached the spot that marked approximately one mile into the woods, Kallwyn did a bird whistle, though it was easily identifiable among the birdsong of the forest (Kallwyn was not good at imitating animals), and Jack and Edwards stepped into the road, weapons drawn. Both were wearing long cloaks with long cowls that didn't show much of their faces.

"Halt, travelers," Edwards' deep voice boomed. He had been chosen as the spokesman for the group because he had a deep, commanding voice and was tall and muscular; the ideal choice for a bandit leader, in the opinion of Regional Lieutenant William Alton. He was the commanding officer of the unit of men escorting the prisoners back to the castle, and looked with annoyance at the cloaked men as Edwards said imperatively, "Your money or your life!"

"You'd be surprised to know," Lieutenant Alton responded smartly, "that I am a lieutenant under the great Overking, and am on his business. Now let us pass and we shall spare your lives; I am in a rather good mood today."

"Probably because of that," Kallwyn muttered to himself, spying a hip flask on the Lieutenant's belt.

"Ah, but you are outnumbered, good sir, for there are more than two score of us awaiting your surrender in the trees," Edwards said confidently. Kallwyn made a small noise of admiration; Edwards seemed to have control of the situation.

Delts and Goldman, within the trees on opposite sides of the highway, moved ropes that had been set three or four yards behind the treeline, making rustling movements within the brush. The two men behind Lieutenant Alton stirred nervously, reaching for their swords, but Alton held up a hand to stop them.

"What are your terms?" he asked suspiciously. He was, as Kallwyn suspected, drunk; in fact, he had a severe drinking problem and had spent the better part of the trip intoxicated, lying in the carriage of the higher-ups. But he had wanted to get some fresh air that day (whilst remaining drunk) and so he wasn't thinking quite straight.

Goldman jangled the different pieces of the packhorse's saddle, throwing them along the rope line where they continued making noise, sounding ominously to the unknowing soldiers of the company like men unsheathing their weaponry. Lieutenant Alton unconsciously took a swig from his flask, looking around.

"There are no terms, fool," Edwards said, his baritone voice giving the words an ominous effect. "Your money or your life."

"Ah, so there *are* terms, then!" Lieutenant Alton said, taking a long swig from the flask, and continued, "So not only are you lowlife scum, but you're a liar, and deceptive!"

The soldiers behind him murmured nervously. They knew of Lieutenant Alton's tendency to drink and to say too much, especially while drunk, but it had never happened in the middle of a standoff or battle.

Captain Quentin Rogerson, second in command to Lieutenant Alton, tapped his superior's shoulder and said, "Sir? We may want to stand down."

"I have decided to stand down!" proclaimed Lieutenant Alton, who then frowned and muttered, "Wait, why are we standing down?" and swayed in the saddle.

"So you are smarter than most," Edwards boomed intensely, then drew his sword. "I will bring two men and collect your valuables." He and Jack approached, and Delt stalked out of the trees to join them. They began searching down one side of the convoy, leaving Jack to make sure the soldiers didn't try anything.

"We're just going to stand down, sir?" asked Sergeant-Major Xavier Lore of Lieutenant Alton. "There's only three of them."

"Didn't you hear the man?" Lieutenant Alton asked angrily. "There's another forty men in those trees. If we try anything, withhold anything, they'll attack. We'll be massacred." This made perfect sense to his intoxicated brain.

"But sir—" protested Captain Rogerson. Lieutenant Alton whipped around in the saddle, swaying dangerously.

"You don't make the decisions around here, Rogerson!" he barked angrily. "I'm your commanding officer and by the gods, you'll listen to me!" He then uttered a string of curses at the two men next to him, who both recoiled in fear.

"Are you just going to let him let them take our money?" a fresh-faced young recruit asked of Captain Rogerson.

"Shut up, Hadley," Captain Rogerson said harshly, smacking the young man on the cheek. "That's insubordination, you know."

"S—sorry, sir," the recruit, named Charles Hadley, stuttered.

"We're going to do whatever the Lieutenant tells us to do," Captain Rogerson said sharply. Hadley looked away and hung his head, embarrassed at his lack of discipline.

"Besides," said a man beside him, a grizzled old soldier named James West, "The Overking will find these bandits and get our stuff back." He winked at Hadley, leaving him with the impression that the Overking didn't care.

Edwards and Delts happily relieved the soldiers of their valuables, patting them down. "Goldman!" called Edwards. "Get over here and help us."

Goldman emerged from the trees after giving a couple more tugs of the line, making more movement and noise. He went down the line from the head, finding more valuables on the men and disarming them, throwing everything into a pile.

After they had ransacked the first carriage and taken the valuables from the soldiers around it, they moved on to the prison carriage. Kallwyn sucked in a breath, looking at the carriage as the soldiers around the prison carriage tensed up as Delts and Edwards opened the deadbolt and various other locking mechanisms keeping the door closed. Then Delts threw open the door.

And got a fist in the face.

Delts staggered back, his nose bleeding. Jack ran down towards Edwards and Delts, grabbing his knife from his belt.

Jonas emerged slowly from the carriage, squinting against the sunlight. The prison carriage had no windows. The soldiers around reached for their weapons, only to find them gone; Goldman had relieved them of their arms about a minute before.

Two more men, squinting like Jonas had been, stepped out of the carriage. Jonas looked around, confused. "This isn't the castle."

Kallwyn stepped out of the trees, brandishing the blued sword blade at the soldiers who attempted to get in his way. The officers at the front of the convoy hadn't noticed that the prisoners were escaping – yet.

“Boy?” Jonas asked, confused.

“He’s not alone,” said Jack, stepping away from the other side of the convoy and into the shadows cast by the trees.

Edwards was attempting to staunch the flow of blood from Delts’ nose, but he looked at Jonas and waved. Goldman tossed Jonas a sword, and then did the same for the other three prisoners (a third man had exited the carriage in the time they had been talking).

There was silence for a moment.

Then, someone from the front of the caravan yelled, “The prisoners are escaping!”

And all heck broke loose.