

The Avatar Prince















WRITTEN AND ILLUSTRATED BY
MYRANDA V. PETERSON

1



LEGEND

- | | | |
|---|--|---|
|  Royal Highway |  Watchtower |  Fortress City |
|  Provincial Carriageway |  Village |  River |
|  Town |  Provincial Capital |  Temple |
|  Coastal City |  Imperial Capital | |
|  Fort | | |



The Empire of Arkanía

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*Dedicated to my parents and to the Lord Christ
who saw fit to bless me with them, along with all those who believed in
the remaking of this project, sometimes even more than I did.*

Thank you for all your love and support.



The Avatar Prince

VOLUME ONE

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MYRANDA V. PETERSON



THE AVAT PRINCE: TALES OF ARKANIAN

To access locked skits for
THE AVAT PRINCE:

First, get reading!

When you see the word 'TV' at the end of a
sentence, it's time for a skit!

Illustrations are paired off with these pages.
Click on an illustration to access its skit.

Enter the password.

Enjoy the show!

(Don't forget to come back to keep reading the story!)



TV
MVP

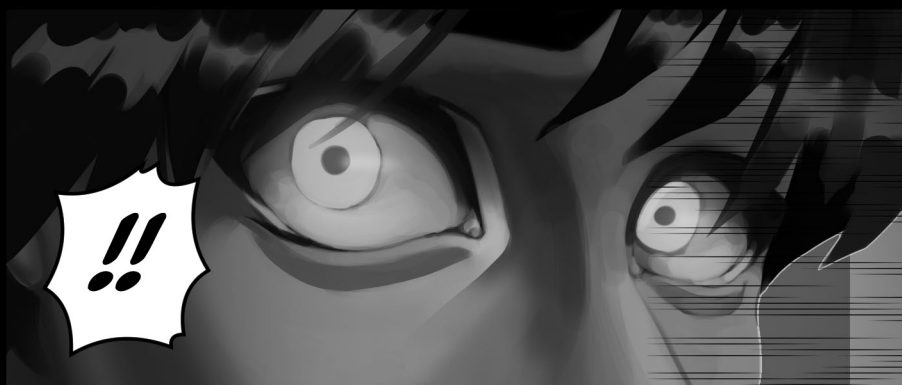


H O U S E M V P











I FOUND
YOU...



**...FILTHY
LOOKALIKE!!**





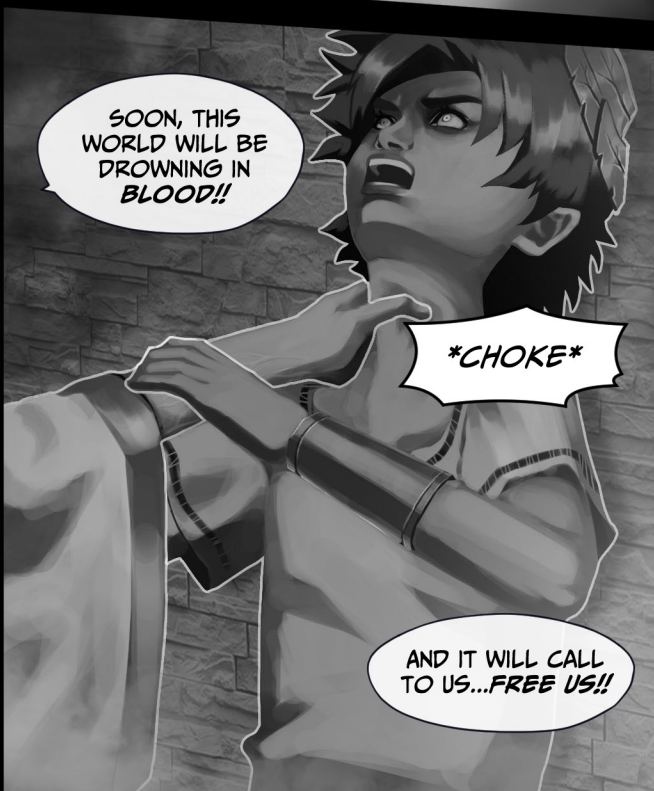
SLAM!

UGH!



WHEN I'M
THIS CLOSE
TO REVIVAL...!

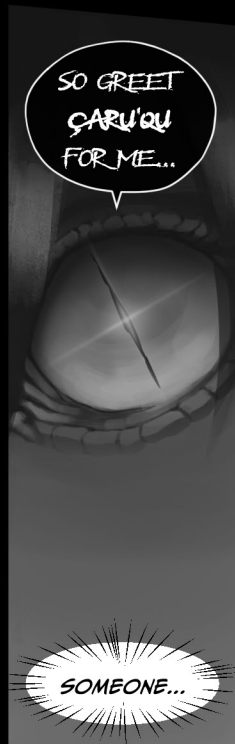
TO THINK THAT ÇARU'QU
BELIEVED I WOULD LET
THIS HAPPEN AGAIN...



SOON, THIS
WORLD WILL BE
DROWNING IN
BLOOD!!

