

Harra' Kunai | Prologue

By Calvin Culy

And there was the beam.

It flickered on, quickly becoming a brilliant white. Then it began swinging about piercing the darkness, fog, and smoke searching for something—anything.

For them.

On queue a billion other lights glowed into existence. On buildings, on the streets, on towers, and others moving mounted on men that patrolled the massive city.

The three small figures hunched between two buildings surveying the activity going on around them, shaking with the tension of what they were about to attempt, readying themselves for the insurmountable. It had never been done, but it had been tried. They had all failed. Hundreds had failed. They would be slaughtered in the dark if they did too. They wouldn't—couldn't. A heavily armored guard passed before the dark alleyway they hid within, silent and alert, yet unsuspecting.

They had planned this for months. The necessary preparations were made, the necessary knowledge had been researched—only the deed had yet to be done. Somehow the extensive preparation still did little to quench the fear of executing what they had built up to for the last four weeks.

Escape.

Another guard passed by. Five minutes had passed. The guard changed three minutes after the next pass. The transition of old to new guards would happen about three hundred feet from where the figures crouched just outside of the guard base. The moment they were waiting for. The three shadows consisted of two boys and a girl, teenagers all of them—slaves...warriors. Yet through their childhoods of beatings, torture, and training there remained a sliver of hope, piercing the darkness like the beam of light above them. But they were searching for it, instead of it searching for them. Another guard passed.

The countdown had begun.

A month of planning, and there was but three minutes remaining before it all began. Three minutes before they either escaped alive or...The boy in the middle shook his head clear of such thoughts. There was no room for doubt now. They had put too much weight on this to risk the thought of it failing—it *would* work. He went over their plan in his head again reviewing his part in it as well as his friends. They would have included more in the escape if they thought it would have worked, but any more than three and the entire undertaking would be severely compromised. *It had to be three*, he remembered arguing to his best friend who stood beside him. Too few and they would be unable to escape, too many and they would be easily spotted even if they did.

Two minutes had passed.

He looked first into his best friend's eyes, Virzoah. The other looked back smiling as only he could, a sort of lopsided smile. A sad, hopeful smile. This is it, it seemed to say. This is our only chance, but it is *our* chance. He nodded slightly and turned to the other. She was the shortest of the three, a small thing, his age but thin from the conditions they had lived under for so long. She looked up. She was counting. Their eyes met for a moment, his deep brown, hers misty blue and huge. He felt a sharp pang in his heart for a moment, for her, for all of them. This *was* it. The beginning...or the end?

Then her hand was on his shoulder. "Virrael," she whispered. *Viriven*, he thought but only nodded in response touching Virzoah on the shoulder.

It was time.

Crouching they moved out of the alley hanging under the shadow of the building and then onto the iron street. All of the streets were iron; it was just the way it was. Though nearly flat and covered in streaks and scratches they still brokenly reflected the dim light shining down from above. There was no sound as the three ran lightly over it. Virzoah was in front, the girl Viriven behind, and Virrael in the middle. The street was clear of guards. The brightest light, from the guardhouse less than three hundred feet away, died far before it reached them and through the foggy atmosphere they could just make out the switch taking place, dark figures moving in and out of the light. They only had a few minutes.

"Quickly!" Virrael whispered harshly and began to sprint hunched low to the ground. They made for the other side of the street, angling themselves so they would reach an alleyway much like the one they had just left. Once between the walls and bathed in darkness they paused momentarily.

"There's a ladder to the second floor of this building just around the corner on the end of this alley," the older boy said looking at the girl. "Climb quickly, you'll be exposed. Once you make the top..." She nodded.

They had gone over it a hundred times before if not more; she *knew* what to do. He nodded back and turned to Virrael.

"Good luck," Virrael said quietly. He placed his hands on both of their shoulders and squeezed for a moment before dashing between them to the end of the passage. They were now on the same side of the street as the Royal Guard Base heading for the tower. Time was of the essence. He paused just outside the end of the alley and glanced to the left where a ladder built into the wall disappeared into the mist above. Satisfied, he swung to his right and began to creep as quickly as he could. A moment later he saw what he was looking for. A door was set into the wall with no handle for entrance. Next to it was a rectangular box with a slit in it protruding from the wall. Behind him he saw a shadow flit from the same alley and begin climbing the ladder. He smiled to himself. She was the best of the best, he thought before turning back to the door. Quickly he snatched a small spherical gear-like object from his pocket and placed it in the slit in box on the wall. He turned it until he heard a soft click. The door moved slightly and he pushed inward, stashed the gear in his pocket, and slipped inside.

As he had guessed there was a guard sleeping at the only table in the room next to a softly glowing yellow lamp. Virrael skirted the perimeter of the room, keeping his distance from the snoring man and made his way towards the far wall. It was covered in dials and wheels which controlled the cities major waterways. A change in the man's breathing pattern caused Virrael to quickly drop to his hands and knees in the dark corner but the guard didn't wake up. Virrael rose slowly and crept to the wall. Turning to the ground below him he began searching. It had to be here somewhere, he thought. A few quick sweeps of the ground next to the wall revealed nothing though. There should be a small hammer here. There has to be...

He began moving from one side of the wall to the other, as close as he could without getting too close to the snoring guard, but other than some buckets and small wrenches there was no hammer. Virrael began to sweat lightly. We couldn't have made a mistake...there had to be—there! It was on the wall, hanging from a bracket. Virrael grabbed the hammer and slowly pulled. It was stuck. He pulled a little harder and it began to slide. Suddenly it let out a screech of metal on metal and came free.

"Huh?" the guard sat up straight blinking and rubbing his eyes. Before the man could see what was happening, Virrael swung the hammer around in a swift arching motion down onto the top of the man's head. He dropped like a sack. Thankfully the man wasn't big, another part of the plan fit into place, another part they had gambled. This plan has too many risks, Virrael thought wiping his forehead. Virrael quickly stripped the clothes off the man and switched them with his own leaving his in a pile on the floor. He rolled the man under the table throwing his clothes on top of him, set the hammer back on its bracket, and turned to go.



The girl Viriven reached the top of the ladder and scrambled over it silently. The roof was empty. Good, she liked it when things worked out as planned. She left her crouch and began running lightly over the roof of the building until she reached its edge. She picked up speed and leapt for the next roof, crossing the alley below without glancing downward. There was no need to.

