

THE HUNT BETWEEN WAR AND BROTHERHOOD

ÜRAL SERIES ARC 1

Chapter 1: Dampest of all mornings

Üral woke up to a damp morning. He sluggishly moved to the window and saw his brother was already awake. Valen looked toward Üral's window, but the sunlight shining from behind the house blinded him.

Üral wanted to shout good morning, but decided not to when Valen turned around and started walking quickly. They never left without letting each other know, so Üral's curiosity was piqued.

Üral left his room and walked down the stairs. He quickly grabbed a piece of fruit from the table for breakfast and left the house to follow his brother.

Üral was dumbfounded; Valen had already disappeared into the woods, even though he was not supposed to go anywhere without letting Üral know. Thankfully, the wet ground was filled with footprints from Valen's boots.

Üral followed his brother's footsteps while listening to the birds singing. After a few minutes of walking, he reached a small shack in the forest. Üral stared at the shack. It didn't look very sturdy, but the wood seemed fresh. *He built a shack without telling me? Nah, obviously not. He must've discovered it accidentally.*

Üral approached the shack. *I should've brought him fruit, too.*

As Üral reached for the door, it swung open. Valen was standing in the entrance; he quickly pushed Üral aside to step out and pulled the door shut behind him.

"Let's go ho-"

Üral interrupted him. "What is this shack?"

"Nothing. I found it today, and it's empty."

"I want to look inside, too."

Valen insisted, "I haven't eaten breakfast. Let's just go back."

Üral noticed how strangely Valen was acting, but didn't push him any further. They walked back home in silence, and Valen prepared breakfast like he always did.

Valen suddenly broke the silence, staring down at his untouched plate. "What did you see?"

Üral froze, his hand hovering over the bread basket. "What?"

"In the shack. How much of it did you see?"

"You blocked the view. I couldn't see anything."

"Is that so?..."

Silence started filling the room once again, but Üral was not going to let this slide. He asked, "What was in there?"

"I already told you, nothing."

"If there was nothing, why did you ask me how much of it I saw?"

"It's a surprise for you, so just don't go there anymore."

"Okay." Üral was left torn between two thoughts. He wanted to be excited about the surprise his brother was preparing for him, but he felt like it was just a lie, especially since Valen's expression remained completely flat while revealing it.

Instead of talking about their daily plans, they both silently went to their rooms. Both had plans of their own.

In his room, Üral listened through the wall to Valen's creaking floorboards, waiting for the house to go quiet so he could check out the shack. Across the hall, Valen sat at the edge of his bed in the dark, checking his boots before sneaking out of the house to hide

whatever was inside the shack.

* * *

About thirty minutes into the night, Üral sneaked out and jogged toward the shack. As he ran past trees older than anyone could remember, he made sure not to leave any footprints.

It was barely a few minutes later when Valen sneaked out into the night, thinking his brother was sleeping. He took his time walking, his mind heavy with thoughts. *Is there any chance that he saw inside the shack? He surely would have confronted me about it. Which means he didn't see anything, and I can just move my stuff. I'm going to need another shack deeper in the woods.*

Valen quickly came to a halt when he noticed the shack door standing wide open. He entered cautiously, only to see Üral standing inside. Üral's eyes were wide with horror as he stared at Valen's research. A rotten smell hung thick in the air, with notes scattered everywhere. Strange containers lay on the floor, filled to the brim with what appeared to be dead animals. The shock of what he saw overwhelmed Üral so completely that he didn't even notice Valen entering.

Valen felt compelled to speak up. "So... you know now. All of this is my research."

Üral remained silent.

"It was supposed to be a surprise, but I'm near success. I guess you are smarter than I thought."

Üral responded, "It's easy to read you. We are brothers, after all."

"Yeah... Want me to walk you through it?"

"Why? Why are you researching this? How could you call this a *success*?"

"This has always been my dream- our dream."

“Our dream? I don’t know any good that could come from this power.”

Valen looked surprised. “This... this can fix humanity!”

“What do you mean, *fix* humanity?” Üral asked, his voice trembling with fear.

“Don’t you get it? Humans are flawed! Remember what they did to our family. B-but I am forgiving. I don’t hate humans. I dedicated my life to fixing them, and I’m this close to actually succeeding.” Valen pinched his fingers tightly together. His speech grew unhinged and chaotic as he continued. “I- this thing, it can remove all the flaws humans have. Think of cows! They are perfect. They eat and produce goods for us. They care only for survival, but they don’t steal or enslave each other. They simply exist.”

While Valen spoke, Üral glimpsed at the notes on the desk and stared at the tubes filled with colorful liquids. Valen didn’t notice his horrified expression; he just kept explaining. “At first, I thought all I needed to do was force humans into a situation where they could only survive by sacrificing others. B-but that’s already what they do. Humans are harder to alter than cows. I needed to simplify them, and this does it. It’s not ready yet, but I swear I’m close.”