CHOKE

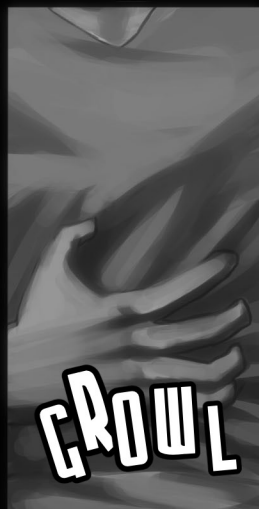
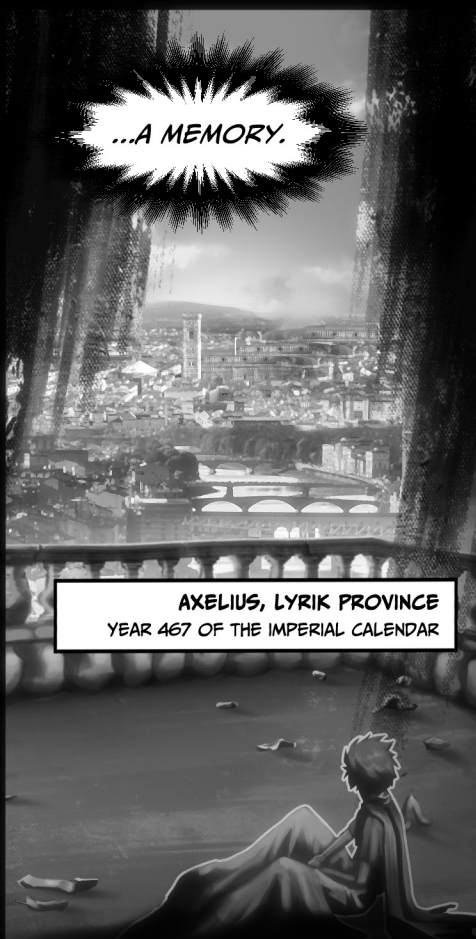
AND IT WILL CALL
TO US...FREE US!!



SO GREET
ÇARU'QU
FOR ME...

SOMEONE...







I'M...

...REALLY
HUNGRY...

1

HE HAD ONE shot.
Make it count.

Leaning over, Brent scanned the room. There were cutting counters on the right, where cooks were mincing food for the lunch rush, and a pair of stone stoves were behind them. They were wide enough to handle multiple fire pits; steaming pots were seated atop nearly all of them.

A dishwashing station was against the wall opposite him. Part of it was blocked by a stove, but he could tell that someone was working there — they kept banging clay dishes together, piercing his sensitive, Avat ears with every collision.

Not even a second later, a new sound came: that of a wooden door swinging ajar.

His golden eyes shot to the left and he spotted the flapping door just as a waitress rushed inside. Grabbing a tray that was ornamented with a few prepared dishes, she hastened back out. Another man came in not long after she did and called out three orders for the cooks to get started on.

It was definitely a chaotic place, what with all the bustling, chopping, sizzling and shouting. But what proved to be the loudest part of the ruckus was the head chef, who was barking orders over it all.

Brent already knew that the head chef was an extremely temperamental man, something that he'd figured out from the many times

that he'd previously stolen into this tavern kitchen. Now that it was the lunch rush, his short-fuse had long since blown out: his round face was flushed red and his already bristly mustache looked even more unkempt.

Gasping, Brent ducked out of sight when the head chef stopped screaming and looked up, his black eyes darting about as if he could sense that someone was watching him.

But, seeing no one, he dismissed his suspicions and turned to one of the simmering pots. Uncovering it, he wafted whatever was inside.

Brent slowly lifted his head out of his hiding place. His mouth watered at the mere thought of what could be inside the pot.

Or maybe he was already salivating because of all of the other scents that were floating around: that of entelodon meat and spiced venison, soups and wild hen...

He snapped out of his trance and ducked back down when the chef looked up again.

"You!" the man boomed and he gestured to the pot that he'd opened. "Add some more of the salt and herb mixings to this! The broth'll boil over bland at this rate!"

The addressed cook nodded hurriedly. "Y-yes, sir!"

Brent bowed deeper into his hiding place, panting gently and his heart still pounding. He couldn't believe he'd almost been spotted twice in less than a minute.

Just calm down, he told himself. Despite everything, he hadn't been seen.

He was all right.

Breathe.

He closed his eyes and after releasing one last, slow breath to ease his heart rate, he stilled himself.

Then, he listened, tuning his pointy ears in to the sound of the head chef's feet as he left the kitchen.

He was wearing thick shoes, Brent determined, and although the sound of the other cooks' bustling feet was rampant, he could differentiate the stride of their supervisor. His gait was distinct — slower, heavier — and every step he took thumped against the stone ground.

He was getting distant now, gradually moving farther away from the stoves...nearer to the door...almost there...

A sudden squeak slashed Brent's eardrums and he cringed.

At the same time the chef snarled loudly, having nearly slipped and fallen to the floor after stepping in something. "Tyronius!" Brent heard him snap. "What do I pay you for, to sit around or to clean?!"

"To clean, sir!" came the reply of a younger male. It sounded like he was the one doing the dishes.

He was probably new, Brent guessed. He'd never heard his voice before.

"Then get over here and *do it!*" the chef roared.

"S-sir!"

Light footsteps darted across the floor.

Brent discerned the gentle splatter of water plopping to the ground with them. The young janitor had probably grabbed a wet mop.

Opening his eyes, he peeked out of his hiding place again.

The stove to his left was blocking part of the head chef from view, but he could still see him well enough. He was backing away from the mess that he'd slipped in so as to make room for the worker that he'd summoned.

Brent watched him intently. He nearly forgot to breathe.

Unaware of him the chef stood in place, watching with folded arms as the young janitor started his new task. He scowled at him in silence, eying every swish of his mop until, finally, he huffed through his nostrils, as if that showed his approval.

Then, dropping his hairy arms, he left the kitchen by the swinging door.

Brent's golden eyes blazed with resolve.

This was his chance.

Keeping low to the ground, he glanced to the left and then to the right. Spying no incoming cooks, he crept out of his hiding spot and hid between the stove counters.

There, he tilted to the right to see around the stove counter in front of him. In doing so, he pinpointed the young janitor.

His back was to Brent, his head bowed as he mopped up what-

ever it was that had been spilled onto the floor.

Brent peered all the way around the stove counter that was behind him next, and he instantly withdrew when one of the cooks that was there circled around another and started in his direction. He hadn't seen Brent, but the child believed that if he stayed where he was any longer, he soon would.

