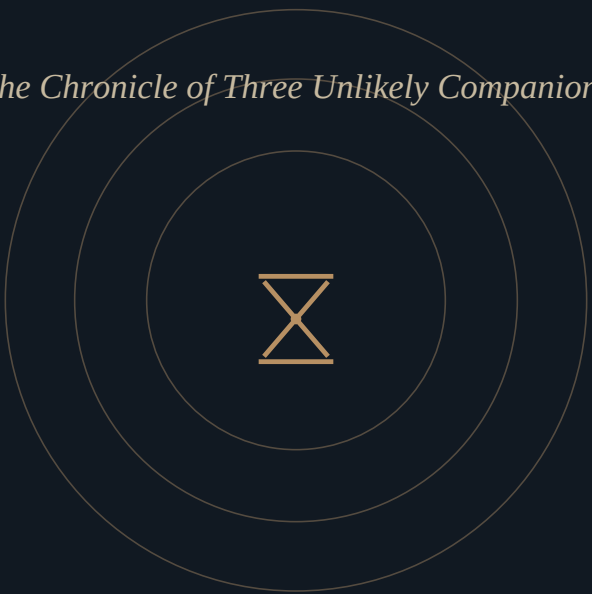
AN ORIGINAL FANTASY CHRONICLE

Stone, Feather & Time.

The Chronicle of Three Unlikely Companions



VOLUME I — THE BEGINNING

Rumors · The Price of Freedom

A STORY IN PROGRESS

CHAPTER I · VOLUME ONE

Rumors

By the time the city walls appeared on the horizon, the sun had already begun its descent.

The last rays of daylight stretched across the surrounding plains, painting the distant towers in shades of amber and gold. From afar, the city looked almost peaceful. Its stone walls rose proudly above the landscape, banners fluttered from watchtowers, and thin columns of smoke drifted lazily into the evening sky.

Adris had learned not to trust appearances.

Cities, much like people, tended to become considerably less impressive once you got close enough to smell them.

He adjusted the leather satchel hanging from his shoulder and glanced toward the enormous figure walking beside him.

“Well, Eiden, there it is. Civilization.”

Eiden followed his gaze toward the city.

“Indeed.”

“Try to sound a little more excited. We’ve been walking for days.”

“I am uncertain what response you expect.”

“Oh, I don’t know. Enthusiasm? Joy? Perhaps a heartfelt declaration about the beauty of human architecture?”

Eiden observed the walls for several seconds.

“The masonry appears structurally adequate.”

Adris sighed.

“Beautiful. Truly moving.”

Their journey had begun several days earlier, after encountering a merchant whose stories had proven far more interesting than his merchandise. The man claimed to have heard reports of strange individuals appearing around a distant city. Creatures that walked upright and spoke like humans, yet possessed the unmistakable features of animals.

Beastmen, some called them.

Others preferred less flattering names.

Naturally, Adris had been fascinated.

In a world where magic had only recently begun to emerge from generations of suppression, unusual phenomena were becoming increasingly difficult to distinguish from elaborate inventions. Every village seemed to have its own supernatural mystery, and every drunken traveler claimed to have witnessed something impossible.

Most such stories amounted to little.

But occasionally, one contained something worth investigating.

And Adris had never been particularly good at ignoring an unanswered question.

Beside him, Eiden continued walking with the steady rhythm of someone who had no reason to worry about exhaustion. His body was an intricate combination of stone and metal, its many components moving with a precision that still fascinated Adris, despite the years they had spent together.

Where an ordinary traveler might have complained about the journey, Eiden had remained almost entirely silent.

Adris, unfortunately, had no such luxury.

“My feet are killing me.”

Eiden looked down at him.

“You have made that observation several times.”

“Because they continue to hurt.”

“Would you prefer to rest?”

“We’re practically there.”

“We were practically there when you made the same statement forty minutes ago.”

Adris glanced at him.

“Have you been counting?”

“Yes.”

“Of course you have.”

The mage shook his head, although a faint smile remained on his face.

Traveling with Eiden was an unusual experience. He could understand complex subjects remarkably quickly, yet ordinary expressions and social conventions often left him puzzled. He seemed to grasp the mechanics of a conversation far more easily than the feelings behind it.