Üral stared in horror before forcing himself to speak. “What are you trying to do?!” His voice came out sharper than he intended.

Valen looked confused by the anger, but picked up one of the tubes filled with liquid and continued. “This *virus* changes the DNA of its host cell. The cell develops a barrier to protect itself and releases deadly chemicals. Then it rapidly divides, replacing all previous cells, maybe even more. I am basically recreating the whole human body. I can give them any genes I want. The transition phase is painful, and most people don’t survive it, but the ones who are compatible end up as animals, a meat blob that only cares for itself. They think simply

and act on their urges. It doesn't make them *good* humans, but they are no longer human, so wars, slavery, and trickery won't exist anymore. It's reverse evolution!"

Valen spoke with feverish excitement, desperate for his brother to understand and support his vision. To his shock, Üral's anger only intensified with every word.

* * *

Even after this speech, Üral could never have guessed what was about to happen; he had trusted his brother with his whole heart. He wanted to help his misguided brother.

He took a step toward the research papers. Valen saw the determination in Üral's eyes and acted impulsively to protect his work.

Before he could react, Üral was on the ground with Valen's hands wrapped tightly around his throat. Valen clearly hated what he was doing, yet he couldn't bring himself to stop. Üral was taken completely by surprise; he had never imagined his brother would attack him. He held Valen's arms tightly, scratching them in the process. Light slowly faded from Üral's vision as he tried to get out of Valen's grip, and he soon slipped into unconsciousness.

Valen sighed as he let go, his hands trembling violently. He stood up and backed away slowly from his unconscious brother. Turning to his desk, he began gathering his research. Knowing he couldn't carry everything, he smashed several bottles outside the shack and set fire to whatever he had to leave behind. Finally, he dragged Üral back home and tucked him into bed.

* * *

About four hours into the night, Üral woke up in his bed, covered in dirt and scratches. It took a few moments, but the memory of what happened came rushing back. He scrambled out of bed and ran through the house, yelling, "Valen! Valen, are you here?!"

No one answered.

Much of Valen's room was cleared out; his backpack was gone, along with most of his clothes. Üral ran as fast as he could back to the shack, but found only charred remains. His legs burned with pain, covered in deep scratches from where Valen had dragged him through the woods.

Üral stood alone, unsure of what to do. Would his brother ever come back? Was he still continuing his dangerous work?

He quickly started writing a letter explaining his plan to go after him, but stopped mid-sentence. *I don't even know where he went. I need to rest and properly think this through before I act.*

He mixed a handful of herbs they had gathered a few days prior and rubbed the poultice over his scrapes. *This should heal the scratches quickly.*

Üral sat on his bed, looking exhausted and brokenhearted. The past he had tried so hard to bury began leaking into his thoughts. Then the dam broke, and every painful memory came flooding back.

* * *

There was once a man named Anden, married to a woman named Vitosha. Their deep love was blessed with a child, and another followed two years later. These children, Üral and Valen, grew up

running freely through the streets of their remote village. They learned basic spells from their father, who served as the village sorcerer. Years passed peacefully; their lives were tranquil compared to those in neighboring regions.

Üral turned seven, and Valen was nearly five when a harsh winter struck. Trade with nearby settlements ceased, and their village food stores rapidly faded. It wasn't long before they learned the brutal truth: a devastating war had broken out, and foreign armies were raiding remote villages to survive the winter.

Their village was no exception. Anden woke to Vitosha's terrified screams. Flaming arrows rained down from above, igniting the wooden homes. Anden rushed to gather his children, but the front door was shattered just as he reached the hallway. Three enemy soldiers stood in the doorway. Desperate to protect his family, Anden threw his arms around Vitosha. One of the bloodthirsty soldiers swung his blade, slicing deep into Anden's shoulder. His agonizing scream woke Üral.

Though young, Üral was quick-witted. He instantly shook his little brother awake and pulled him under their beds. Trailing blood, Anden staggered into the children's room, trying to warn them while sheltering his wife. The soldier pursued him and thrust his sword through Anden's torso. He collapsed to the floor right beside his children's hiding spot. Seeing his sons hidden safely under the frame made his final moments slightly less terrifying.

Two other soldiers grabbed Vitosha. She screamed at her husband's killer, deliberately keeping her eyes off the bed to protect her boys. The soldiers left Anden's body behind and dragged Vitosha out into the night. As the last soldier turned to leave, he heard a faint sob. Noticing the rumpled bed sheets, he quickly put two and two together, reached under the bed, and dragged the terrified children

out by their shirts.