So, getting up, he rounded to the opposite side of the counter.

Only one cook was standing at the very end of the walkway here, his back to Brent as he chopped some vegetables at one of the cutting counters.

And close to the edge of the counter on his right sat several plates of food.

Brent's mouth watered all over again. There were boiled sausages on one plate, steamed fish on another, doranis steaks on a third...

He glanced between all of it and the cook. Just as quickly, he peeked over the stove top to ensure that none of the other workers were looking around the room.

They weren't.

Untying the little burlap sack that he'd roped around his waist, he ran towards the plates at a crouch.

Keeping low, he grabbed a piece of steak and dumped it into his sack. When he saw that no one had seen him do it, he reached up and plucked some of the sausage next.

He still wasn't seen.

He snatched a bread roll last.

Now carrying all that he wanted, he glanced up at the cook.

He was still chopping,

Releasing another quiet breath, Brent turned to run out of the kitchen the same way he'd come in.

But as soon as he circled he locked eyes with Tyronius, who was now standing only a few feet behind him.

Brent froze, paralyzed with disbelief. With ears like his, he should've heard him coming.

Then again he wasn't a full-blooded Avat and what with all of the other clamor that was going on in the kitchen, the only way he would've been able to hear the janitor was if he'd been trying to.

But that didn't matter now. He was caught.

His gaze shot to the stone doorway that was behind Tyronius, and the panicked look in his eye bowed to one of determination.

No...he wasn't caught *yet*.

"*A-a goblin!*" Tyronius shouted frightfully, having at last found his voice, and the room erupted into pandemonium.

"Goblin?!"

"Where?!"

Fingers were nearly chopped off and hands were burned as people hunted for the creature Tyronius had spotted.

"Behind you!" He pointed at Brent, who promptly clenched the roll of bread between his teeth and tied the sack back to his waist.

"Get it!" someone across the room shouted and Brent heard something swoop for his head.

He ducked and a metallic clang resounded when whatever had been aimed at him bounced off the side of a stove.

He looked up.

It was a butcher knife.

The cook who'd been cutting produce behind him was the one carrying it. With a yell, he raised it again,

His golden eyes burning, Brent sprinted for the door.

Tyronius cried out in genuine fear as Brent ran at him, and he spun his mop around to catch him across the face.

But Brent was too quick: clutching his bag close to his scrawny hips, he rolled right between Tyronius' legs, leaving him to swing his mop into a counter of dirty dishes instead.

At least half of them were swept to the floor where they shattered noisily.

"What's going on in here?!" The head chef burst back into the kitchen, having been drawn by all of the commotion. His beady eyes darted between his hysterical workers before he spotted Brent's shocking blue hair.

His nostrils flared.

As if he could sense his glare, Brent looked up at him in mid-run.

"You again!" The head chef snatched a long and sharp knife off of the nearest countertop. "Don't think you can come in here and take what's not yours! I'll have your head and serve it up to the

Viceroy himself?"

He hurled the blade at Brent, who darted out of the back door before it could rip into him. It lodged into some empty food crates instead.

"Don't you dare show your face here again, devil!" the chef screamed after him, racing to the door to see where Brent had gone. He glanced up and down the cobblestone alley and soon spotted him making a mad dash for the depths of the backroads.

Seizing the doorframe with his sausage-like fingers, he shook his fist at him in fury. "I'll kill you if I ever see you here again! Do you hear me?! *I'll kill you!*"

Brent threw a hasty look over his shoulder and caught the chef's vengeful eye from afar. With his heart hammering and his breath short, he faced forward again.

He didn't stop running.

2

BY THE TIME Brent finally found a place to sit and eat, his stomach had taken to devouring itself.

The spot that he'd selected wasn't perfect, but at the very least it was in another alley. Thanks to that it was generously shaded, as well as far enough from the sunny streets for him to not be seen by anyone.

Pressing his back against one of the stone brick walls, he slid to the ground and untied his sack. The inner fabric was stained from the meat sauces. It looked filthier than it did before.

He didn't care. Food was food, and even with the bread roll that he'd inhaled on his way here, he was starving.

So, grabbing the doranis steak first, he buried his teeth into it. His stomach garbled with delight.

Over the last few weeks, he'd come to like the food that came out of that tavern. While stealing from it often proved to be more risky than not, he still wished that he'd discovered it sooner. If he had, perhaps he wouldn't have been foraging for food out of the city's trash heaps for as long as he'd been.

How long had he been doing that, he wondered suddenly. Had it been months? Or...had it been years?

He couldn't remember.

He finished the steak and after licking his fingers, he moved on to one of the fillets. Using his teeth to rip it apart, his gaze wandered out of the alley and towards the sunlit road that ran perpen-

dicular to it.

Now that he was thinking about it, how long had he been out on these streets at all?

He couldn't remember that either. He hadn't thought of it much. But now that he was, he realized that in losing track of time he'd lost track of something else as well: his age.

Was he still eight? Or maybe he was ten now. Or...ten and a half?

He stared distantly at the road as he pondered this subject, watching as horse carriages wheeled along the paved, cobblestone street. Some of the vehicles had their window curtains drawn, allowing those inside to bask in the summer sunlight as they were carried to their destinations. Every now and then a walking pair would pass the end of the alleyway as well — a mother and a daughter; two friends; a couple — all of them decked out in fancy cloaks, dresses and sashes that looked as pricey as anything Brent had ever seen.

He took particular notice of the men, especially the boys who seemed to be close to his age. With their short hairstyles, leather-strapped sandals and billowing capes, they seemed to be in a class of their own.

He studied his own clothes: a dingy scarf that trailed past his skinny knees, and a ripped tunic that was covered in mud and weird stains. He figured his face and hair were just as filthy.