She landed with a grunt and continued. Only five more to go. They were headed for the Watchtower. Virzoah would be following a few feet to the right on the edge of the street below her to the right. They had to hurry before the guards began patrolling the area again.

Four more, she landed and braced herself with her hands before straightening up again. There was a lot of clutter on this roof, large wooden crates and dark piles of material. She made her way through them quickly and jumped for the next roof. The next roof was lower than she had anticipated. She landed hard and rolled, gasping. Viriven reached down and felt her ankle. No, it wasn't sprained or broken—just shocked. She stood up and wiggled it to try and rid herself of the feeling. Focus, she thought. I need speed, yes, but careful thought and precision as well. Virzoah would be ahead of her now, she needed to get back in the lead as she had more to do before he reached the tower.

It was close now. It's dark massive form rising up like a monster in the night before her. The fiery head spinning back and forth searching for its prey. She set off sprinting, each step deliberate and swift. As she jumped for the third time she saw the shadowy form of Virzoah just ahead of her on the street below. He would just have to wait in the darkness next to the door leading into the Watchtower from the street. She said a quick prayer to no one in particular, who would she pray to? It was more a desire that their plan in all of its flaws and risks would actually work. A frail hope for the future.

She landed again, this time coming down softly and lowering into a crouch. The last roof lay ahead, the one that held a bridge which stretched over the street that circled the Watchtower to the tower itself. Light was filtering through the slow moving mist from the roof ahead. Viriven couldn't get caught now, there was so much left to do. They needed her. She moved foreword slowly until she was at the edge of the roof. Foolishly, she looked down. The ground always looks farther away when you're looking straight down. She looked away and focused on her destination. She had to jump. Quickly...and quietly. She crouched even lower like a coiled spring. She wavered for a moment. It was harder when you weren't already moving quickly. What if she slipped? What if—she jumped and landed quietly on the final roof. Such thoughts only wasted one's time.

A flat roof stretched out before her and near its far end a small entry protruded upwards with a single door facing her. There was a light on inside shining through a window in the door. *Great*, she thought. They hadn't expected that. Viriven began slinking foreword on her hands and feet circling around and staying out of the light filtering through the window.

When she was just below the window she paused and listened. There was definitely someone inside. The roof was bare but for a few items in a pile next to the door. Convenient. She made her way over to it and selected a metal object from the mound before making her way back into the shadows. A moment later she banged the object into the door and then flung it across the roof so it would rattle and clang before stopping at the edge of the light. Perfect. There was a voice inside, just one, and talking to itself by the tone of it. He wasn't happy.

The door burst open and the man yelled. "What do you want Furan? I told you to..." He looked up and paused seeing no one. Then his eye caught on the glinting object Viriven had thrown.

"That stupid man. Just let him wait till I get..." he stalked towards the object mumbling angrily while Viriven slipped inside behind him.

She blinked as the brightness blinded her in a sudden blast. Hurry, her thoughts screamed. The flash of white faded slowly. It was a small room with counters around the edge and a lot of tools. The watchtower's control room. Then she saw the door and hurried towards it, keeping low and slipped through it closing it just as the irritated man reentered the room behind her. Before her stretched a long suspended hallway that stretched from the building that the previous room had sat upon to the massive watchtower across the narrow street below. Thankfully it was dark, unwatched, and windowless. But one could never be too sure. She took off at a run for the opposite end, landing lightly to keep the enclosed bridge from swaying.

Slipping through the next door Viriven entered a spiraling stairway which she descended. The girl reached the bottom floor and slipped through another door into the gear room. A sudden blast of noise hit her ears, the screeching of metal on metal jarring her senses. Before her a massive cavern stretched upwards and in its center churned the enormous gear shafts that turned the watchtower allowing it to scan the night for trouble. For them. Thankfully it was an engine room of the sort that didn't need to be watched and no guards were present. Viriven grabbed a gear from her pocket, very similar to the one Virrael had held moments before and dashed for a door on the far wall. Virzoah would be waiting. She inserted it into the locking mechanism and turned it until the catch released. Slowly Viriven opened the door a crack and made a quiet hissing noise. Virzoah slipped in a moment later shutting the door behind him. He gave her a quick awkward smile before turning to the heavy machinery behind her.

Virzoah was at home here in a strange sort of way. He lived with the machinery, had operated it—had built some of it, though not the Watchtower by any means. It had been here forever. He may be awkward with people but with machinery he was at ease.

A quick search revealed what he was looking for. They had found the blueprint to the Watchtower just three days before when Virrael had been taken in for questioning by an officer by random selection, the officer that managed the tower. Virrael had barely been able to grab it from his office before he was taken away for a more forceful questioning. They did that to instill fear, to keep them in check. Virzoah shivered. He hated them. This had been a last minute addition to their plan, yet a big one. It made for a safer escape if their point of exit wasn't illuminated by a searching tower.

Virzoah quickly made his way over to a small raised platform that was covered in levers and spinning gear shafts which led out of the platform across the open caverns floor and into a dark hole in one of the walls. He jumped up to the platform and swung his legs over it before straightening up. Virzoah was familiar with this. It was no challenge for him. There were two stations of sorts on the platform, each one with a couple large levers on them among the levers protruding from the platforms floor.

The stations were what he was looking for. He made his way to one and began switching levers slowly methodically going over the order and layout in his mind. He threw the last lever and a deep snap was heard. Viriven, who was watching him and standing near the doorway watching the entrances into the cavern closely, saw the large hatch on a metal structure across the room swing open. Virzoah jumped off the platform and ran to it. The open door revealed a mess of spinning shafts and gears that operated the intricately timed path that the watchtower spun on.

Slowly Virzoah reached in and began fiddling with a small shaft near the bottom that had poles sticking off of it and wasn't spinning. As he turned the poles it caused the quickly spinning gears above to move up and down adjusting their velocity and in some cases stopping them from spinning. A minute later he grunted satisfied with his work and shut the door. Viriven was waiting for him at the doorway and he smiled reassuringly to her as they both slipped out into the night.



Virrael wasn't progressing as smoothly. He had been about to leave the building housing the cities water channel controls when he had realized it would help matters if the waterways within the city were all open so to give the cities water a clear passage when the time came. He had opened the levers as quickly as possible but it had taken time, too much time. When he had finally left the building there were guards heading towards him down the street.

