

Chapter 1: The Time I Ran Away from Home

“I was born Atticus Patterson in the city of Munk, where I lived for one day before my mother died. My mother went into labor a month early and died during childbirth, which left my father alone to raise his only child. He took me home and raised me in Iniqua, a large city in eastern Zantia. Well, my father and a fleet of servants, attendants, messengers, wet-nurses, and sycophants.

“Two brilliant and somewhat hilarious tutors educated me. I had everything a nine-year-old boy could ask for, and my dad was the most fun, fantastic, and wonderful person in my life. That was until the morning everything changed.

“We lived in the city, but my window had a flower box with purple petunias. This is noteworthy, since in Zantia most houses looked exactly the same as all the others on every street. Gray house after gray house lined the streets, each looking the exact same except for the numbers at the front. My father, being an important agent of the state, was allowed a few niceties that most citizens dared not have. Most in Zantia did their best to fit in, since being different had a way of getting you in trouble.

“When I was nine, my father normally read to me every night. We had a fleet of servants, but he always put me to bed himself. My dad was my hero, and I knew no matter what, everything was going to be all right as long as he was there.

“It’s funny what you remember. For me, I remember my father reading me stories, doing voices, and creating characters for adventures. I remember thinking about my father’s stories that morning. He loved telling them as much as I loved hearing them. That morning I heard people coming up the stairs. I had hoped they had finally found my father; he had been missing for three days.

“Pale, leaden light illuminated my large bedroom. I can still smell the mixture of fresh bread and flowers from through the window. Four burly officers barged into the house and dragged me from my room. A canvas bag was shoved over my head and cinched tight. I realized something had clearly gone awry. Pretty insightful, wasn’t I? Hooded, cold, and confused, I rode on the back of a horse with an unknown man holding me in place.

“We dismounted, and I heard a mass of people around me. The man dragged me up several stairs and I could feel the icy wind blowing through my pajamas.

“Someone roughly yanked the hood off my head and I blinked in the pale morning sunlight. Ten paces away I saw my father. He stood on the top of an elevated wooden platform, a noose around his neck, and a trapdoor underneath him. His face had been mangled and his body beaten. Matted, dried blood covered his head and a black stain streaked down his entire right side. He had been stripped to just his pants and deep purple welts covered his entire torso.

“Dad! I screamed and started running toward him.

“The guard slammed his truncheon into my belly. Pain and the inability to breathe collapsed me.

“Stop!’ came my father’s voice. ‘I’ve already told you everything I know.’

“I don’t know what I expected him to sound like, but strong and confident definitely had not been at the top of the list. He looked pitiful and helpless yet sounded as commanding as ever. I later learned my father was an assassin. He had infiltrated deep within the other three countries, ferreting secrets and plots against Zantia. He had been promoted as a state assassin, with the laughable job of checking on his own government. Nobody expected him to actually do it. Their mistake. As it turned out, King Zolf liked his secrets to remain hidden.

“I gazed up at him, standing on the giant wooden gallows. Under the trapdoor was nothing but fifteen feet of empty space. We were open and exposed so the entire crowd could watch him die. Hundreds had assembled to watch. I remembered a lecture from my home tutor Yeeto on how executions by hanging worked. The rope extended from his neck, slacked down to his knees, then to the wooden beam above his head. When the rope became taut, his body weight would be enough to fracture his neck, killing him even before he could asphyxiate.

“They had brought me here to watch him die. Mortality is hard to come to grips with when you had been comfy in bed thirty minutes earlier.

“I managed to stand and look at the mob; hundreds had arrived for the execution. It didn’t matter that most of them never knew my father. People as a whole have always swarmed to see carnage. Predictably, the crowd had swollen despite the fact that many were now enlightened due to all his hard work and effort. They came to watch a man die, indifferent to his contributions to society.

“The patriarch of the state walked to the stairs, his white robes billowing in the wind behind him. He lumbered up the stairs, every movement a dramatic presentation of his self-worth. The crowd quieted.

“Malachi Patterson, you have been found guilty of high treason before the state for your crimes and lies. You have spread malice and rumors, created uprisings and rebellions, and destroyed the work of thousands of loyal state workers. I hereby sentence you to death for your crimes. Your assets and,’ he nodded toward me, ‘personal belongings now belong to the state,’ he said.

“And my son?’ my father asked.

“The patriarch then walked closely to my father, so his voice could not be overheard by the crowd.

“‘He is property of the state,’ the patriarch said. ‘He likely has been entrusted with state secrets, considering his stock. We have no choice. After you’re done dancing at the end of the rope, he will be next.’

“My father did not respond.

