

# Chapter 5

## The Imani Territory

**B**ehind them was a week of long and hard riding and Caitlin, Bravecat, Elesar and Lauren were resting in the Imani forest not far from Calmera, the capitol of the Imani territories. The unicorns were grazing without a care and Lauren was checking their equipment. Caitlin was sitting next to her and speaking:

"This is so exciting! I've never been farther away than Kiroshan and here I am now. Without my escort!"

"They have truly kept you in that castle like it was your prison," Lauren said.

"Now that I think back, I think you're right. I was more of a prisoner than a princess."

"You mean a little princess?" Lauren asked on purpose.

"What have I told you about that?" Caitlin scolded her. Lauren smiled and immediately apologized, "Forgive me. A bad joke."

Caitlin looked to Elesar. He was leaning against a tree, and beside him was Bravecat. They were wordlessly looking towards Calmera.

"Look at those two," whispered Caitlin, "I wonder what they're thinking about."

"I do too. They often stand for hours without a word. Speaking."

"With their thoughts?" Caitlin asked.

"I am not sure," Lauren confessed, "They say that after many years some Elves develop telepathic abilities. I'm not certain if Elesar achieved this. I never asked."

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"Calmera. How long has it been since our last visit?" Elesar asked Bravecat.

"About three years. The last time we were there the guards wanted to execute a young man accused of stealing from a merchant. Of course, you got involved and offered to pay for the stolen goods. You saved him from the death sentence then."

"Yes, I remember. A nice young man. Don't you recall that after that he went to Black Rock and became one of the head captains of its army? You see, even one act can change your whole life," Elesar said.

"I remember. You've always had a nose for such things."

Elesar smiled, "Come, let's tell the girls we will be on our way. I want to find accommodations in town. We are not safe here in the open."

Bravecat rose and went to the girls, leaving Elesar to his thoughts. He spent some more time thinking of Calmera.

Lauren saddled the unicorns, which at Elesar's almost soundless whistle ran to him. They were on the move again. They descended to the stone road leading to the main gate of the city. A great wooden door, bordered by high walls of light-brown dried mud and stone, was open. Before them stood a guard, a man dressed in a grey tunic covered by thickly woven chain mail. In one hand was a wide shield and in the other a long spear. The gloomy face under the metal helmet and thick black moustache did not look friendly:

"State your purpose in this city," he commanded.

"We wish to stay the night and sell this monster of a cat," Elesar said gruffly.

"Eles-" Caitlin started in surprise, but Lauren stopped her with a look.

The guard look at Bravecat, not even surprised by his size, "That will be an interesting sale. Just make sure it doesn't get loose," he said and let them through.

After they were farther away from the gates, Caitlin asked Elesar in disbelief:

"Are you really going to sell Bravecat?"

"No, Caitlin," Elesar turned to see if the guard was far away enough, "I said that to not raise suspicions. Such a great cat like Bravecat attracts too much attention. It's best you ride with Lauren and put a rope around Bravecat's neck so it looks like we wish to sell him," ordered Elesar.

"I understand," Caitlin said and did as instructed.

Passing by the cobbled streets of Calmera, Caitlin didn't know where to look. The city was bigger than Libria. Dozens of buildings, tall and short, wide and narrow were lined along the road that crossed the main one they were travelling on. She noticed there were more people here than almost in the whole of Kiroshan.

"Where do all the people come from?" she asked.

"Merchants and traders from all over Sillwith come here," Elesar answered, "The Imani territories is the only part of Sillwith without a king for a ruler, a so-called free zone. It's situated near two great kingdoms, Kiroshan and As'silaria and it didn't fall under their influence and neither have they tried to conquer it. Most think it is better that way. Here Men and other races can live and trade freely, without fear of a king's decrees and those who enforce them. Anyone can find everything they need in the commerce area.

Considering that there are many valuable and unique, even magical things for sale, noblemen, but also bandits and thieves come here," Elesar indicated with a look a caped man in a crowd of people, who, thinking no one could see him, grabbed a decorated vase off a stand from some merchant and disappeared in the crowd.

"To protect themselves from bandits, some noblemen hire guards to protect them and their goods. In time, there were more and more guards, so they formed their own guild – the House of Guards. That house trains the guards for hire," he pointed towards a large house. At its edifice was a red banner with a long shield emblazoned in the middle."

"The guards are also the representatives of the law. But the only laws which exist are the unwritten rules of Calmera, which the traders brought. Most protect them from attack and thievery. Many hold to them, for the punishment for breaking them is death.