Virrael threw himself into a crouch immediately his heart beating wildly. Stay in control, he thought. They hadn't seen him yet, he might be able to get behind the building without being seen. Slowly, only moving his legs, he began moving backwards keeping his eyes on the approaching guards. He was shaking so hard it was difficult to keep from making a noise. He could see their eyes now—see their breath in the frosty air. Quicker! He felt along the buildings wall with his fingers searching for the far corner of it. There! His fingers curled around the back of the building. As discretely as he could manage he backed up a few more steps and swung himself around the back of the building and out of sight. But this was no time for thinking or resting. He took off at a sprint away from the still-approaching guards.

Making a wide circle Virrael headed north and east through the alleyways and small streets on the northwest side of the Watchtower. As he turned a corner he heard a distant single bark from one of the beasts the guards used while patrolling. The things were bred in a large walled complex just northeast of the city. Bred for killing, hunting, and war.

He circled around before heading straight east until he was on the edge of second largest street in the city. He waited in the shadows again as he had done with Viriven and Virzoah just minutes before. He sincerely hoped they hadn't had any close calls like he had. A moment later he dashed across the street and disappeared between the buildings on the far side.

Virrael made his way between a number of buildings before arriving just outside of his destination: the Water Gate. It was home to the massive gate that kept the cities warm water from escaping to the frozen world beyond, their ticket to freedom. He sat waiting on the far side of the street, once again, this time waiting for his companions.

He still couldn't believe how easy escape seemed in a way. It made him wonder why it hadn't been tried more, though he knew why. No one got far even if they did escape. Not only would they be tracked down and killed the frigid and harsh landscape would do them in if they weren't. But that's where their plan was different.

The river would take them far enough distance to get to safety before they could be caught, and hopefully far enough south. Maybe they would even be given up for dead as frozen under the river if anyone thought to pursue them. Plus, most of the others seemed content to stay here and train. The beatings, torture, and harsh treatment lessened as you grew older and the benefits seemed to increase, a way of making you esteem those above you. A happy slave works harder than a hateful slave. Still he was unsatisfied. There had to be more than this. Somehow freedom was still a more tantalizing option than a brighter future here.

Virrael's thoughts were broken when he heard a noise behind him. Viriven and Virzoah materialized out of the dark behind him. He smiled briefly.

"The Water Gate," Viriven whispered. "We made it." She smiled at Virrael, searching his eyes.

"Yes...we did," he replied looking back and smiling a bit. He looked away when he realized Virzoah felt awkward. Turning back to the building he spoke. "You two should make your way around the side of the building. I'll head for the main entrance after you're in place and let you in since I have the uniform. Once we're all in we can dispatch any remaining guards in the immediate area and open the Gate."

"I can hardly believe how close we are," Virzoah whispered softly. "Almost out. It feels so good already." He half-smiled and looked down at his feet.

Virrael smiled and nodded to himself. "Alright, let's go."

For the second time Virzoah and Viriven separated themselves from him and headed across the street quickly and quietly. No guards were present at the moment, it was a small street, and they made it around the edge of the building with no problems. The massive dark grey structure rose up in the night lifting above the shadow of the huge wall behind it. The wall of the city. It kept much of the cold out, which tended to lie nearer to the ground, and arched inward as a protective arm, cradling the city, keeping it warm.

The Water Gate was a complicated mechanism: an intricate system of pulleys and levers that lifted the enormous iron wall out of the rock to let the water flow through. All three of them had memorized the brief instructions they had obtained as to how it should open in theory, but none of them had seen the inside of the building or operated anything like it. It was ancient yes, but complicated all the same. Virzoah would be the most familiar with it as machinery was his specialty. Virrael waited a moment longer and then left his hiding place.

He strode determinedly and briskly to the main entrance as a trained soldier in the position he imitated would. He was a dedicated servant of his commanding officer, he was precise, he was sure of himself. As he neared the large doors at the entrance he lifted his chin a little to show the arrogance an officer would have had. Virrael reached for the doors handle and pulled. It didn't budge. He pulled harder but it was caught. It was locked. But it was *supposed* to be open, he thought in distress still rattling the door. There would be guards within and no need to keep the building locked. Why is it locked! He let the door go frustrated and headed down the street a little ways before breaking off into an alley and doubling back.

Viriven and Virzoah were surprised when he appeared behind them instead of from the doorway they were watching from their hidden vantage point.

"It's locked." He said breathlessly. Their eyes widened.

"Are you—"

"I'm sure," Virrael finished for Viriven. She sighed and turned back in thought towards the door they had been watching.

"It was supposed to be opened!" Virrael kicked the dirt angrily. "We've come too far to have this happen."

"We couldn't knock loudly on the door." Viriven said.

Virrael shook his head in agreement. "Too much noise. And it might alert too many guards."

Virrael sighed. Viriven turned back to Virrael and laid her hand on his shoulder squeezing slightly. "We'll think of something. Virzoah, what do you think?"

He had sat down with his head between his arms looking dejected when he heard her question and looked up. He didn't answer immediately though but continued staring up at her and Virrael...past them.

"Virzoah?" Viriven pressed. He shook his head and focused on her again.

"A key. We need the key." He said in a matter-of-fact voice. "I know where it is."

"Getting the key will take too much time. It's out." Virrael said bluntly. "What are our other options?"

"How else can we get into the building?" Virzoah asked quietly.

"We could wait until the guards change," Virrael suggested, but he knew that would take just as long or longer. He sighed. "You're right. It's our only option. Where is it?"

"It's in the Royal Housing complex. In one of the Lord's...Lord Traet's home. He oversees the Water Gate's operations, or protection and maintenance really, since it isn't operated anymore."

Viriven knew what Virrael was thinking. "You can't go Virrael. You don't know what Virzoah knows, he will be the most useful of all of us in locating and retrieving the key."

"Viriven..." Virrael started looking back and forth between the two. "Virzoah is needed here though, to open the Water Gate. He knows how to operate it more than we do. He needs to be here when the time comes."

"He...Virrael. No one else knows exactly where this Lord Traet's home is, and no one else knows where exactly the key is or how to get to it but Virzoah. It would be a waste of time to try and explain it and most likely it would be too hard to keep it all straight. Let Virzoah go Virrael...please."

Her last statement gave another reason she wanted Virzoah to go, though she hoped only Virrael caught it. "...Alright," Virrael reluctantly replied. "Alright...you," he said speaking to Virzoah, "will need this uniform."