They were thrown into a wooden cage alongside their mother and fellow villagers. After two days of cold, foodless travel, they arrived at a crowded military camp. They listened to soldiers sitting around campfires, boasting about the homes they had burned. Many freezing nights passed, and each morning, someone in the cage failed to wake up. After a long trek spent eating the captors' scraps, so long they lost track of time, they reached the gates of a sprawling city.

Without explanation, they were chained together and put up for auction. Soon, a wealthy buyer placed a bid on a group of slaves, including Vitosha. She dropped to her knees, begging the buyer to take her young sons as well. A slave trader whipped her across the back for speaking out, but the buyer intervened: "Don't damage my property. I'll take the children too."

The family was put to work in the crop fields, given barely any rest to mourn Anden. Üral and Valen often slacked off out of sheer exhaustion, but the other slaves kept silent to protect the young boys from harsh punishment.

Their mother's health rapidly deteriorated under the weight of forced labor and grief. Soon, she grew too weak to stand. A veterinarian inspecting the field owner's livestock examined her and remarked, "She is critically ill. Treating her would require costly medicine."

Medicine was a luxury reserved for livestock, not slaves. As she weakened further, the owner ordered the doctor to put her out of her misery. Realizing what was about to happen, Üral fell to his knees, begging for his mother's life. Valen mimicked his brother, not fully understanding the danger, though Üral was sobbing uncontrollably.

The doctor shoved the two boys outside and slammed the barn doors shut. The last image the brothers had of their mother was her weak, trembling hand reaching out to them through the closing gap. There were no screams, but when the doors reopened, the floor was stained red. Their mother, the last caring soul in their lives, was gone.

* * *

Üral laid across his bed sideways, his legs dangling over the edge as tears tracked down his face, into his ears. *It has been twelve years since we ran away from that farm.*

He could barely picture his parents' faces anymore; all that remained were the phantom sounds of his father's final scream and the memory of his mother's frail hand reaching through the barn door. *I can't stay trapped in the past. And I definitely can't let Valen commit this horrific mistake.*

He sat up, wiped his face, packed a small satchel, finished his note, and stepped out into the night. For the first time in twelve years, he was leaving the sanctuary of their home. The only person he had seen or spoken to in all that time was his brother. (Kidnapped at 7 years old, worked in the fields for a year before he ran off with his little brother, currently 20 years old with a 18 year old brother named Valen. He did speak to a travelling sorcerer but that wasn't much of a human interaction)

And so, his journey to find Valen began.

* * *

Üral left the house unlocked, as the door had no latch. He took one long, final look at the house crafted from strange green timber, a

wood whose origin he still didn't know. They had stumbled upon the abandoned structure years ago and gradually renovated it, though a few hard-to-reach spots still bore old dirt and moss. Valen had taken the second-floor room on the left, while Üral's window overlooked the right.

The ground level consisted of one large open space containing a makeshift kitchen and a sitting area, with a small side closet used for storage.

Did Valen really just abandon all of this? Did he abandon... me? Üral wanted to linger and memorize every detail of their home, burning it into memory, but he knew time was running out.

He went into the direction that he believed led to a road. They had encountered a traveler from that direction years ago.

* * *

It was roughly four years ago when Üral was chopping firewood in the yard and noticed a figure approaching in the distance. Having not seen another human being in years, panic seized him, and he called out for Valen.

Valen stepped outside just as the traveler collapsed onto the road. Hearing the thud, Valen immediately began walking toward the fallen man.

Üral gasped, "Where are you going?!"

Valen remained calm. "He might need help."

"He could be dangerous!"

"An unconscious man isn't going to hurt us. Are you going to help me carry him inside or not?"

Üral reluctantly followed. Together, they carried the mysterious stranger inside and rested him on the floor.

When the man stirred, he muttered something in an unfamiliar language, though his demeanor was harmless. Valen offered him food and water. Seeing the man's clothes were damp and filthy, Üral offered one of his few spare shirts, suggesting they clean the stranger's robe. However, the traveler firmly refused to part with his garments.

Valen spoke, unsure if the man could understand: "You'll catch a fever in those wet clothes. If moving hurts, I can help you take them off." He reached gently toward the man's hood.

The traveler gave a resigned sigh and allowed Valen to pull back the fabric. His pale skin was covered in intricate markings and arcane symbols. He looked at the two brothers expectantly.

"What are those?" Üral asked.

Valen paused. "He doesn't understand us."

To their surprise, the man spoke in a heavy accent: "My eastern accent is poor."

"What is an eastern accent?" Valen asked.

The man looked caught off guard, but answered, "You speak with an eastern accent. I speak with a western accent."

Valen remembered something their father had mentioned: "Human languages have many dialects. Words change, but the core language remains the same," he explained to Üral. Turning back to the stranger, Valen asked, "What is your name?"