As well as trade, taverns and lodges prosper. There are even carriages that transfer their passengers to any part of town."

"So you can buy almost anything here?" Caitlin asked, studying the rows of markets. Wherever her gaze fell, on every free bit of land, between houses and along the road were benches displaying their merchandise.

"Yes, even people," Lauren said.

"Isn't that forbidden?" Caitlin asked.

"It is! But these laws hold no sway here," Elesar said angrily, "there is no government here to stop it."

"But who manages the city? If there are Guards, there must be someone who commands them."

"No one!" Elesar said, "Here the one in charge is the merchant that controls most of the trade and who has the greatest power and of course, the most guards."

"That sounds cruel and unjust," Caitlin decided.

"I know. But it is such when greed rules people. But, on the other hand, everyone can find a job to do here. Not always honest, but one which assures them food and accommodation," Elesar answered.

"What kind of job?" the princess asked. The concept of a job was still not altogether clear for her.

"Varied ones. From merchants and their servants, to providers, to working in a tavern, to carriage drivers. From guards, to mercenaries that do other people's dirty work, to thieves to hired assassins."

"Being a thief or killer is a job?" Caitlin asked in surprise.

"Here, yes. Like the guards, the assassins and thieves have their own organizations. The assassins have their own secret guild and the thieves usually meet in cellars of taverns," Elesar said.

"Elesar, we won't arrive to the Calmera border before dark. You know as well that these roads are very dangerous. We have to find a place to rest," Lauren warned.

"I know, I said so to Bravecat. We will find rooms in the "Lost Traveller" tavern. They have large stables and room for Bravecat there," he answered.

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Night had long fallen by the time they had gotten to the part of the street where the "Lonely Traveller" tavern was. The streets were deserted. The only light came from the torches in front of the taverns. The loud crowd that had surrounded them only a short while ago had disappeared.

"Where did all those people go?" Caitlin asked in surprise, looking all around. There was hardly anyone on the streets.

"Twilight is a sign here to look for a safe place to stay," Lauren said carefully, "Elesar, we had best be off as well."

"I know. Let us hurry," said Elesar and prodded his unicorn.

"Why? Don't the guards worry about the safety?"

"Not at night. They don't pay them enough. Under the cover of dark, evil people walk the streets. I would not like to meet them," Elesar said, looking about himself carefully. They were alone.

"Especially not some bandit," Lauren added.

"Bandit?" Caitlin felt scared and held on harder.

"Don't worry, the odds are greater that we will meet some murderer," Lauren was mercilessly toying with Caitlin.

"Enough!" Leave her alone. You have scared her to death. Do not fear, Caitlin. I won't let anyone harm you," Bravecat said. He sniffed the air to see if he could sense any danger. Nothing.

"Thank you, Bravecat, but I'd still like to find a place to stay for the night as quickly as we can."

Lauren stopped, listening.

"Somebody is following us," she said quietly.

"Let us make haste!" Elesar commanded.

The girls hurried along with Bravecat.

In the dark, at the end of the street, Elesar noticed movement, but he couldn't tell whether they were thieves or murderers. In fact, he did not want to know. He prodded his unicorn and quickly caught up to them at the very entrance to the "Lonely Traveller".

The lanterns from the inside of the window were burning with a faint glow. Elesar peeked through the dirty windows. There were a few people there, enveloped in thick smoke. When they opened the door, a wave of heat and unpleasant smells hit their faces.

"Ugh! What is that awful smell?" Caitlin asked through her coughing.

"It's the smell of tobacco. I don't know why, but Men like it," Lauren explained. She coughed as well, "It sickens me as well."

"I will check with the barkeep whether they have room for us and Bravecat. You sit at a corner table and order a meal. I will return quickly. Be careful," Elesar said and left them.

Lauren made her way to a corner of the tavern, her head raised and her gaze ahead. She didn't even glance at the guests watching and weighing her. Caitlin firmly held her hand. They sat a table in the corner that was anything but clean.

"Disgusting! How could anyone eat here?!" Caitlin asked in disbelief.

"Not everyone lives in a castle with servants, princess. These are common people, so it's best you blend in and hold your tongue. It would not be wise for everyone to find out you are of royal blood. Here, kings and noblemen are not exactly popular," Lauren warned her in a whisper.

Caitlin didn't answer. She was seeing life in shapes she had never known before. And she was no longer delighted with them.

Lauren sat next to her and waved to a serving woman. She was of a broad build and had a dirty white shirt. Her hair was unruly and stuck up every which way from something that looked like a braid. She asked them,

"What'll it be, girls?"