Viriven turned as they switched their outfits. The uniform was a bit baggy on Virzoah but it would do. Virrael's clothes were too small. Viriven smiled when she saw him but said nothing.

"Go quickly but safely Virzoah." Viriven encouraged. "We will be waiting here for you."

"How long will you be do you think?" Virrael asked.

"Thirty minutes, maybe longer. I'm not sure. It may be hard to get in."

"Alright. We're counting on you, man. We'll be here when you return."

Virzoah nodded and shuffled a bit awkwardly before turning and fleeing into the darkness. Viriven sat down and Virrael followed. They leaned against a dark building in the grass thinking for a few moments.

Virrael turned to Viriven and watched her as she looked up at the misted sky. He smiled. She was beautiful and kind and he loved her. She turned from the sky and looked back into his eyes calmly.

"Here we are," she said smiling slowly. "Just you and me. Alone in the silence. I wonder if freedom is like this." She looked back to the swirling mists above. "I wonder if there are others out there already. Free like we soon will be..."

"We're gonna make it," Virrael said after a moment. She looked over at him an eyebrow raised.

"You sound as if you aren't sure." She smiled and leaned over into him resting her head on his shoulder. "I love you Virrael," she whispered. "I always will. And maybe once we're free, it will mean something. Maybe then it can work."

Virrael smiled contentedly. "It will, Viriven. If there is freedom to be found, we will find it." He leaned his head into hers a little more and put his arm around her. "And no matter what happens to us...I...want you to know that I love you too, and I'll never leave you."

She nodded in his side but didn't reply. It seemed funny to her in a way that she...that *they* could be so happy and at peace during such a stressful time. Somehow having him next to her helped the chaos fade away. This was worth fighting for, dying for. This was only possible where freedom was, as relationships were prohibited for warriors. Warriors, hah. They were slaves. It was all part of the program to brainwash them into desiring to fight for Zah'Vrin. And it worked too. Viriven could still see the faces of so many friends who had turned from a desire for freedom to a satisfaction in training to fight for Zah'Vrin.

She would never see them again.



Virzoah ran. He loved running, the quiet, the solitude. This was where he belonged, but not *here* here. It was dangerous to be running alone *here*. He kept to the shadows, underneath the overhangs, flitting through the mist like a wraith—he was skinny enough. The oversized outfit of the guard Virrael had taken the clothes from billowed about him like a dark sail.

He was making good time, but this was the easy part. He slowed as he came to a wide street. It circled around the Plant: the cities gigantic factory for assembling all armor, equipment, and other devices. It rose up a couple stories tall, a monumental feat for the buildings depth and width. It was the size of a small city with no windows or distinguishing features on its outside other than a row of massive doors running down each of its longer sides (for allowing the entrance and exit of heavy machinery).

Even now he could hear the sounds of banging metal and hissing steam as night shifts worked within. Miril would be working in there tonight, Virzoah thought. She was like him in a lot of ways; good with her hands, skinny, awkward. He liked that, but that was all over now. She didn't want freedom. Virzoah had asked her once in a burst of courage only to be disappointed by her devotion to Zah'Vrin. He hadn't let it change how he felt, but Virrael had insisted that the three of them were all that could make it out, and Virrael wasn't willing to take someone who would rather stay. It made sense, but it still hurt.

He hurried onward under the Plant's deep shadow, using the sounds from within to mask his passage. He made his way south, picking through the alleys and listening for guards. But he neither saw nor heard anyone but his own footfalls and so continued on unhindered. It had been a while before he came upon a road leading off even further south into another region of the city. He knew what lay at the end of that street. The Well of Laughter.

The other slaves used to talk in hushed tones about it as a way of escape. Hushed because all who had tried to escape had died in it, or so the stories went. Supposedly as you fell down the well towards the water below you would hear laughter. No one knew why though, or how those who jumped in would eventually die. But nevertheless a couple days after the attempt the body would be raised out by the cities guards and hauled off. Sometimes they just left them down there. Virzoah shivered and continued on.

The buildings here grew nicer in appearance even in the eerie haze as he approached the Royal Housing sector. It was still a ways to go before he reached the Complex where the High Royal's lived but the effects were already noticeable. Tall spires and statues rose up into the air between the ornate buildings. Detailed

elegant designs covered the walls of buildings where they could be seen between the rows of planted trees. Even here, in a city that bred warriors and was led by a tyrant, there were those who could appreciate beauty.

As he grew near to the mouth of the Iron Way, Virzoah turned deeper into the alleyways between the buildings. It was harder here to sneak as the alleys grew fewer in number and were better tended and clear of debris. The minutes crawled by as he checked his every step to keep from making a noise. The passage curved as the buildings split apart where the Iron Way began a couple hundred feet to his right. For a moment Virzoah caught a glimpse of the tall stone wall circling the High Royal Housing Complex through the trees and looming buildings between them before it disappeared from view again.

Finally, he reached it and began making his way around it towards the gate. There was only one, so he would have to enter there. There was no simple way of scaling the huge smooth walls. The walls had been built hundreds of years earlier when the city had first been built as a safeguard for the cities keep. Over time the functions and arrangement of the city had changed. The walls had remained but the keep inside had been torn down and replaced with an extensive housing complex for the Royal Family. They had lived there ever since passing on the properties as the family grew and expanded.

Virzoah rounded a corner of the wall to see the gate in the distance. He muttered something under his breath. It was not only well lit and closed but guarded by two armed men as well. They hadn't planned for this. How badly he wished he could simply turn around and leave. But what would Virrael and Viriven say? ...That there was no other way. He didn't have a choice. He had done it before, he could do it again. He *had* to do it: for them and for freedom. He took a deep breath of resolve and strode towards the light.



"—you're telling me. That was so stupid of him. I could hardly believe—"

"—and then he pushed him. Pushed him!" the other interjected. The first shook his head in disbelief.

"He got what he deserved, the idiot. It's about time he learned his lesson." The first guard hefted his weapon as they walked.

"Yeah, I'll say." The other agreed.

The two guards were patrolling a few thousand feet south of the Watchtower. They were both armed with swords and each had a large leashed beast walking next to them. The creatures looked like massive wolves with black coarse fur covering their heavily muscled bodies. The beast's shoulders rose high up above their heads which were low to the ground sniffing. Both of them were covered in heavy armor plating.

As the guards talked one of the beasts paused near the edge of a building sniffing in the dirt. The guard holding its leash paused and gave the chain a tug but the animal didn't respond.