He finished his fillet and upon grabbing the last one, he looked out at the imperials again. But this time, it was with envy.

He'd had their life before, for a moment. Servants, shelter, warm food, loving arms to embrace him...and then in the span of one fiery night, it had all been ripped away.

All because of his ears. Because of his blood.

Because he was "tainted".

His eyes tightened bitterly.

Ripping his gaze away from the city folk, he scratched one of his pointed ears.

They were the ears of an Avat — of a slave, of filth, of someone less than Arkanian, less than human. For however long he'd been out on these streets, it seemed that there was no shortage of people

or even things that sought to remind him of that.

There were posters on storefronts that depicted Avats — or “goblins” and “devils” as the imperials so fondly called them — submitting to the demands of their Arkanian counterparts, be they scrubbing their masters’ shoes; or farming in the blistering heat while their owners lounged in the shade; or cowering in fear while their owners prepared to beat them for their disobedience or incompetence. Their ears were always fiercely exaggerated, their eyes depicted as bulging, their bodies as misshapen or hunched in some way to suggest that they were always slouching. And in every illustration they were shorter than the Arkanians, who were often given a much more pleasing aesthetic.

It was a complete eyesore.

Then there were the Avats that Brent had spied at outdoor slave auctions, each one chained at the ankles and wrists, sometimes even around the neck. Forced to stand on a block of wood, they would watch with forlorn or panicked expressions as the crowds shouted the highest amount of arkans that they would pay for them. Sometimes families were separated. Sometimes their screams of despair were too much for Brent to bear.

Once, their cries had made his eyes water. But whether it was from pity or a fear of suffering the same kind of fate, he was never really sure.

And of course there were the slave traders, who would hunt for stray Avats once the blue sky rolled itself up to leave the world cocooned in a wrapping of stars and moonlight.

Brent had had more interactions with them than he cared to count. One too many times he’d nearly been captured — once he had been, and had only gotten away because it had been pouring, and a large sign for a tavern was hanging on a rusted chain just above the slave traders, and it had snapped and crushed the man who’d been trying to bind him. His mind almost splintering, Brent had darted away before the man’s partner could finish what he’d started.

The fact that he had to live that sort of life wasn’t fair.

But his bitter feelings about it didn’t change anything. Still he saw people who looked like him in chains; still he saw them trailing

in their masters' shadows on the streets; still he saw other Avats like him, forced to live below the status of poverty and getting beaten if they were suspected of even viewing an imperial sidelong.

Some were even executed in the city square for crimes as petty as theft. Others just died in alleyways, where their bodies rotted until the authorities were informed and the corpses were carted off to some unknown place. Sometimes they were simply killed by night patrollers, who claimed they'd either been afraid of the "shadow" that they'd seen or because "the goblin was too sick and probably wouldn't have been sold for half an arkan, anyway."

Other times, Brent had heard of Avats being taken to the temple somewhere deep in the heart of the city. The people worshipped the imperial gods there: Empyrean and Vedrah, as he understood their names to be. As far as why people would bring their slaves to such a sacred place, Brent had overheard grisly stories. Fire was involved, and burning, and bleeding, and death, all in exchange for a blessing on one's family, or for success at their trade, or as a way to show gratitude to the gods for the lasting peace and prosperity of Arkania.

No matter the reason, one thing had always remained the same: any Avat who was brought to the temple never came out again.

All across the continent that the Empire of Arkania ruled, these stories and more were the same. Everywhere and anywhere that someone traveled, they were bound to uncover one consistent truth: that the Arkanians hated the Avat people and treated them accordingly — even going so far as to slay them at the feet of their gods for a reward.

It was normal. Common. Even the Avats had accepted their fate. After all for the four hundred-and-sixty-odd years that the Empire had existed, it had been their allotted place. Their rank. Their only status.

But Brent still hated it.

Even more than that, he hated that it hadn't always been like this for him. He didn't always have to go digging through barrels of trash in search of something useful — or edible. He didn't always have to steal. He didn't always have to consider himself to be someone so low.

In fact, he wasn't always.

But then...

Flashes of his past leaped through his mind like snapshots: the dark folds of a cramped closet; the wild grin of a boy with misshapen eyes — one that was human and one that was slitted like a lizard's; the stench of blood; the looming threat of death unbidden, death abrupt; fire and smoke, screams and flickering shadows...

And a weight, a weight so magnificent that it made breathing hard. A weight so heavy that it was as if something were sitting on him, on the entire building that he'd been running through, watching him, craving his blood, craving his flesh, hating him with every ounce of its presence —

He shut it off.

He didn't want to think about it.

Still, at times, it was all that he could think about: the fact that he wasn't good enough to be an Arkanian but, because of his ears, he was just good enough to be an Avat. It didn't matter that he wasn't even a full-blood, given the shocking color of his eyes and hair.

But it was still just enough to be hated.

The memories started to pile up again. In light of them, he supposed it all added up.

This would be his lot in life. Forever.

His resentment simmered into despair.

A split second later he leaped to his feet and with the tails of his scarf whipping about, he faced the dark end of the alley. There, the cobblestone pathway curved to the left and inclined deeper into the backstreets.

But he was more interested in the sound of bare feet that were coming from around the corner, lazily ambling in his direction. It didn't sound like they were too far off.

He took a wary step back.^{tv}

Barely an instant later, the owner of the feet rounded the corner and entered his line of sight.

He relaxed.

It was a man, a tall one at that, with a complexion that was a few shades darker than Brent's light-skinned pigmentation and



LISTEN CAREFULLY
CODE: SANCTUARY

pointy ears that extended far more than the child's own. His black hair, tangled and lackluster as it trailed from underneath his raggedy hat, ended just above his waist, and his old and baggy clothes exaggerated his thin frame.