"Give me some chicken and beer," Lauren tried to seem rough and vulgar.

"And you, little girl?" the woman looked at Caitlin.

"I would like some lamb and red wine. With some fresh corn bread."

The woman looked at her in wonder and then laughed loudly and said to the other guests:

"Hey folks! This girl wants some lamb and red wine!"

The other guests burst into loud laughter. Lauren kicked Caitlin under the table to shut her up and quickly recovered.

"Can no one take a joke here? Of course she'll have the same as me!" Lauren giggled.

The woman didn't care whether it was a joke or not. She lazily went into the kitchen.

"I told you not to draw attention to yourself and you do exactly that!" Lauren hissed impatiently.

"I'm sorry! It didn't even cross my mind that it would attract anyone's attention," Caitlin said fearfully.

It seemed that the time for a quiet and pleasant evening hadn't arrived yet, for an unkempt, untidy red-bearded man, smelling as well as the tavern, swayed over to their table. Not asking for permission, he sat next to Caitlin.

"Hey! This is our table, get lost!" Lauren said angrily.

The ragged man neither looked at her nor answered her. He put his face to Caitlin's frightened one and slurred:

"What do you say...ha...little lady...that we go somewhere and play?"

Horror flooded Caitlin who stiffened upon seeing there was nowhere to move away from this smelly pest.

"Leave her alone, scum!" Lauren yelled, drew her knife and swung towards his hand. The tip of the knife scored a thin red line against long-unwashed skin.

The molester swore: "Bitch, you'll pay for that!" and drew a knife from his belt with a swiftness that was unexpected from one so thoroughly drenched in alcohol. Before he got to Lauren, someone firmly grabbed his hand and the knife fell to the table with a muted thud. The drunk turned in wonder, completely unprepared for a stronger adversary. Elesar was the one who had twisted his hand and he hissed in a threatening tone:

"Be ready to part from the girl or from your hand! You can't say I left you with no choice."

He needed no encouragement. His decision was made with little reflection. He might prefer the girl at this moment, but his hand was far more important in the long run. Even to his drunken mind, that made sense. He moved towards the door with a speed that grew proportionately to the fear that that strong and determined stranger had instilled in him. The other guests didn't even react to Elesar's actions. Such scenes were common here.

At the door, which opened with an unpleasant squeak, the drunk collided with three men cloaked in black. They stopped, cast their gazes over the other guests and sat at the least lit table of the tavern without any hurry.

Elesar looked at them from the corner of his eye and felt his whole being fill with doubt. They struck a chord somewhere in the depths of his memory. But he couldn't bring it forth, so he tried to hear what they were saying to the barkeep.

It was in vain; it was too loud in the tavern. He decided to sit at the table for now and he would deal with the strangers if it became necessary.

"Thank you for coming before it became even uglier. What a foul creature! How dare he?!"

Caitlin was beside herself with anger, humiliation and fear. No one treated the heir to the throne of Kiroshan that way. But to her sorrow, that was of no use to her at all now. Indeed, it would do more harm than good, so she stopped complaining.

"The last thing we need right now is to draw attention to ourselves. And you draw it, like it or not," Elesar answered. Then he turned to Lauren, "Have you noticed the three that just entered and sat so it is impossible to get a good look at them?"

"I have, why?" Lauren said and furtively looked towards them.

"It is possible they were the ones following us."

"Do you think so?"

"I don't know. I am not sure, but they make me feel uneasy. And my mind might be playing tricks on me. We have long been travelling. Even I am tired," he concluded.

"It's the smoke," Caitlin said, coughing.

The serving woman approached their table and set wooden plates on it, "ere you go, miss. Your supper." She then looked at Elesar and smiled at him, "And what'll you be havin', sir? Thanks for not 'arming Marvin. He hangs about 'ere like a pest, but he's about as dangerous as one. All talk, that one."

Elesar skipped over her comment about the molester.

"I'll have the same thing they are," he replied, "But the beer I'll skip."

Even before she finished her simple meal, Caitlin began to feel sick and dizzy. She tried to stand, but stumbled and sat back on the filthy hard chair. A vague thought crossed her mind: "How did I end up here?" But she didn't voice it, due to feeling weak, but also out of respect towards her newfound friends.

"Poor thing! She's tired, and can't hold her brew," Elesar said. But Lauren didn't feel her best either.

"I don't think tiredness is the last of it. I feel dazed as well though I have twice her endurance. It seems something was in the drinks," she could barely say. Her vision blurred and she could barely make out where she was.