"Think he's got something?" he asked the other guard.

"Nah, probably just some critter was crawling around looking for food a while ago."

The beast growled and pawed in the dust then continued sniffing. It began moving to a small closed door that led into the building and then back to where it had begun near the buildings corner. The guards resumed talking letting the creature investigate.

"Did the General say anything?" one asked.

"No word on it yet, apparently he's been busy. I hear there's going to be an—"

"Rarrhh!" The beast barked suddenly drawing the guard's attention.

"I think my Wolven may have something," the guard said. He bent over near the ground the Wolven had been sniffing. Sure enough there were strange imprints in the dirt. Someone had been here earlier. About a half hour earlier by the looks of it.

"Looks like someone's been here." The guard said. "This just may be worth looking into."

"Alright, I'll head on to the base and get a small team out here." The other guard said as he turned and jogged off into the night with his Wolven trailing behind. The first guard nodded and leaned back against the building waiting for the extra men to arrive. Who knows, they might actually find something. They might even get a commendation. Doubtful...but they might.



The two guards straightened as the officer approached them. He was a tall skinny young man whose clothes seemed a bit large for him, but his badge showed him to be an officer nevertheless, and that demanded respect.

"Officer." The leading guard said nodding his head in deference.

"Gentlemen." The officer responded, his voice giving him away as quite young. Perhaps not even twenty. "I'm here on personal business," he continued implying the need for the gate to be opened.

The guards looked at each other. It was rare that personal business occurred at such late hours of the night with members of the Royal Family.

"I have my own key if you won't give me admittance," he said pulling a circular gear-like object from his pocket. "I'd think that an officer of Lord Traet's would receive better service from..."

The guards hearing who he was working with quickly moved to release the gate and opened it wide as he strode through into the darkness beyond.

The gate slammed shut behind him and Virzoah let out his breath. He had been holding it the whole time in fear. He still couldn't believe they had fallen for his act. Their training had helped him more than he had thought possible. Or perhaps they were suspicious; he'd better hurry either way. Virzoah hurried forward into the courtyard that sprawled out before him. He ran lightly under the overhanging bows and past fountains that glinted under small lamp posts that dimly illuminated the grounds from various points. The boy would have loved to stop and admire the architecture, but this was hardly the time for that. He had a mission, and a responsibility.

The courtyard ended as a row of massive arches marked the entry into the housing area. Virzoah moved off of the cool cobblestone path and into the shadows behind the pillars. He visualized his destination again in his head. The pillared lane widened out and split into a number of paths that branched off in different directions. Virzoah took one that led to the left without hesitation and then left the path for the building marked in his mind as Lord Traet's. The key was in there, he thought as he made his way crouched towards the two story palace. It wasn't huge but its magnificent appearance gave it the illusion of being so. It was the perfect architectural personification of all that royalty was: affluence, dominance, beauty, and wastefulness.

Virzoah loved the shapes and colors but despised all that those who lived within it stood for. He knew what kind of man Lord Traet was. The side entrance he had planned on entering the building through was unlocked as expected and he slipped within. No one expected a thief in the Royal Complex or a thief period. The propaganda ensured that each and every warrior and soldier was content with what he had. Virzoah shut the

door behind him and slipped down the hallway. Lord Traet would have the key in his study on the second floor. It was near the back of the palace and attached to the balcony Virzoah would drop from.

Virzoah had just turned a corner when he heard a door open and footsteps. He quickly hid in a small closet and waited. The footsteps were accompanied by quiet whispering and grew louder. There were a couple of them, men by the sound of it—perhaps soldiers. The footsteps grew quite loud and passed right in front of Virzoah's sweating form but obviously didn't know of his presence. They disappeared down the hallway growing fainter until he could hear them no longer. Still, he waited a couple more minutes before exiting the closet just to be safe.



Between the two buildings next to the Water Gate, Viriven and Virrael sat waiting. Actually only Virrael was waiting now. Viriven had fallen asleep next to him sometime earlier. For some reason he just wasn't tired or enough at ease to do that.

He hoped Virzoah was making good time. He would know what to do if something came up; he was pretty good like that, despite his awkwardness. Virrael could still remember when his friend had gotten them out of a situation a year or so ago that could have been disastrous.

The three of them had been talking together, which wasn't permitted, as female warriors weren't to speak with male warriors unless ordered to or when training, and then it was only to be on matters of concern. They had been speaking softly behind a building when an officer had happened to stumble upon them.

"Hey!" the officer had said causing Virzoah to jump slightly. But immediately Virzoah had lapsed into some complicated speech as if he was discussing a matter with Viriven.

"What are you three doing back here?" the officer asked angrily. "You know you're not allowed to mix with female warriors..."

"Yes, excuse me Officer," Virzoah had interrupted politely. "I was merely relaying my Officer's orders to his assistant here. I was *ordered* to give her these," Virzoah said emphasizing the word ordered and pulling some papers from the front pocket of his training uniform. "And to briefly explain to her the situation."

Virzoah had then handed Viriven the papers and nodded to her. "Did everything make sense?" He had asked her. She had nodded and was about to leave when the guard had pointed at Virrael.

"And what are you doing here?" he had asked a little less sure of himself.

"Her escort." Virzoah answered for him. "To make sure she doesn't fall prey to any other young warriors."

He winked at the officer and then nodded to the two of them. Viriven and Virrael had turned and left both smiling at the role they played and at Virzoah's quick mind. Apparently he had gotten away fine as well; he had never mentioned it again.

Virrael smiled to himself. He didn't know what he would do without the two of them. Virzoah...and Viriven. He looked down to her sleeping form beside him. She moved slightly up and down with each peaceful breath. Virrael found himself smiling. He knew even from the way he felt thinking of her that he didn't fit in here. He was too emotional to be a good warrior, too headstrong to follow orders. Viriven had said she was too caring. She hated the violence, the pain, the killing. She too was headstrong. She too wanted to be free.

Virrael sighed content and closed his eyes. It wouldn't be a long wait now. Virzoah should be on his way back now.



Virzoah was close. He had made his way upstairs from the closet. The stairs were solid, much to his satisfaction, and didn't make any noises as he tip-toed up them. He reached the top looking down a long hallway. It was the third room on the left. Lord Traet's private study and the location of the key to the Water Gate.

Holding still for a moment, Virrael stood with his head cocked listening. All was quiet. He didn't know where the soldiers had gone, but they weren't up here. He reached the study in a few moments, turned the handle on the oaken door, and pushed slowly inwards.