"Jhaled," the man replied, still looking somewhat bewildered.

"I haven't heard a name like that before."

"It is a western name."

"What are those markings on your skin?"

"Sigils." (*consult the last section of this book for definitions)

"What are sigils?"

"Spell contracts. Magic," Jhaled explained, gesturing to his forearm.

"Our father was a sorcerer," Üral noted.

"I assume he hailed from the Aula Kingdom?"

"We don't know much about the kingdoms-" Valen began, but Üral cut in.

"Father mentioned the Eastern Kingdom, remember?" Turning to Jhaled, Üral added, "We grew up in a remote village."

"A sorcerer living in a remote village, lingering in the quiet... he must have been a wise man."

"He was," Üral murmured softly.

"I came from the Aula Kingdom," Jhaled stated.

"We've never traveled," Valen admitted.

They allowed the traveler to rest for the night. In the morning, as he prepared to leave, Jhaled offered his hand to Üral. "Perform a sigil transfer with me."

"I don't know how to do that."

"It is a gift. Simply accept it in your mind."

With a faint glow, one of the intricate sigils faded from Jhaled's skin and materialized onto Üral's arm. With a brief wave, the stranger departed into the woods.

* * *

Üral now wore the stranger's discarded robe over his tunic. Knowing nothing of the kingdom he was approaching, he assumed it would

help him blend in. *He was traveling without any supplies, so the kingdom can't be too far... though considering he collapsed from exhaustion, it isn't right around the corner either.*

He packed what food he could, carefully selecting items that wouldn't spoil quickly.

He hiked through the forest, jumped over thick roots, taking careful steps not to step on mushrooms. He saw some small animals with long fur, running in groups. *I always wanted to feed one of those gimmicks but Valen refused to let anything with fur into the house.*

The shade from the wide and tall trees soon ended as the forest turned into a wide plane of grass. There seemed to be a dirt path in the distance.

He followed the dirt path for several hours at a steady pace. Eventually, he reached a fork in the road marked by deep wagon ruts. It was clear no one traveled down their specific path anymore. *These main tracks must lead to major settlements. Only a lost traveler (referring to Jhaled, whose name he forgot) like that sorcerer would ever stumble upon our cabin. The road just ends near a forest after all.*

When night fell, he slept tucked beneath dense bushes. The sturdy robe kept off the chill and kept insects at bay. *This turned out to be quite useful. I owe that sorcerer a thank you,* he thought before drifting off.

He resumed walking at dawn; sleeping too long in unfamiliar territory felt unsafe. A few hours later, rustling in the brush alerted him to wildlife nearby. It was reassuring to know animals still frequented the area. Before dusk, he ventured deeper into the woods to forage and spotted a bush laden with bright, vibrant berries. Remembering his

father's rule, *Never eat what the animals avoid*. he decided to make camp nearby and observe. Just as he was closing his eyes, two wild piglets trotted up to the bush. One snorted, sniffed the fruit, gave a sharp shake of its head, and both scurried away.

"Even the pigs won't touch them. Poisonous for sure. Thanks again for the advice, Dad." Üral muttered softly, wiping a tear from his eye as he settled in for the night.

He woke with a scratchy throat, but pushed forward. After hours of walking, the distinct sound of wooden wheels grinding against dirt echoed around the bend. *Someone's coming. A merchant? A guard patrol?* Anxiety surged through him. *Should I hide? No, hiding looks guilty... but what if they're bandits? What if I get captured again?* The sudden spike of fear regressed him to his childhood self; he dived into the dense undergrowth and held his breath.

A heavy wooden wagon rolled into view. Two men sat up front at the reins, while the rear consisted of an enclosed wooden cage.

One of the two mercenaries riding horseback behind the wagon called out, "One of them is throwing up back here!"

The driver, a man with a long mustache, snapped back without looking, "They're just slaves, you fool! Whip them or keep moving!"

Slaves... Just slaves. Like my mother.

Whip them?

They treat them like property... worthless property.

How can people treat another person like this?

They don't care if they die...

Was my mother worthless to them, too?

Did she deserve to die in the dark?

Do these people deserve to die?

They are dying right now!
I have to do something!

Overwhelmed by memories, Üral acted without thinking. He burst from the bushes into the middle of the road, drawing the rusted sword they had found in the cabin years ago.

"Stop! Identify yourselves!" Üral shouted, hoping he sounded commanding.

The wagon ground to a sudden halt. The man sitting beside the driver and the two armored mercenaries trailing behind jumped down, drawing their weapons. *Shit... what was I thinking?*

"Who the hell do you think you are?" the man with a long mustache growled.

"That doesn't matter! Are those slaves in the back?!" Üral gestured with the tip of his blade.

"Yeah. What's it to you? Planning to rob us single-handed?"