Brent knew this Avat. Or at least, he knew that his name was Renthor and that he'd escaped his slave master somewhere out west. On top of that, Renthor had been one of if not the only person in the whole of the city who'd ever bothered to have civilized conversation with him, even offer him tips and insights on how to survive the hostile streets of one of the Empire's best-kept cities.

Indeed, when Brent had first ended up in the city, shivering and terrified and covered in bloodstains and mud, it was Renthor that had found him and taken him under his wing.

The best restaurants to steal from and how; the best places to hide from slave traders at night; the fastest way to outrun soldiers; ways to use parts of the street and storefronts to one's advantage when making an escape or stealing... These were all things that Renthor had gone out of his way to teach the child.

He'd even taught Brent how to pickpocket once, which Brent had also practiced once. He'd succeeded and had managed to buy a fair amount of food with his steal, but beyond that he found the habit useless. After all, hardly anyone ever sold anything to an Avat and even if he found a way to hide his ears before approaching a vendor, the sight of a skinny, stinky boy who clearly had no business being in the wealthier part of the city usually turned the store clerks' noses before they turned him away.

Stealing what he wanted — usually food — seemed far more efficient.

Renthor had once grunted that he probably just enjoyed the thrill of it.

Brent wasn't so sure. He only ever knew that when he got hungry he usually wanted food immediately. Plus, paying for food like a good citizen with stolen money never really made much sense to him.

Renthor had even taught him how to hold his breath for long periods of time, in the event that he ever needed to hide from imperials underwater, which, oddly enough, had actually happened a few

times.

Most prominently however, Renthor had taught Brent the peculiar importance of remaining in the district of the city that they were currently standing in. It was the Nobility District, home to the nobles, politicians, lords and ladies — even the viceroy himself and his family — while the outer ring of the city was known as the Commoners' District. The two were separated by the Atteline River, a wide stretch of water that was often crossed by way of a ferry.

For reasons that Renthor had never disclosed, even when Brent had tried asking, he urged the boy to remain in the Nobility District.

"The food's better, and the slums aren't nearly as smelly," he'd offered, and Brent had to admit that that was a rather convincing argument. The likelihood that there were more slave traders patrolling the roads on the commoners' side gave him even more incentive to stay put, as did the fact that if he were to leave the Nobility District, Renthor wouldn't accompany him.

"Why not?" he'd asked once. "I thought you were looking for that sanctuary."

It had been a provocative question, but Brent had been being honest. Shortly after their first meeting, Renthor had said that he was en route to an "isle of Avat sanctuary" somewhere to the far east, beyond the Empire's coastal border. But, given that he'd claimed to have been shuffling his way around the city for much longer than Brent had, he'd long-since concluded that the man had given up on his journey years ago.

It was probably because the "isle of sanctuary" that he'd been looking for didn't even exist, Brent had decided. There was no such thing as a sanctuary for Avats, especially not in or near a place like the Arkanian Empire. There was nothing but enslavement for goblins like them.

Anything else was just a fantasy.

"Oh, I'm still looking," Renthor had promised, a finger on the lowered brim of his hat, and he'd pushed it up to send Brent a crafty smile through his ridiculous fringe. "But certain signs suggest that staying in this area might actually prove to be beneficial for us both."

Brent had frowned.

Renthor hadn't explained himself.

He hardly ever did.

Another thing Renthor had taught him was the art of laying low. Upon their very first meeting Brent had been dressed in attire that no Avat would ever be able to afford, let alone be permitted to wear. If he were to continue around the city in such clothes, Renthor had warned him, there was a chance that it would cause him extra trouble.

As far as what sort of trouble it could cause, he'd never said. He'd only helped Brent steal rags from a clothesline in an alleyway that same night. Eventually the clothes had gotten too small and so, using stolen money, Brent had managed to purchase something a bit more suitable for himself. He hadn't gotten anything new since.

Either way, the longer he'd stayed in the city the more stifling and repetitive the place became. With Renthor's help he'd developed a basic schedule for himself: wake, steal, hide, sleep, repeat. It only ever got interesting when they were nearly captured, or when they inadvertently caused some kind of ruckus in the streets while hunting for dinner, or that one time when they'd impersonated a pair of nobles and stole their room at a fancy inn.

That had been Brent's most nostalgic night. The soft bed and pillows had reminded him of his past life. By morning, he'd awoken with dried tears on his face.

Eventually, he'd come to believe that if he could escape the city, things would work out better for him. In all the time that had passed, he hadn't found any proof of Renthor's words: that remaining where they were would bring them some kind of benefit.

But he wasn't keen about leaving on his own. So far as he knew the only home he'd ever had had rejected him, and the only acquaintance he ever had would sooner desert him than leave the city with him.

So he hadn't had any other option other than to agree with Renthor's very first instructions, and blend in with the city's shadows and homeless folk as best as he could. Funnily enough, not even the poorest people treated him any better than the richer. He quickly learned how to avoid them.

After all, he didn't want to get into any more trouble.

"I see you're getting better at hearing when people are behind you," Renthor observed presently as he stopped in front of Brent, and he looked over his nose at him with a slow and unpleasant smile. "The sooner you train those ears of yours to be as good as a full-blood's, the better. We wouldn't want you to have too many close-calls with the imperials."

Brent thought of his close-call at the tavern. But he didn't say anything.

"Aww, no words today? And here I was, glad that I'd finally found a familiar face to talk to..." Renthor plopped a hand onto his hat and bowed his head in mock-sorrow. In the process, his eyes caught the half-eaten fillet that was still clutched in Brent's hand. "Ooh, my!" He raised his head and with his hand still on his tattered hat, he leaned towards the remnant of Brent's meal as if it was the most incredible thing he'd ever seen.

Brent retreated a little.