“The crowd, though now gigantic, remained silent. I whimpered a little but tried to remain strong for my father. The large man in white addressed the masses again.

“‘This is what happens when you disobey!’ the patriarch said to the crowd, pointing at my father. ‘This is what ingratitude and laziness earns you. If you work hard, and give to the state, you will be rewarded, but *this* is the reward to those who rebel.’

“He nodded to the maniacal manly man manually manning the lever of the trapdoor. He pulled the wooden lever.

“I screamed as I watched my father fall.

“I heard a shrill whistle which ended abruptly when the rope above my father’s head exploded from a sharp circular disc thrown from the crowd. The disc embedded into the wood after slicing through the rope. My father fell through the trapdoor to the ground. The crowd exploded into chaos.

“‘Jump down the trapdoor!’ yelled my father over the roar of the crowd.

“I sprinted toward the opening. The man in white spun, only to receive my shoulder in his stomach. The man fell over the side of the gallows, screaming.

“The crowd parted as a warhorse charged through. I scurried down the trapdoor and fell onto the muddy ground. A man jumped off the horse landing next to my father. He threw my father and me onto a second horse and we galloped away.

“‘KILL THEM! KILL THE BOY! KILL THE BOY! THE BOY!’ screeched the patriarch.

“Soldiers unloaded crossbows in our direction. The crowd received the majority of the crossbow bolts.

“I looked up and saw our savior. It was Creeya, my tutor for the last six years. He had taught me theory, tactics, and history. He knew about communications and how to conduct sales. This was my knowledge of my tutor. He was kind, funny, quirky, and always ready with some preposterous story. Nowhere had he presented himself as a disc-throwing maniac capable of rescuing people from certain death while surrounded by a legion of troops.

“Our horses galloped with soldiers closing in behind us. I had been on a horse before, but never at full gallop. My father somehow managed to keep an arm securely wrapped around me.

Sometime in the scrambling he had managed to release his arms from his ropes. I grabbed onto the pommel of the saddle and held on for dear life.

“My father’s raspy breath wheezed above the pounding of the horse. We thundered toward the city gates, only to see a wall of archers waiting for us. Neither Creeya nor my father halted.

“The gate to the city was closed, yet Creeya charged forward, his horse pushing thirty paces ahead of ours. He stood up in his stirrups and held a dagger between his palms, as if praying to the dagger. A flash of dark green light flooded into the dagger and he hurled the weapon impossibly fast. The dagger flew faster than an arrow and embedded into the thick oak gate. I still remember the dagger sticking for a split second before the explosion blew the gate into wooden shrapnel.

“Several archers were taken out in the explosion, but nearly twenty remained unloading their arrows at us. My father leaned forward, pinning me between the horse’s back and his chest, protecting me from any errant arrows. Though I could feel the jolt as an occasional arrow slammed into the horse’s flank, our beast charged onward. I also felt the sudden hammer of arrows striking my father.

“In a dozen heartbeats we passed through the gate. Though pressed against the horse, I caught sight of Creeya as he threw a handful of small metallic balls behind us. Gray fog emanated from the balls as we rode. I later learned that they actually were a condensed poison which hung in the air for a long time, ‘borrowed’ from my other tutor Yeeto. By throwing them as we passed through the gate, he prevented pursuit. Anyone trying to follow us would have to leave out of one of the other gates or wait an hour for the poison to dissipate.

“‘Where’s Yeeto?’ my father yelled.

“‘He prepared the getaway,’ yelled Creeya.

“We rode toward the nearby forest. The horses’ mouths foamed and blood oozed from their arrow laden sides. Somehow, they continued to run despite their injuries. After an agonizing fifteen minutes, Creeya finally stopped.

“He dismounted and helped me off of the giant horse. My father’s breathing had become ragged, and he collapsed forward, laying on the horse.

“I turned around and looked up at my father. I counted seven arrows buried deep in his back, and fresh blood dripped from the corner of his mouth. Yet, despite his terrible and gruesome appearance, he beamed. When he spoke, his voice was a whisper.

“‘You did it Creeya. Thank you,’ he said.

“My father smiled, and then barked a ragged, bloody cough.

“‘I was hoping for a better time and place to give this to you,’ my dad said, reaching his right hand toward his left shoulder. The skin on his shoulder appeared to melt as his hand disappeared

into the flesh. Slowly, a long, perfectly polished blade emerged. He displayed the intricately etched dagger longer than my arm, smiling.

“The man who bestowed this to me said a time would come when I would know to pass it on,’ my father said. ‘That time is now.’