"I'm setting them free."

"That'll cost you twenty five square schdinks," the driver sneered.
(*consult the last section of this book for definitions)

"Well, I currently have..." Üral patted his empty pockets "...zero!"

"Get out of the road before we break your legs." The two mercenaries began advancing, swords drawn.

Üral raised his blade into a defensive stance, his heart hammering against his ribs. He calculated an escape route in his head; he wanted to play the hero, but he wasn't eager to die here.

Suddenly, one of the mercenaries froze mid-step, eyes widening in panic. "Sorcerer! He's a sorcerer!"

Üral realized they were staring at the glowing sigil marked on his

exposed forearm. *Wait, Jhaled (he remembered the name) was a sorcerer... Is this some kind of mark? Maybe I should have kept it covered.*

Seizing the sudden advantage, Üral bluffed. "Turn back now, or I'll turn you both to stone!"

The men hesitated, but realizing they couldn't simply run without risking their employer's wrath, one lunged forward. Panic seized Üral. Instinctively, he threw his palm open toward the attacker to block the blow, hoping to make them think he was casting a spell. An intense surge of energy rushed down his arm and burst from his palm. A deafening crack echoed as a gust of compressed air slammed into the mercenary, launching him backward into the dirt, bleeding profusely.

Wait... that wasn't just the feeling of adrenaline. I actually cast a spell?!

The second mercenary took advantage of Üral's distraction and swung his sword, catching Üral across the shoulder. Wincing from the pain, Üral thrust his palm out again. Another shockwave blasted from his hand, tearing through the mercenary's leather armor and severely injuring his arm. The man fell to his knees, screaming in agony. "We aren't paid enough to fight a sorcerer! Please, spare me! I'll throw down my weapon and walk away! I swear it!"

Üral barely heard the man begging; he was staring at his own glowing palm in disbelief. Turning toward the slave trader, he raised his hand threateningly. "Unlock the cage, or you're next."

The driver panicked, turned, and bolted into the thick forest, leaving the wagon behind. Üral exhaled a long breath of relief. Not having to fight another person was relaxing. Behind him, the injured

mercenaries stumbled away into the distance, leaving a trail of blood behind them.

Now, for the people in the back...

Chapter 2: Curiosity saved the cat(s)

Üral approached the front of the cart, where the wagon driver sat motionless. "Aren't you going to run?"

"No, sir."

"Why not?"

"I signed a soul contract never to abandon this vessel unless the owner releases me or the cart is destroyed."

"Your master ran away. You don't have to stay."

"It's a magic contract, sir. Leaving means death."

"Then stay put and don't interfere."

The driver nodded silently. Üral walked to the back of the wagon and slid the heavy iron deadbolt out of place. As the doors swung open, a group of huddling figures stared back at him with frightened eyes. Üral stepped back to give them space. "It's safe now. Come out so I can see if anyone is hurt." Üral pointed at the road.

The first individual jumped down and immediately dropped flat onto his stomach on the dirt road. *Why is he doing that? Is he injured?* Üral wondered. One by one, the rest followed suit, laying face down in the dust.

Üral looked on in confusion. "Why are you all lying down?"

No one answered.

It was then that Üral noticed their long, soft ears and sleek tails. These weren't just humans; they were feline humans with cat features. *Oh... they don't speak the human language, do they?*

"Can anyone understand me?" Üral asked gently.

A middle-aged woman raised her head slightly. "Yes, sir."

Üral disliked the formal title, but focused on the situation. "Do the others speak my language?"

"No, sir."

"Why is everyone lying on the ground?"

"Because the first one laid down."

"Why did he lay down?"

"He assumed you were ordering us to do so."

"Please, tell them to stand up."

The woman turned to the group and spoke softly: "Stariĝi."

Immediately, the captives rose to their feet.

Üral gestured back toward the road. "I drove off the slaver and his guards. You're free now. I can guide you toward the city if you wish."

The woman translated: "Mi venkis la sklavkomerciston kaj liajn virojn; vi nun estas libera, kaj mi povas montri al vi la vojon al la urbo, se vi volas."

The group whispered among themselves, looks of disbelief painted across their faces. The woman turned back to Üral.

"Sir... are you setting us free?"

"Yes."

"Thank you for your kindness."

"I fought them to save you, not to capture you."

"Thank you, sir."

"Are you all heading toward the kingdom?"

"Our people are enslaved there, sir. Going there is dangerous."

"Oh... Well, you could stay at my cabin. I don't know if it will hold everyone..." Üral paused to count. "...all twelve of you, but it's safe."

The translator looked bewildered. "Forgive me, but... have you ever dealt with slaves before?"

Üral grew quiet for a moment. "I was one, a long time ago."

"Then you must know we cannot simply walk away."

"Why not?"