"So, you stole something from that tavern that I told you about again, I take it?" Renthor rose to his natural, towering height. "I don't suppose you'd be willing to lend me that last morsel as a token of your gratitude? Scraps are barely filling these days."

Brent looked from Renthor to the last bit of meat that he was holding.

He held it out to him.

Renthor swiped it away with a greedy smile. "Many thanks, *chouja*."

Brent didn't respond to the strange word. It was a way to address boys his age according to Renthor, and it belonged to a strain of the Avat language that Brent had been told but couldn't remember the name of. Either way, since it wasn't an insult, he often opted to overlook it.

Renthor devoured his snack in as little as two bites and hungrily sucked the tips of his fingers when he was done. "Those cooks never cease to amaze me..." he murmured when he finished, and his eyes descended to Brent once more.

The boy had turned his head to the sunny street again and was gazing out at the people once more.

Renthor followed his stare and his smile morphed into a more mysterious one. “Wishing for the good life again, I see.”

Brent whipped around to see him.

“Those fine clothes, and all those jewels...” Renthor sauntered around him. “What I’d give to have such things as my own.”

He stopped just shy of where the alleyway’s shadows ended, unwilling to go any farther for concern of being spotted. “It’s almost funny how the imperials make us Avats slave away for them all day and yet, we never even get rewarded with so much as a decent meal. But, I suppose it’s as the saying goes...” He looked back at Brent, his ominous smile still there. “Life isn’t fair, is it?”

As before, Brent didn’t reply.

Renthor released a low and very curt laugh. “And it certainly hasn’t been that way for you has it, chouja? Let’s see now...how long has it been since I first met you out here? I’m inclined to say... three years.”

Surprise flickered across Brent’s childish features.

Renthor noticed and he chuckled quietly. “Time flies, doesn’t it? Still, for a mere boy you seem to have learned to handle yourself well in such a short time. I’m actually surprised that you’ve lasted this long.”

Brent didn’t respond, still stuck on the man’s previous statement.

Three years.

Then...that meant —

Eleven.

That was how old he was. Eleven.

He almost couldn’t believe it.

All the same, he supposed that the number made sense. The seasons, however mild they were in this part of the Empire, had to have cycled at least three times, and his legs were longer than they’d been when he’d first started to wander these streets. His sky-blue hair, although still short, had grown out as well.

But, no matter how he looked at it, three years was a long time to be running around this place. He couldn’t believe he’d lost track of that much time.

Then again, it probably hadn’t been avoidable. The days had

begun to run together long ago, blurring to the point where each one seemed to be an identical copy of the one before it. They all brought the same anticipation, the same fear of capture by slave traders and above all else the same, overarching goal he'd had since the fiery night that had started everything:

Survive.

At once, the street exploded and a shockwave took him off his feet.

3

YELLING, BRENT CRASHED to the ground and rolled into the alley, stone tearing at his skin as he tumbled without ceasing. It wasn't until he bounced over a lump in the path did he finally skid to a rough halt.

As soon as he stopped he flopped onto his stomach, breathing hard. His head whirled, the world pitched under him; it wasn't until everything began to level out did he open his eyes.

The smoke that had blown in from the street was settling into drifting clouds by now. He could hear people's screams coming through it, but their voices were muffled and distant. It was if they were coming to him through ten brick walls, only to be strangled by his own ears.

Coughing, he lifted his head off the ground. His vision was unfocused, even more so because of the dust that was floating all around, and it was all he could do to find the strength to squint through it.

He pushed up so that he was resting on his elbows and all at once, the screaming voices detonated in his ears at full volume.

His head throbbed violently and he seized it — as if that could help — and when the pain ebbed he peered up at the buildings that walled the alley.

They'd suffered a great deal of damage from the explosion: slabs of stone had been blown right out of them, and bits of debris were

still raining to the dusty ground.

Following one such trail of dust, his hazy vision fell to an intimidating shadow that loomed nearby. He stiffened with concern for a second, but in the next he recognized it as a heaping mountain of rubble.

And from the looks of it, it wasn't too far from where Renthor had been standing.

His eyes widened in alarm. Staggering to his feet, he stumbled towards it.

"R...Renthor?!" he called breathlessly. Weak-kneed, he fell against the pile.

No one answered him.

"Renthor!" he tried again.

Still nothing.

He closed his eyes and attempted to train his ears to the quiet, hoping that maybe he could pick up the sound of Renthor murmuring some kind of reply.

All he could hear were people shouting.

He opened his eyes and studied the pile of debris anxiously, hunting for a stone that could offer him a good foothold. Finding one, he set his foot atop it and proceeded to climb the rock heap.

Maybe he couldn't hear Renthor because he was unconscious on the other side.

Grunting, Brent pulled himself to the top of the wreckage and looked down in search of his old acquaintance. As soon as he did, one of the rocks beneath him gave way.

A clipped grunt escaped him as he toppled to the ground, and he threw his arms out to break his fall. Despite his efforts, his hands and knees were badly skinned when he landed.

He hissed through his teeth, pained, and squinted around the gloomy area. The smoke was even thicker here, and everywhere a burning stench hung stagnant.

"*Renthor!*" he cried a third time.

The man was nowhere to be seen.

Suddenly, Brent's eyes widened with realization. Slowly, almost reluctantly, he twisted enough to see the pile of rubble that was behind him.

It looked bigger on this side. In fact, it blocked the entire width of the alley and was high enough to reach a good ten feet into the air, perhaps higher.

Renthor had been standing rather close to the end of the alley, he recalled. At least, he'd been standing much closer to it than Brent had. And if he'd been standing there when the explosion had happened, then...

Brent's eyes slipped to the ground and immediately his stomach twisted, threatening to upend everything he'd just eaten.

Renthor's arm was sticking out from the bottom of the rubble. Limp. Broken.