“Malachi, no. He’s no Steelshifter,’ Creeya hissed. My other tutor, Yeeto, emerged from hiding, fresh horses and supplies already secured.

“Creeya is right, my friend. You’ve lost too much blood. If you even attempted this, you’d kill your son. Steelshifting is rare, and I have never heard of two from the same family. I’m sorry, Mal, but the power must go with you,’ said Yeeto.

“We don’t have time for this. I know my son, I know what he is,’ coughed my father, his breath now coming in ragged gasps. ‘Atticus, this will hurt for a moment, I am sorry. We don’t have time for the luxury of anesthetic. Take a deep breath, straighten your arm.’

“Malachi, stop,’ yelled Creeya as he lunged for the blade. Too late.

“The tip of the blade nicked my skin at my left wrist and I felt the blade plunge into me, lancing up to my shoulder. It felt as if liquid fire flowed into me. My father appeared to effortlessly push in the blade, it decreased in size as I felt it carve into my arm. I screamed as the pain exploded from my wrist to my shoulder.

“Malachi, what have you done?’ Yeeto said in horror. ‘You’ve killed him.’

“My body responded to the foreign metal. Fear, confidence, love, anger, wrath, love, hatred, bitterness, love, and finally happiness, flowed through me in a heartbeat. I felt energy flow into me, invigorating me, calming me. The impaled dagger had dissolved, as if it were made of ice, and it quickly melted into my flesh and became part of me. It felt malleable, almost liquid inside of me. I opened my eyes, and my vision seemed sharp, my senses heightened. Creeya and Yeeto stared, momentarily unable to speak, awestruck.

“A second-generation Steelshifter. It’s not possible,’ Yeeto whispered.

“Creeya’s pale face had beads of sweat. ‘What . . . what are you?’ he asked.

“He’s just a boy, and he needs your help,’ wheezed my father, his skin gray, each breath rattling in his chest. ‘Atticus, you have more strength than you know. Work hard, listen to Creeya and Yeeto, they will help you. Be safe, be smart, and let no one limit you. But right now it’s time to run. You need to run and run and keep running. Running will keep you safe, for now. But remember, there are more important things than safety. Someday you will stop running to face the darkness and make a stand, but that day is not today,’ he said. He paused, hearing something in the distance.

“I love you, Atticus,’ my dad said to me.

“I love you too, Dad,’ I said, tears welling.

“Protect him, Creeya, make him strong and fierce,’ Dad said.

“You know I will,’ said Creeya.

“Take care of him, Yeeto, and make him wise and compassionate,’ Dad said.

“I will,” said Yeeto.

“My dad looked down at me, the corners of his bloodied mouth coming to a smile. I could just barely hear the sound of running horses in the distance. He reached down and touched my face.

“My father then pushed himself up in his saddle.

“I will miss the stories,’ he said to me, so softly I could barely hear it.

“Before Creeya, Yeeto, or I could protest, he charged toward the approaching horses.

“That was the last time I ever saw my father.

“Atticus, Creeya, it’s time to go,’ said Yeeto.

“Tears streamed down my face. It was all I could do to not fall off Creeya’s horse. My father, my rock, my hero had escaped his execution only to run back toward his doom. We rode as fast as we could. Ten minutes later, we heard an explosion while we fled. A furious shockwave passed through us. I knew then that my father had died. Creeya slowed to a trot. Yeeto followed his lead.

“He was a great man,’ said Yeeto.

“We stopped for a short time, staring vacantly back toward the city. We heard no horses following us.

“He didn’t even get to die on his own horse,’ Creeya said with a sigh, patting the neck of the horse he rode. What’s the plan?”

“We have to leave,’ said Yeeto.

“No scat, genius. I mean where to?’ asked Creeya.

“Suliad,’ said Yeeto.

“Three refugee humans from Zantia, going to Suliad? Zolf has been sending humans to kill creatures from Suliad for the last two hundred years. Humans are greeted with hatred and mistrust. I think I like my chances better against the troops,’ said Creeya.

“Let’s go,’ urged Yeeto.

“I suppose I should mention here why Creeya and Yeeto had such trepidation surrounding my father’s actions. Steelshifters have a unique Talent. Once imbued, they can shape the metal within them into anything, as long as the object is still attached to themselves. If the metal leaves the body, then the Steelshifter must undergo the excruciating reinsertion of the blade, and trust me, once was enough. Steelshifters can form a shield, a lock pick, scissors, or a hidden blade that can never be lost. However, the trait comes with dangers, and only after one has been verified by several tests does one even consider the final imbuing of steel. People showing the Steelshifter trait might actually reject the metal when imbued, resulting in pain, and loss of life or limb. So my tutors had good reason to doubt my father. Having my dad thrust a magical dagger qualifies as abnormal, but as you may have guessed, ‘not the norm’ will be a reoccurring theme for me.