"Our binding stones are kept inside the wagon cabin. Whoever holds the stone holds absolute authority over us."

"What? I've never heard of such a thing."

"They are forged through magic contracts. Attempting to flee without your stone would break the contract, killing us."

"What if I just crush the stones?"

"That would also break the contract and kill us instantly."

"Unbelievable... How long has this practice existed?"

"For as long as anyone can remember, sir."

"What if I return each stone to its owner? Then no one can command you, right?"

"Yes... that would be a good temporary solution."

"Tell them."

The translator turned to the group: "Li diras al vi, ke vi prenu vian propran ligŝtonon; vi ĉiuj estas nun liberaj. Li montros al ni

lokon por loĝi. Li estas ĉe nia flanko." (He is telling you to take your own binding stone, you are all free now. He will show us somewhere to live. He is on our side.)

Gasps echoed through the small crowd. They moved cautiously toward the front of the cart, noticing the blood on the dirt where the guards had fled. Searching the driver's chest, each person retrieved their glowing stone. Yet, even with freedom in their hands, they lingered, uncertain of what to do next.

Üral pointed back down the road. "Follow this dirt path straight ahead. Ignore the branching trails. When the road ends, go into the forest and walk straight, eventually, you'll find a two-story house built from green timber. You can rest there and eat whatever food is left. You're welcome to stay, but please don't get rid of my belongings. My brother's name is Valen, if he happens to return, please give him the letter on my desk."

"So we are to wait for you there?" the woman asked.

"You're guests, not prisoners. You can leave whenever you feel ready."

A gentle smile broke across her face. "Which god do you serve? I wish to pray for your safety."

"I don't know any gods," Üral replied honestly. "My father never taught us about them."

"Then I shall pray to mother nature to watch over you."

"Thank you."

As the twelve travelers began their journey toward his home, Üral remembered something and called out, "Wait! Take this.

It's a three-day walk!" He unslung his pack and tossed it to them. A young man caught it skillfully and blurted out, "Go tweng ka wena?"

The translator clarified, "What about your supplies?"
"I'll take the wagon. I'll be fine."

They bowed respectfully and continued down the path. Üral climbed up beside the driver. "Can you take me to the nearest city?"

Without a word, the driver turned the car around, and the wagon rattled down the road toward the kingdom, leaving the terrified horses behind.

Üral found the prolonged silence awkward. "So... how do these wagons actually run without horses?"

"You don't know?"

"I've been living deep in the forest for a long time."

The driver gave a faint smile. "It runs on a soulstone."

"What's that?"

"A crystal infused with concentrated soul energy."

"What does that mean?"

"You're a sorcerer, aren't you?"

"What does that have to do with it?"

"How can a sorcerer not understand soul energy?"

"As I have already stated, I've been isolated in the woods for years."

"Soul energy is the very force you drew upon to cast those shockwaves earlier. For this vehicle, it's simply fuel."

"How are soulstones made?"

"The high sorcerers in each city craft them."

"I see." Üral fell quiet again, watching the scenery pass as the driver kept his eyes fixed strictly on the road.

As the massive stone ramparts of the city came into view, the driver spoke again. "I can get you through the outer checkpoint."

"I'd appreciate that."

"My contract officially ends once the wagon crosses the city threshold."

"Understood."

"Killing within city limits is strictly forbidden by royal decree."

"I don't plan on killing anyone."

"Just making sure. You're a strange sorcerer from the wild, after all."

"I'm not going to harm you, if that's what you're worried about."

"That's reaffirming to hear, sir."

The wagon slowed as it approached a huge gate. Eight heavily armed guards patrolled the entry; two controlled the gate, while six inspected incoming cargo in pairs.

Two guards approached the wagon, halberds raised. "State your business and cargo!"

Before Üral could speak, the driver cut in smoothly: "I am transporting this gentleman. He is traveling for leisure. The rear cargo hold is empty."

"Leisure? In a battered transport like this?" The guard looked suspicious. He marched to the back, threw open the doors,

and confirmed the empty bay. Satisfied, he signaled to the gatekeepers. As the other two pairs of guards inspecting the two other wagons that arrived at the same time as them gave the same signal, the heavy wooden doors creaked open, and the wagon rolled into the bustling city streets.

The city was a whirl of activity. Vibrant market stalls lined the cobbled thoroughfares. Multi-story stone buildings towered overhead, illuminated by strange glowing streetlamps. Children darted through the crowds while merchants haggled over shimmering coins. *I don't have a single coin to my name*, Üral realized with a ping of worry, though he couldn't help but marvel at the spectacle. In the distance, a massive stone castle towered over the skyline. A squad of heavily armored men marched past, carrying broadswords openly. *No one seems concerned about weapons here. I guess carrying steel is normal.*

Üral approached a nearby stall. "Excuse me, what are you selling?"