Lifeless.

Horror consumed him.

Renthor...had been *crushed*.

A shriek rent the air.

Flattening himself against the gravelly earth, Brent swung around.

The smoke was thinning by now and as the dust settled more of the street was revealed to him, unveiling a cobblestone road that was riddled with flaming beams and slabs of stone from a fountain statue, as well as glass from blasted storefronts. A couple of carriages were overturned, their horses still attached and kicking for escape, and all around them people were scrambling as though seeking refuge.

Brent hardly had the time to wonder why before he figured it out: they were being attacked.

By Avats.

He recognized their features even through the smoke, from their dark skin and silky, jet-black hair, to their pointy ears and resilient cheekbones — their most telling traits. They were poorly dressed and there weren't many of them, but all were armed with short swords or knives. Some even had a bird feather in their hair, or a tassel-beaded pendant over their soiled shirts — various trinkets that were known for belonging to Avat culture.

That baffled Brent even more. Not only were these people flaunting their ears, they were flashing obvious signs of their culture.

Why?

His eyes roved across the thoroughfare again, from the broken buildings and fiery debris to the terrified citizens that were running for their lives.

Many of them were falling, caught by the blow of a blade, and while many more tried to fight the Avats off, their fates were sealed as well.

“Death to the oppressors!” one of the Avats roared, and he locked blades with an armed citizen.

Their standoff was short-lived: with a vengeful scream the Avat broke it and slashed his enemy’s stomach open.

The citizen barely dropped to his knees before the Avat raised his sword to strike him again. But he stopped short and jerked backward, narrowly avoiding an arrow that sought his head.

Turning, he searched for where it had come from.

Brent did the same.

A short ways down the road a unit of soldiers was approaching, each armed with a sword and crossbow. Their armor clanked noisily as they sprinted towards the Avats, swords drawn, and straggling civilians dashed behind their line for safety.

The sun bounced off of their breastplates as they ran and on them Empyrean, Arkania’s chief deity and a symbol of imperial might, threateningly flexed his talons, his beak wide and feathered horns erect.

They were the city guard, clearly having been on patrol nearby when the explosions had gone off. Only one of them had his crossbow drawn — most likely the same one who’d just tried to kill the Avat — and the helmet that he wore shaded his eyes enough for him to see that his target was nailing him with a deadly glower.

“Deaaath!” an Avat screamed and she charged at the soldiers. With her small knife raised, her sights were set on their leader — the only one with a cape and no helmet to guard his head.

Her black eyes gleamed wildly as she went, the tassels of her oversized vest flapping in the wind, and she swung her blade in to sheath it in his neck.

But he grabbed her wrist, stopping her, and at the dead look in his eyes, she faltered.

Sunlight glanced off of his silver breastplate as he shifted, twisting her arm back until she was forced to her knees. As he did, her fingers unfurled from around her knife and it clattered to the ground.

The imperial eagle bore down on her from his armor, poised to strike its prey, and Brent was forced to look away when the light that bounced off of it shot into his eyes.

But even with his gaze turned away, he heard the woman cry out when the soldier's sword dove through her body.

Breathing shakily, Brent turned to look at them again.

In that same moment, the Avat woman slumped to the ground. Dead.

His heart hammered and his eyes widened in terror.

The soldier that had killed her looked up, squinting through the sunlight.

Fearing that he'd be spotted, Brent hastily scampered to his feet and hid against the alley wall.

Unaware of him, the soldier ran after his men and into the rubble-infested street, his armor clanking and cape blowing.

Brent thought for sure that the Avats would take off at that point, seeking to save their lives instead of face off against a division of the city guard. He'd thought they were lucky at first, to have been approached by foot soldiers rather than the city's special forces unit. Made up almost entirely of aetheriests, it would've been horrible for the rioters to face off against people who could cause rocks to break out of the ground or send their enemies flying with a simple wave of their hand.

But now he could see that it didn't matter who they were up against. Aetheriests or not, the odds weren't stacked in the Avats' favor. Things were never in their favor.

But they didn't retreat.

Instead they ran to meet the soldiers, their faces twisted into scowls of rage, indignation, and everything in between.

"*Deaaath!*" they screamed in a shared war cry that echoed into the heart of the city, and Brent watched in awe as they fought futilely against the Empire's trained warriors. Professionally wielded swords crashed into their flimsy weapons, knocking them right out

of their hands, and if a soldier's booted foot didn't kick them to the ground before they were stabbed, they were simply stabbed on the spot.

Brent's throat closed at the sight of them falling, one after another. They didn't stand a chance. It hardly looked fair.

Resentment bubbled in his chest, but it didn't last for very long. In fact, he barely had the chance to harbor it before he witnessed one of the Avats yell in agony and grab at a deep wound that had been cut into his side. Almost as soon as he dropped to his knees the soldier that he was facing struck him again, cutting him down without so much as a breath of hesitation.

Blood spewed everywhere.

Brent's eyes broadened and as his breath shortened his heart raged, shooting him full of an adrenaline that outmatched his indignation.

He had to get out of here.

Now.

His golden eyes darted about, hunting for a blind spot through which he could run for escape.

He stopped when one of the Avats, a young teenager, passed in front of the alley as he battled one of the soldiers.

Startled by their arrival Brent stumbled backwards, but his eyes never left the Avat as he dodged and parried the soldier's attacks. He was an abled fighter, there was no doubt about that, and even though he was armed with nothing other than a set of twin knives, he was an even match for his opponent.

He ducked low, avoiding one of the soldier's strikes, and in a flowing sequence of circular motions he slashed at the man's exposed legs, forcing him to his knees.

As soon as he was down, the Avat vaulted off of his shoulders and landed behind him. There, he slashed across the man's back with both of his blades, striking deeply enough to draw blood.