“Slicy’s Rule #12: Abnormal does not mean better.

“We rode on. I rode with Creeya on his horse Simon as Yeeto led onward. We maintained a driving pace for the next week. Yeeto explained that messenger falcons had surely been sent out throughout the kingdom by now and all the neighboring cities would be on the lookout, thus we continued our trek by night, sleeping during the day, avoiding people, and slowly making our way to Suliad.”

Chapter 2: Trust

Slicy stopped his storytelling to take a long drink from his water flask. He had agreed to tell his entire life's story to the group as they traveled. Granted, he loved telling stories, though Cameron, the leader of the group, made it clear that he wanted Slicy gone. Cameron knew his past, and if Slicy's story did not convince the rest in the group he should stay, he would have to leave.

Slicy's storytelling pierced the silence of the post-midnight darkness. Riding on the road at night dissuaded most travelers. However, after a hard two days the group had become accustomed to trusting Cameron's lead. Cameron had halted only to rest the horses and eat enough to keep going. He knew the Dark King would be after them. They had just vanquished the wivari and the bozrac that had been sent to kill them all, and Jayde and Sarah were the first Chosen to find one another in two hundred years.

"Are we going to ride all night long? My butt's getting sore," asked Jayde.

"Yes, Jayde. You'll get used to riding with time, but for now we have to put more distance between us and Grandeur. Besides, our vampire leader can see perfectly even with just the hint of moonlight tonight," replied Marie.

"Well great for him, but I still feel like I'm gonna crash into a tree any second," said Jayde. "Maybe conjuring Fang into a glowing cat will help." With this, Jayde concentrated on the white bozrac riding next to her in her saddlebag. Normally, Fang the bozrac looked like a small white cat, but after Jayde's conjuring she started emitting a bright blue light. As a conjurer, Jayde could alter a creature's appearance, but more than that, with the power of her will she could transform one object into another, limited only by her imagination and her reservoir of will. Yow Li, her conjuring teacher, said he had never seen such potential in his life. For the moment, she satisfied herself by altering the appearance of Fang, the bozrac.

"I have some anti-sun cream for the journey," said Cameron, "but considering how we left Grandeur, haste and secrecy are vital. We'll travel at night for the next few days. It'd be best if anyone traveling to Grandeur had no news of a group hastily traveling in the opposite direction."

"If you're getting low, I can always conjure you some more sun cream," Jayde said, while pointing Fang in different directions to illuminate the surrounding trees.

"Jayde, I don't mind you altering my colors and fur, but being a living torch is quite annoying," said Fang.

"Sorry, Fang," Jayde said. She concentrated and the light vanished.

“No be much to see here. Me just see tree and tree and tree. No see good rock to eat, just trees. Trees no be good for much,” said Marl. As a rock troll, Marl could alter his form into a myriad of different shapes and creatures. He often blended into the background as a stone, but currently he trotted alongside Jayde as a large, rocky dog.

With a blur, two pixies from Sarah’s shoulders zipped next to Marl to join the conversation.

“Well, Marl, that may not be completely factual. Sarah, being part dryad, has plant abilities that may be beneficial,” said John. The two tiny pixies, John and Lucy, stayed continuously at Sarah’s side.

“I doubt that,” Sarah said. “I’ve never been able to do anything with trees. In fact, I still don’t think I have any magical ability, unless you count my ability to tell where the next Chosen is located.”

“Sarah, you underestimate your potential,” chirped Lucy, the other tiny pixie hovering by her shoulder.

The group finished resting and began mounting their horses. Cameron and Marie moved a short distance from the group and spoke in hushed tones as the rest of the group prepared to move.

“So, what’s the plan, Cam?” Marie whispered.

“We keep trekking toward Verrara,” he said.

“That’s not what I meant. I want to know what we’re going to do about—” she said.

“About Slicy, I know. I know. I said I would let him tell his side of the story. He makes me just as nervous as you, but he saved Jayde’s life. Whether we like it or not, *she* is a Chosen and said he stays. She might be impetuous and quick to judge, but her decisions as a Chosen stand. She *chose* to hear his story. We have to respect her decision. We’ll hear him out and let the group decide as planned,” said Cameron.

“And I can kill him if he has an agenda all his own?” she asked.

“Keep that temper of yours in check. On the other hand, if he does betray us . . .” Cameron paused. “Well, then you’ll have to kill him before I do. For now, we’ll just listen to his story like everyone else.”