From the far side of the study light filtered in through a thin curtain that separated the room from the balcony beyond. In the dim light Virzoah made out the desk and chair that Traet would work at. Virzoah hurried to the desk and began looking over the contents on its surface. There were papers everywhere, some in stacks, some crumpled, some on the floor around the desk among piles of books and cases of some sort.

The key wasn't on the desk. Virzoah glanced around the room briefly before turning back to the desk. There was no other place it would be. Perhaps it was in the desk. There were three drawers on either side of the desk carved with ornate design as everything was in the Royal Complex. The first drawer proved a waste of time, as did the second. When he opened the third he saw something glint faintly. He stuffed his hand into the drawer and grabbed it pulling it out. The key! Finally, he thought elated. He dropped it into his pocket when he heard a noise behind him.

Virzoah spun around as three figures detached themselves from the shadows of the corners of the room and closed in on him. Virzoah's eyes grew wide. They had been waiting for him! He stumbled backwards and turned to flee only to run into another soldier that had crept up behind him when he had turned. He ran face first into the man's chest. The man threw his fist into the side of Virzoah's head causing stars to explode in his vision.

The boy gasped and reeled away but was immediately caught by the other two. One of them tripped Virzoah and slammed him to the ground while the others began kicking at him. Virzoah's struggling became slower as he began to bleed in numerous places from the attack. In one last attempt he began screaming and grasping for something to beat back their blows. One of the soldiers quickly saw his intent and slammed his fist into the back of Virzoah's head knocking him into unconsciousness. His vision went dark and the pain receded into a pool of cool inky blackness.



Virrael was running his hand through Viriven's blond hair when she stirred. She propped herself up and then sat up rubbing her eyes.

"Is he back?" she asked in a whisper.

"Not yet," Virrael responded. "Any minute now and he should be. We should be ready for him. We're running out of time."

The stood up and brushed the dirt off of their clothing and then began to wait. The air grew a little colder and seemed to cling more to their skin. In their little alcove between the buildings time seemed to stand still. There was no noise, no chirruping crickets, no wind to rustle the grass, just silence—dead and void. Virrael and Viriven waited for what must have been thirty more minutes before the tension of the still became too much.

"Maybe we should go looking for him." Viriven suggested. "Perhaps he needs one of us. You don't think—"

Virrael shook his head. "He's fine Viriven. Maybe just taking a little longer for some reason, but I'm sure he's fine. Let's wait longer before we decided on anything."

"Alright. But not too long Virrael," Viriven said, laying a hand on his arm. He smiled and nodded. "Not too long."

They sat down again to wait. Virrael couldn't image what could have held Virzoah up. He was too careful to get caught and too resourceful to get hung up on any problem. Viriven wasn't quite as sure. It was a dangerous place to be wandering around. Especially directly in the Royal Complex. What if he had fallen from somewhere and been hurt or couldn't find the key? Maybe it wasn't where he had expected it to be. He would need us, she thought.

"I'm going to go look for him," Viriven said.

Virrael looked over at her and shook his head. "No, Viriven. If he needed us he would have come back for help."

"Would he?" Viriven asked searching his eyes. "What if he hurt himself and can't come back? What if he needs us where he is? I'm going."

She stood up and brushed off her clothing again. Virrael stood and turned her to face him. He was frustrated. "Viriven, this is madness. If something happened to him will it not happen to you too? How will you find him? You've never even been in the Royal Housing Complex!"

"Virrael," Viriven said taking his hand in her own. "I *have* to go. He's been gone way to long. He's never been late. Something's up."

She straightened up and pulled him down, kissing him.

"I'll be quick." She promised and then turned and ran into the mist.

"Viriven..." Virrael said as she left. He hated being separated from her. Every moment of it set him on edge. He knew she was capable of take care of herself, but he still worried...Hurry back, Viriven.



Viriven ran like an arrow towards her target. Virzoah was going to be ok she kept convincing herself. He was just delayed. But with every stride she grew more worried about Virzoah, about what was happening to their plans. She passed the Plant in a flurry of limbs and crossed the hard cold street beyond it before turning right and aiming for the Iron Way. She was almost there when she heard loud voices in the distance and slowed. She moved cautiously foreword in the shadows towards the noises.

There was a group of soldiers standing listening to an officer give them commands. Viriven moved as close as possible without risking her position so she wouldn't miss a word. Something was wrong, she could tell just by the tone of his voice. She kneeled behind the corner of a building peeking around it at the scene before her.

"... and he was trying to steal the key to the Water Gate. We're not sure yet of his intentions, but this could be a small piece of a larger scale operation. I want you to organize your men and spread out over the city in a sweeping search."

Virzoah had been caught. Viriven was horrified. She sat down hard behind the building, stunned. He would be taken away into solitary confinement until...She almost screamed but kept it within her, holding herself

back. Her fists were clenched. Those weren't soldiers before her but the cities officers. And the man speaking was a general: one of the most important men in the city. Viriven began to shake. How did they know where Virzoah was unless...Virrael! She had to get back to Virrael.

She was about to jump up when a couple of the officers ran past her. Once they passed she was able to look out and see the others dispersing into the mist that hung in the city. She waited a moment longer before taking off at a sprint. He would be alright, she convinced herself. He would know what to do.

She ran with tears streaming down her face as she thought of Virzoah. Why! She screamed within herself in anger and frustration. He deserved better than this! Would they ever see him again? No. She knew what they would do to him. And she hated them all the more for it. She could hear the sound of men in the distance as they began to spread out through the streets. She moved deeper into the crevices and narrow streets of the city. She wasn't going to make it in time. Virrael! She began to run headlong through the city.

Suddenly she broke out of the alleys into a wider street that led farther south into a massive housing district. It wasn't empty. There must have been about fifty soldiers marching in line when she ran into the bunch of them. Pandemonium broke loose. Viriven swerved back and forth as men began trying to grab her. She broke out the other side of the battalion and raced into the buildings on the opposite side of the street. Behind her she could hear them shouting and spreading out. They would try to cut her off.