The soldier barely grunted before he collapsed.

With his frightened eyes riveted to his fallen body, Brent took another retreating step. His heel kicked a pebble.

Hearing it, the Avat's eyes shot up to him.

Brent froze.

In the same instant, the teen's gaze darted to the small points of Brent's ears.

"You there!"

The teen rose to his full height and turned, his knives bared, and he faced the captain of the unit.

In doing so, he blocked the sight of Brent.

The captain was standing directly across from the alley and with his once fearsome scowl having waned into a calm frown, he looked to be greatly unaffected by the carnage that surrounded him.

"Your allies have fallen," he announced, and with his blood-stained sword he gestured to the inert bodies of the boy's comrades.

The Avat followed his indication with his eyes and when he returned his gaze to the captain, his brown face darkened with wrath.

Brent tried to see the corpses from behind him, but most of the Avats' bodies — even, the bodies of citizens that hadn't made it out of the attack — had fallen behind mounds of rubble. He could only perceive little things in certain places, such as a foot sticking out from behind a rock, or an arm hanging through the wheel of an overturned horse carriage.

He was glad he couldn't see more.

"You appear young," the captain called to the only Avat who remained. "So I'll offer you mercy and ask that you surrender, on the grounds that you were fiercely misled by your depraved comrades. Be honored. No imperial would offer this gift lightly."

"I spit on your *gift*," the Avat snarled, and he spat on the ground. "What does the Empire know of gifts? What does the Empire know of mercy?!" He waved an arm across the battlefield, where the blood of his fallen was still oozing into the streets. "Is this a gift? Is this mercy?! You enslave us, you torture us without cause, you strip us of our names and culture and tell us that we should swallow it! And if we refuse, you kill us! Curse your self-satisfying gifts! *Curse your mercy!*"

"I need not remind you that you and your allies destroyed imperial property, and mercilessly killed a good number of our people," the captain replied, unruffled by his outburst. "Not to mention one of my own men." His eyes flicked towards the fallen soldier that was lying at the Avat's feet. "By law, I should have killed

you as soon as I saw you. But I am of my word; my offer remains. Stand down,” he ordered again, “and you will be brought to the nearest slave trading outlet. There, they will follow procedure so as to return you to your master, and your punishment will be light. Lower your weapons if you comply.”

The Avat glared at him and the rest of his squadron in stony silence, and he squeezed the handles of his knives.

Brent could feel the anger rolling off of him, swirling into a black cloud that desired to consume the entire area. Overwhelmed by its rapid growth, he tried to take another step back.

The pile of rubble stopped him.

He swallowed roughly.

At last with a fanciful twirl of his knives, the teen thrust his weapons into a pair of holsters that were belted to the back of his waist.

Brent blinked, surprised that he'd actually given up. Then again, he probably feared for his life.

He couldn't blame him.

The captain nodded in acknowledgment of his decision, and he made to gesture for one of his men to arrest him.

But before he could, the Avat produced something from his back pocket and closed it into his fist, which he pumped over his head.

“Death to the imperials!” he bellowed and his powerful yell echoed into the sky.

Operating on instinct, one of the soldiers swiftly raised his crossbow and fired an arrow into the teen's chest.

Brent lurched back, appalled.

The Avat staggered, stunned, and he gawked at the arrow shaft that was jutting out of his body. Sputtering faintly he took a shaky step back, then another. He barely managed to turn his head enough to see Brent.

The child stared at him, horrified, and in the Avat's eyes he saw something flicker vacantly: it was anger, but more so than that there lay a deep and bottomless sadness.

The Avat slumped to his knees, and the object that he was holding rolled out of his palm.

Brent eyed it.

It was a tiny gray sphere, no bigger than a walnut.

What was it?

"There's another one in the alley!"

Brent's head snapped up to find that one of the soldiers was pointing his sword at him.

With a deadpan expression, the captain's eyes locked onto Brent's partly shadowed figure. He seemed to study him for a moment.

"Capture it," he said finally and he removed a piece of cloth from his belt pouch. With it, he began to clean his blade.

The soldier with the crossbow loaded another arrow, thicker than the last.

Brent swiftly recognized it as an arrow that would expand into a net in mid-flight. He'd seen the slave traders use it on Avats.

And this soldier was about to use it on him.

His heart thundered with enough force to challenge an earthquake.

This was it, then. He had nowhere to go.

He was going to be captured, caught in a net like he was some kind of wild animal.

Three years of survival...and it all ended here.

The soldier's finger moved for the trigger.

Brent braced himself.

"Cover...your...eyes..." he heard someone gasp softly.

The voice was ragged, faint, but even so Brent could determine where it was coming from: it was the young Avat.

He looked down at him, surprised that he was still alive, and in facing him he learned that the teen's dying eyes were pinned to him as well.

There was a flash of movement by his hand.

Focusing on that next, Brent saw that his fingers were creeping towards the sphere that he'd dropped.

He didn't understand what the teen meant to do with it, nor could he comprehend why he had to cover his eyes. But, presuming that it just might save his life, he blocked his face with his arms and hit the ground.

At the same time, the Avat pressed a button that was on the side of the little sphere and a brilliant light erupted from it, burning brightly enough to match the might of the sun.

The soldiers cried out, nearly blinded, and when the glow faded Brent uncovered his head to see them rubbing their eyes or shaking their heads in an attempt to readjust themselves.

His eyes zipped over to the Avat.

His chin was leaning into his chest now, his sleek hair having fallen to curtain his lifeless, brown face.

Brent gaped at him, panting. Then, realizing that he'd been given an opportunity, he scrambled to his feet and sprinted onto the messy thoroughfare.

"It's running away!" one of the soldiers yelled, his vision returning.

"Then it was involved." The captain sheathed his sword. "Kill it."



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