"I think you are overreacting a little," Elesar answered, "You have had a bit too much to drink and the road was long and hard. Come, I will lead you to your room. Everyone could do with a little rest," Elesar took each of them by the hand and led them to their room. He paid no heed to the evil comment and shouts of the other guests.

"Lookit 'im! 'e snagged 'imself a pair! Spread 'em around some!"

He calmly took them upstairs and left them to sleep. They lay down fully dressed. This wasn't a sleeping place where anyone wished to take off their clothes. They would be quicker in the morning as well. Elesar closed the single window, closed the door and once more descended to the stable, to check on Bravecat. It seemed even he would use the night to rest. He was calmly and contently purring on the hay, not reacting to the nervous horses which were unnerved by his presence. Not completely calm, but definitely tired, Elesar returned to the room next to the girls', lay down in the bed and quickly fell asleep.

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In the dead of night a door squeaked open. Someone entered the room where the girls were sleeping. Three figures dressed in black. One took out a knife and went towards Lauren and the other two went to Caitlin. While one put a huge inhuman hand over her mouth, the other lifted her, trying to throw her over his shoulder. Though dizzy and muzzy, Caitlin realized two dark figures were holding her and that she couldn't throw them off, nor yell. Her attempts to get away from them yielded no results. She was far too weak.

Their commotion and muffled muttering woke Lauren and she opened her eyes right at the moment the third attacker was swinging his dagger towards her. Lauren woke in a second and quick as a cat, grabbed her sword which was lying next to the bed. She was on her feet in a flash and, not expecting an honourable battle, thrust the sword in her attacker's chest. She

didn't even manage to turn before the second attacker left Caitlin to his accomplice and lunged at her. The blow to her back was so strong that she fell, dazed and unable to speak. By that time, Caitlin had managed to free herself from the attacker holding her. She couldn't hope to match his strength, but she was faster and nimbler. A punch to the face left her unbalanced for a moment. She couldn't believe she had not remembered that. She'd never hit anyone before. She was a princess of Kiroshan after all. Not knowing what else to do, she shouted at the top of her voice:

"Elesar! Help!"

Bare to the waist, Elesar ran into their room, Moonsaber drawn. The head of one attacker soon rolled across the room, hitting the chair and wardrobe with a dull thud. The other attacker lunged at Elesar, but he skilfully dodged and hit the attacker with his elbow against the back of his head. It made the attacker hit the wall face first and fall to the floor, unconscious. Elesar, Lauren and Caitlin silently listened to the sounds in the tavern. Apart from some unclear noises on the ground floor, there was nothing.

"Lauren, are you all right?" Elesar asked, not taking his gaze off the unconscious attacker.

"Just a scratch. I suffered a wicked blow to my back, but I will be all right. How is Caitlin?"

The princess was sitting at the edge of the bed stiffly. Her eyes were wide. Elesar approached her and she wordlessly hugged him.

"She's shaken," Elesar told Lauren, "This would be too much excitement for anyone in one night. And yesterday she was one of the most sheltered people in all of Sillwith. It seems someone does not want us to get to Adazar."

"Do you know who?"

"I don't know. But my suspicions of a spy in Kiroshan have proved true. I think our rest for the night is over. Take your things. I will go get Bravecat and the unicorns," he made to get up, but Caitlin still had a firm hold on him. He lightly too her hands and said, "I am only getting my things and Bravecat, Caitlin. Lauren will be here."

"Come, Caitlin. Help me pack," Lauren tried to distract her. But Caitlin could tear her gaze away from the headless corpse in the middle of the room. A dark green liquid was oozing out of it. The head, still covered in black cloth, was under the wardrobe.

"What are they?" she asked quietly.

Lauren didn't answer her. She quickly packed their gear and went to the door. Stepping over the wounded attacker, she looked at him and called to Elesar:

"And what shall we do with this?" she bent down and took of his covering.

"A Reptilian!" Elesar wondered, "What is he doing here?"

"Attacking us! He is far from his Swamp," Lauren replied.

"Obviously a mercenary..."

"And if so...who paid him to kill us?"

"Good question. That's why we're taking him with us to Valinndor for questioning."

He then approached the corpse Lauren had felled and took off his mask.

"An Orc! Lauren and he said at the same time. They both knew it was a servant of Kodran. Was it possible that Kodran was already furthering his evil plans? They didn't say anything. They hoisted the tied Reptilian onto Bravecat's back and took him with them.

Dawn was breaking, which meant a lull in the rule of the night bandit gangs on the streets of Calmera. At least until the next night.

*End of Chapter 05*