There was no way she could reach Virrael now; no way could she escape the notice of fifty trained soldiers. The buildings rushed past her in a blur but the voices behind her were growing louder. She could hear more and more shouts as others were called to help in the chase. She took a hard right to try and throw her pursuers off and scraped her arm on a rough wall. She spun crazily before righting herself and taking off again. Now the voices seemed to come from everywhere. She was heading farther south instead of north. Perhaps she could at least draw them from finding Virrael. Perhaps he would have a chance. What chance? He had no key. She gritted her teeth and ran harder. Suddenly a man jumped out in front of her grinning with a sword in his hand. She skidded to a stop and looked wildly about. He took a step forward.

She feigned a dash to the right and took off to the left down an alley. He yelled and ran after her screaming that he had found her. Viriven burst out onto another wider street. Over thirty men were racing down the street towards her. She took off veering even farther south. She knew now where she was headed. She had no choice, it had been made for her. She could almost already hear the mocking cry of the Well of Laughter even though she had never heard it before. She could see it in the distance, growing closer. Her heart dropped. She couldn't do this. No one had survived, not even one. She would be no different. It was smaller than she imagined. The name and legend had blown its size way out of proportion in her mind.

Maybe it wasn't so bad. Maybe it was a trick of Zah'Vrin to keep them from trying to escape. Maybe it *would* work. The drop of hope in her soul evaporated as she remembered an old friend who had attempt escape years ago. She had been found dead in the well a week later. Few bodies were ever brought back up. It was too deep to make the effort to pull them out. They were usually just left down there. Viriven shuddered and skidded to a halt before the stone structure. She spun around as the soldiers behind her drew near and gasped for air. Her heart was beating wildly from the extensive running.

It dawned on them then what she was planning and they stopped unsure. She watched them; they watched her.

A man burst out from the soldiers and yelled, "Go on girl! Jump! You'll only die down there. It's the well or surrender. Death...or life." He grinned wickedly.

Life, hah! Viriven thought but made no response. Somehow the solemnity of the situation quelled her hatred of them and her heartbreaking despair. She circled around to the side of the well so she could see the soldiers as she mounted its top. She didn't look down yet. She didn't have the courage to. Instead she looked back once at the soldiers. They watched.

Viriven took a deep breath when the man who had shouted realized that she intended to jump.

"Bows!" he yelled. "Fire! Fire!"

Viriven waited no longer and jumped looking down as the blackness enveloped her. Wind rushed past her like fingers, flinging her hair about her. The air grew increasingly cold as it grew dark. At first there was only the wind, and then suddenly it came to her. A deep booming laughter rising up from the water she rushed towards below. It surrounded her and chilled her to the bone; it sounded so human and mocking. She hit the water with a reverberating crash and then swam back to the top.

It was warmer than she had expected. Warmed by the cities water heating system. It only took a moment to realize that there was no current. She wasn't being swept anywhere or moving at all. As her eyes adjusted she also realized that the laughing wasn't so loud at the surface though she could still hear it echoing up and down the stone walls that had been cut into a well shaft so many years ago.

Soon the darkness became a dim glow. She could make out the walls around her and could faintly see shapes in the water below. She didn't want to think of what they could be, she didn't have the strength. There was one large metal grate on the far side of the well. It was shut. It probably always had been-always would be. She was trapped. This was what the Well of Laughter entailed: the mocking laughter and a slow starvation until you died.

Viriven treaded water and waited for the inevitable.



Virrael was pacing at the moment Viriven jumped into the Well of Laughter. He had been pacing ever since she left. He had no idea what had transpired since Virzoah had left much less Viriven. No idea until he heard the distant shouts.

Almost immediately he knew it was related to Virzoah and Viriven. Nothing else he could think of would cause shouting and large amounts of men to begin running through the streets in squads unless one of them had been caught. Virrael left his hiding place between the buildings next to the Water Gate's side entrance and made his way through the city, nearer to the main street. He found a good vantage point on the second floor of an empty storage building and gazed out at the scene that was unfolding before him.

From the amount of men he couldn't keep from concluding that they had both been caught. A few men he could understand if one of them was caught, but if both of them were, the cities guard would assume the problem to be on a larger scale. They would send out the entire royal guard on full alert. And they had. Hundreds of men marched through the streets, all of them fully armed and alert. There were Woven as well and armored wagons. Here and there he could even see officers and one general.

The reality of it hit him then, the failure of their plan. The loss of two more lives. Tears came to his eyes as he thought of Viriven and Virzoah. They were all he had ever had. They were the only ones who had been like him, dissatisfied with their current state of slavery. Virzoah such a close friend and helper in tough times. And Viriven...oh Viriven! A great wave of hopelessness crashed over Virrael and overwhelmed him. He hunched down and shook with tears for his lost friends.

Below him the soldiers marched by in heartless order. Their uniforms were straight and neat, their weapons were clean. They all wore the helmets of the Royal Guard and walked in unison behind their commanding officer. Like ants after their queen, they marched. Like a plant void of feeling, they existed. It boggled Virrael's mind that they could be satisfied with such an empty existence. He needed something more. How dare they try and rip that away from him! How dare they harm his friends!

Below him a soldier broke off from a group and headed across the street towards the Water Gate. At first he headed towards the main entrance, but then as if he had changed his mind he veered off towards the side of the building. He's heading for the side entrance Virrael thought suddenly. He didn't think; he acted. Virrael raced down the steps of the warehouse and began sprinting through the back passages. He skidded to a stop where he had waited for hours earlier with Viriven and then for an hour without to see the soldier approaching.

The man was carrying a package and walked with determination. Virrael tensed and wiped salty tears from his lips. Then the door opened on the side of the Water Gate and another soldier stepped out. The first man motioned to the other soldier and waited holding the door open with his foot. This was his only chance; Virrael knew it the moment the door had opened. It was the only way he would get in. Escape had flung wide its arms.

He waited for the exchange to complete. The soldiers talked for a moment in hushed tones and the package was handed over. He would have to move quickly. The moment the soldier turned to leave the other Virrael began slinking foreword from his cover. He waited as long as he could and began to sprint. The soldier now holding the package turned to reenter the building and Virrael leapt. He caught the man on the back of the head with both hands and his momentum swung him foreword and down slamming the man's head into the stone floor inside the building before he could do more than gasp. The package however wasn't as quiet and shattered inside of its cloth packaging. Virrael was breathing heavily as he let the door close behind him and took stock of his surroundings.

He was in a small unlit hallway. At its end he could see it t-boned another hallway. Apparently the crashing package hadn't alerted anyone of his intrusion. Actually, the building was silent. Virrael did notice almost immediately after noticing this fact that there was a noise, but it wasn't of machinery or people. It was a deep humming noise, almost a deep crashing. It was the water, he realized. The White River was calling his name. And he was answering it.