"Travel gear, friend! Extra wheels, rope, bedrolls... I even have fresh soulstones available."

"How much for a soulstone?"

"Two full schdinks each," the merchant replied cheerily.

(*consult the last section of this book for definitions)

"That sounds expensive..."

"They're synthesized exclusively by the royal academy, so they don't come cheap."

"Is there a cheaper way to get around?"

"You could hire a beast-drawn cart, but most folks just stay put. You might want to consider settling down here yourself."

"I'm looking for my brother. Have you seen him? His name is Valen. He has dark, wavy hair, a sharp jawline, and striking yellow eyes."

"Sorry, kid. I see hundreds of faces a day. I'm just a vendor."

"Where can someone earn money around here?"

"Well, the Adventurer's Guild posts contract work daily. Or you could find labor at a tavern, help on a construction crew, or try your hand at trading."

Üral thanked the vendor and walked on, deep in thought. *I can't trade without having some coins first and construction takes time. Working at a tavern would give me a roof over my head while I check the Guild for news about Valen.*

"First step: find lodging for the night. Then I start asking around," Üral muttered to himself.

He wandered through the bustling avenues, admiring the architecture and listening to the hum of unfamiliar conversations.

He tried asking a passerby for directions, but the man walked right past him. Steering himself in front of another traveler, Üral asked, "Excuse me, I'm new to the city, could you point me toward a tavern?"

* * *

In a quiet corner of a busy tavern, three men sat away from the crowd. Two wore full knight's plate armor, while the third, a sharp-featured blonde man, wore lightweight leather and steel

pauldrons. The surrounding tables were conspicuously empty; patrons kept a wide distance, casting anxious glances toward the trio.

At a far table, two local workers chatted over mugs of ale.

"Hey... isn't that Sir Rafel?"

His companion hissed, "Keep your voice down! Yes, that's him."

"Why isn't he out on patrol?"

"Even royal knights get break time."

The worker nodded, then leaned in closer. "Did you hear the rumors? They say he sensed something yesterday."

"You mean that 'great disaster' nonsense?"

"It's not nonsense! Everyone's talking about it!"

"If you're so sure, why don't you go over and ask him yourself? He's sitting right over there." The friend pointed toward the blonde knight.

"Are you crazy? The Lord handed him authority to execute anyone he deems a threat on the spot!"

"You're an off-duty carpenter drinking ale. You're hardly an empire-level threat."

The carpenter stroked his chin, weighing the risk.

His friend grinned. "Tell you what: I'll give you two triangle schdinks if you ask him."

"Make it three."

"Deal."

The carpenter stood up, smoothed down his apron, and nervously approached the table. "Sir Rafel... might I have a brief moment of your time?"

The blonde knight slowly turned his head, his cold glare

brimming with irritation. "What?"

"Pardon the intrusion, my Lord... I was simply curious if the rumors surrounding you were true?"

"Which rumors?"

"People are saying... that you felt a disturbance. A great disaster incoming."

"There is no cause for concern so long as I-" Rafel froze. His expression darkened instantly, his eyes narrowing like a predator locking onto prey.

The carpenter recoiled as Rafel stood up slowly, extending his right hand to the side.

A thick swirl of dark grey smoke materialized around his palm, condensing into the sharp silhouette of a blade. As the smoke dissipated, a uniquely forged weapon appeared. The carpenter gasped, "The Holy Sword of Souls!"

The weapon featured a slender hilt wrapped in black silk and a long, needle-thin blade that curved dramatically at the tip like an ocean wave. It was Rafel's famed holy artifact, a blade capable of severing and absorbing raw soul energy. Patrons knew him as the knight who deflected grand magic and executed dangerous rogue sorcerers. It was whispered that the blade possessed its own intent, granting Rafel a supernatural danger sense. It was the reason he was assigned constant patrol duty: he hunted threat signatures across the territory and eradicated them without fail.

Terror swept through the tavern. The carpenter dropped to his knees. "I'm sorry, my Lord! I meant no disrespect! Please

forgive me!"

Rafel ignored the trembling man entirely. His eyes were locked on the tavern's entrance.

* * *

Üral finally located the tavern a massive wooden structure with flickering lanterns framing the entrance.

He pushed the heavy doors open. As the hinges creaked, every eye in the room snapped toward him. *Well... this feels uncomfortable.*

Üral offered a weak smile. "Hello..."

From the far corner, a blonde knight stood with a strange, wavy sword drawn. "Leave this city immediately, or draw your weapon!"

"Whoa, hold on! Did I step into the wrong place? I'm just looking for a room!"

"Are you here for my life?" the knight demanded, his voice echoing through the tavern.

"No! Absolutely not! I'm just looking for work, I arrived today!"

Üral raised his open hands to show he was unarmed, noticing two heavily armored guards flanking the speaker.

Without another word, the blonde knight lunged forward, blade raised high.

Üral remembered the driver's words: *Killing in the city is strictly forbidden.* He wanted to keep his magic hidden, but this was

an emergency.

Forget fighting, I need to run! Üral bolted out the door, darting through the unfamiliar streets. He ducked into a side alley, only to hit a towering stone dead end. Swiveling around, he found Rafel closing in, blocking the exit.

The knight seemed slightly calmer, though his weapon remained ready. "Why run if you aren't a threat? Aren't you powerful?"

"I don't know why you think that! I have no intention of harming anyone!"

"My instinct never lacks."

"Your instinct?!"

"You're an outsider, aren't you?"

"I just got here today!"

"So it was your presence that triggered my warning sense a few days ago."

"I don't know anything about your senses! I'm just searching for my brother!"

"Who is your brother?"

"His name is Valen. He's younger than me, about my height-"

Rafel cut him off cold. "Given the intensity of the threat signature you radiate, you are either planning to execute me or wipe out half this city." He seemed like he was talking to himself rather than to Üral.

"I'm not trying to kill anyone!"

"Notice your wording: 'I'm not *trying* to kill,' instead of 'I *can't* kill.' You're concealing your capability."

"I have never killed a person in my life!"

"That still isn't a denial of ability."

"I've been living isolated in the wilderness for years! I don't know your laws or your customs! Just let me go!"

"The wilderness..." Rafel muttered, evaluating him.

"Look... shouldn't we at least exchange names before you draw conclusions?"

"I am Rafel, High Knight of the Inner Guard."

"And I am Üral. I'm just trying to track down my missing brother."

"So, what is your deal? Are you a sorcerer?"

Üral hesitated, knowing the danger, but decided against lying to an armed knight. "...Yes."

Rafel's grip tightened on his hilt. "So you're affiliated with them. The Cult of the Dark Tree."

"I've never heard of them," Üral replied, shaking his head.

"You can't deceive a blessed warrior. Use your magic and fight!"

"I don't want to fucking fight you!" Üral snapped, his patience running out.

"Then you're here to abduct children for ritual sacrifices?"

"Fuck no!"

Rafel paused, caught off guard by the genuine frustration in Üral's voice.

"You will not leave my sight as long as my blade identifies you as a catastrophic threat."

"Your blade? You're basing all of this on a gut feeling?!"

"I have been blessed with the Holy Sword of Souls. It measures the potential lethality of living souls."

"A holy sword?"

"You truly have been living under a rock, haven't you?"

"I told you! I've been in the woods!"

"Holy swords are divine relics granted to those who have

communed with the gods."

"Gods are real?! How much history did I miss out there?!"

"Humanity has known of the divine pantheon for centuries. We hold grand tournaments to determine who receives the next blessing."

"Whatever! Fine! I'll leave the city right now if it stops you from chasing me!"

"You aren't leaving until I determine your purpose." Rafel went quiet for a moment, weighing his options. "Actually... you will enroll in the Empire Academy."

"The Empire Academy? Wait... I know that name. My grandfather studied there. That's how my father learned magic, from his own father."

"The academy is staffed by master sorcerers and high archmages; your potential for collateral damage will be reduced there. Furthermore, the smell of danger you radiate is far too immense to leave unsupervised. I can come check on you whenever my blade alerts me."

"I don't have time for school! I have to find my brother!" Üral yelled.

"You'll have access to the royal archives there, far better research tools than wandering the alleys. I am not offering a negotiation, sorcerer: fight me here, or register at the academy."

Üral gritted his teeth, raising his hand as energy surged into his glowing sigil.

Chapter 3: Back to school

Üral bla bla

Definitions

Schdinks: 100 triangle schdinks equal 10 square schdinks which equal 1 full schdink which equals 1/5th of a golden schdink. These are the main currency used by most human settlements and vendors.

Soul energy: It is the energy naturally generated by all humans, it is necessary to keep the mind awake and is used to cast spells.

Contract: Contracts are formed by multiple people agreeing over the same rules by sealing soul energy. If these rules are broken the sealed energy is released uncontrollably and usually leads to the death of the one who broke the contract.

Blessing: These are powers given by gods to humans, they can bend the rules of reality since it is formed by a godly will.

Holy sword (aka holy artifacts): It is a form of blessing that can be summoned by the blessed, these swords usually have special powers.

Sigils: Sigils are contracts that contain the recipe to a spell, they can be willingly transferred between humans and activating them by focusing energy on them causes a spell.

THESE ARE SIMPLIFIED, YOU CAN READ THE FULL
WORLDBUILDING DOCUMENTS AT <https://lore.enia.net>