He began walking towards the noise. He wasn't sure exactly where the gate was located in the building. He guessed that it was against the outer wall to the left of where he entered from the north, but Virzoah had known for sure, he was the expert. And now he was gone. The hatred wasn't as strong within Virrael as it was in Viriven. He hated them yes, but he couldn't focus on that. It didn't help.

He turned the first corner heading as best as he knew towards the Gate. He didn't even know what it would be like. How could you build a gate for water? What manner of open-able mechanism could contain such a shapeless thing? This hallway was longer than the first one, was well lit, and had rows of doors lining each side. Virrael walked briskly through it trying to reach the other side without having to run into another officer. He just wanted to be free. He reached the far end and was faced with a door. He tried its handle and it opened inwards revealing a large dark room.

He passed through this one and another before he was met with yet another hallway. This one led from west to east instead of north to south. He headed east. He was hoping that the Gate would be in the eastern center of the building. Virrael met no one as he made his way through the large building. The noise grew louder

and louder as he headed east and south until it was a deep roar beneath his feet. The building even vibrated slightly under his feet. What power was he about to unleash? Would he even survive what waited? Perhaps he would end up no better than Virzoah...or Viriven. His heart panged sharply and the tears came fresh to his eyes. He scrubbed them away angrily and forced himself onwards.

Finally it seemed he had reached the room. A door stood before him where the throbbing was the strongest. There was light within that poured out beneath the door. It had no window set in it. He would have to risk it. He eased the door open as slowly as he could and poked his head into the room beyond. It was strangely empty. There were burning lights everywhere and yet no one within. As he looked about at the scattered instruments and vacant posts he realized that they must have left just moments before him. Something seemed missing though that should have been there. There was no Gate! Suddenly he was quite worried. This was all too easy; they must have known it was him. They've set a trap. They would arrive any minute and take him away. But no one had come yet. It was all so strange. He saw no gate and yet the sound here was louder than any other. It was then that he saw the door. It was on the far side of the room right next to the wall that must be a part of the cities outer wall. He could tell because of its difference in look. It was much older and darker in color. He headed for the door, perhaps *it* led to the Gate. As he entered it he could see steps leading down. Down? Maybe it was beneath the city. The river would be lower than ground level after all. He hadn't thought of that. Intrigued he descended. Soon it grew dark and he couldn't see at all. He used his hands to feel his way down, running them along the walls and taking tentative steps.

Another doorway greeted him at the bottom. Now the booming was all around him not below him. Now it was shaking the walls instead of just the floor. He entered through the door and closed it behind him. Suddenly it was much quieter. The room he stood in was dimly lit by a single torch on the wall that flickered over it revealing nothing but the opposing walls and a bare floor. Baffled Virrael began to study the room. It was here, he knew it was here in his bones. He was just missing something.

After a quick overview of the room he began making his way around it. The walls all seemed to be bare and made of solid stone. Something glinted in the corner of his eye and he spun around expecting to be faced with the soldiers who had finally found him but saw nothing. What had glinted? It was near where the torch was on the wall. Below it perhaps? He walked directly to the torch and looked at the wall around it. There was nothing there. What could have glinted? He sighed and leaned up against the wall next to the torch. His gaze dropped from the far wall to the floor and there was the glint again. This time he didn't look directly too it but kept his eyes focused on the floor of the room. It seemed to be from the torch's bracket. When the flame flickered wildly it would glint in a flash of light off of the metal fastening.

Virrael turned towards it and reached up to feel it. It was warm from the flame, which must have been lit for quite some time. There was some kind of decorative engraving in it. He tapped on it with a finger and then realizing how tired he was leaned on it. Suddenly it gave way and the entire bracket turned revealing a metal depression behind it. A gear lock! Virrael was astounded. He had never heard of hiding a gear lock behind a torch bracket. He pulled his gear from his pocket, thankful he had held onto it all this time, and place it into place. He began turning it watching the way it turned and adjusting it as he felt it catch. The last click sounded and he pulled the gear out.

The silence seemed louder now. Nothing seemed to have happened. He heard no gate opening or sound of rushing water from another room. Then above him he heard a grinding noise. Suddenly it filled the entire room and grew to a loud screeching. Virrael quickly put the gear back in his pocket and covered his ears. A

great rumbling began to shake the floor and dust began to fall from the roof. Frightened Virrael looked up and then noticed that the wall that was a part of the cities outer wall was moving. Moving!

It rose slowly at first and then gained a level speed as it moved upwards. The crashing sound grew louder and louder. Then a rumbling sounded behind him. That wall was moving too, but it was moving sideways instead of upwards. He felt like he was facing the end of the world. The entire room was shaking as the walls around him moved. Then the water began blasting out through from beneath the outer wall. It began spraying into the room, quickly putting out the single torch. Now bathed in darkness, Virrael could see nothing but only feel what was transpiring about him.

The water filled the room in a matter of seconds in an icy cold rush. It swept him off his feet and began to spin him to and fro. In seconds he was numb from the water that had beat from the frozen world beyond the warm city against its walls. Then water from within the city began pouring through from the wall that was once behind him. The warm water within the city mixed with the frigid water from without causing a loud hissing steam to join in the chorus of chaotic noises. As the water from within the city hit the water from without the current swept him through the Water Gate and into the White River.

The White Rivers surface was frozen, and had been for hundreds of years, but underneath it was quite liquid and he was torn down the river at a ferocious pace. Behind him the city's water was quickly draining of warmth causing its temperature to drop as warm water was replaced with ice cold.



Viriven had waited for what seemed like eternity when suddenly from the silence the grate began to move! It was so unexpected that it caused her to jump in the water. With the opening of the grate a current began to pull at her sweeping her through its open exit and into the tunnels beneath the city. Thankfully Virrael had opened the other main passages within the city's underground water system allowing Viriven free passage. She was swept to and fro at a frightening pace through the tunnels as the water sucked her towards the Water Gate. For a while she was able to keep herself from hitting the sides of the tunnel but as the pace increased she was thrown against its sides. Each time she lost a little more of her already mostly drained energy and sustained another bruise.

Moments later she was unconscious. As Virrael sped down the White River a distance from the city Viriven rushed through the Water Gate after him underneath the frozen river's covering but out from underneath the iron fist of slavery. Freedom was finally a reality.