Adris found the contrast endlessly entertaining.

Sometimes, he wondered whether Eiden found him equally confusing.

Probably.

As they approached the gates, the road became increasingly crowded. Merchants guided loaded wagons toward the entrance, farmers argued over the price of grain, and travelers hurried to reach the city before nightfall.

Eiden’s presence attracted attention almost immediately.

A young boy stopped walking and pointed toward him.

“Mother! Look at that!”

The woman accompanying him followed his gaze.

Her expression changed.

“Come along,” she whispered, pulling her son closer.

“But what is it?”

“Don’t stare.”

The boy continued looking over his shoulder as his mother hurried him away.

Adris watched the exchange with mild amusement.

“Well, that went better than expected.”

Eiden turned toward him.

“She appeared frightened.”

“Yes, but she didn’t scream or call for the guards. I’d consider that an improvement.”

“I do not understand why my appearance produces such reactions.”

Adris looked up at his companion.

“You’re a walking mountain of stone and metal, Eiden. Most people aren’t accustomed to meeting someone like you.”

“That does not explain why they are afraid.”

“People tend to fear things they don’t understand.”

Eiden considered his answer.

“Do you fear things you do not understand?”

Adris laughed.

“Me? That’s usually when things start getting interesting.”

“That is not necessarily a rational response.”

“Never claimed it was.”

They continued toward the entrance.

Two guards stood beside the main gate, checking travelers and occasionally inspecting their belongings. One was an older man with a weathered face and a thick beard. The other appeared considerably younger and was visibly struggling to remain interested in his duties.

As Adris approached, he caught part of their conversation.

“I’m telling you,” the older guard insisted, “the butcher saw it himself.”

The younger guard rolled his eyes.

“Here we go again.”

“Fur covering its arms, claws on its hands, eyes like an animal. And it was walking upright!”

“Perhaps your butcher needs spectacles.”

“And what about the tail?”

“Perhaps he needs fewer drinks.”

The older guard frowned.

“You never believe anything.”

“And you believe everything.”

Adris slowed slightly.

His expression changed almost imperceptibly.

“Eiden,” he murmured.

“I heard them.”

“Well, isn’t that convenient?”

“Their conversation does not establish the truth of the rumor.”

“No, but it establishes that people are talking about it here.”

“That was already our assumption.”

“Yes, but now it’s a slightly better assumption.”

Before Eiden could respond, the older guard noticed them approaching.

“Next! Names and business!”

Adris immediately straightened his posture.

The casual expression he had worn moments earlier gave way to a composed, courteous smile. His shoulders relaxed into the practiced bearing of someone accustomed to speaking before professors, administrators, and people who believed themselves considerably more important than everyone else.

He approached the guards and offered a respectful nod.

“Good evening, gentlemen. My name is Adris Novas, and this is my traveling companion, Eiden. We seek accommodation for the evening and intend to conduct some research during our stay. I trust that poses no inconvenience.”

The older guard barely acknowledged the introduction.

His attention had settled entirely upon Eiden.

“What in the gods’ names is that?”

Adris maintained his smile.

“As I mentioned, sir, his name is Eiden.”

“I heard the name. I’m asking what that thing is.”

There was a brief silence.

Adris’s expression remained courteous, although something in his eyes grew noticeably colder.

“My companion is a person, sir. I would be most grateful if you addressed him accordingly.”

The guard raised an eyebrow.

“A person? That’s a pile of rocks.”

“Stone and metal,” Eiden corrected calmly.

The younger guard leaned forward, examining him with obvious fascination.

“Can it understand us?”

“I can,” Eiden replied.

The young guard flinched.

Adris inclined his head slightly.

“As you can see, gentlemen, communication should present no difficulty.”

The older guard scratched his beard.

“Is it dangerous?”

Adris glanced toward Eiden before answering.

“He possesses considerable physical strength, certainly. However, I assure you he has neither the inclination nor the intention to cause harm. We are merely travelers.”

Eiden nodded.

“That is correct.”

The guard seemed unconvinced.

“And what sort of research brings you here?”

Adris folded his hands behind his back.

“We have recently encountered several rather intriguing accounts of individuals possessing both human and animal characteristics. I understand there may have been sightings in this region, and I would be interested in determining whether these reports possess any factual basis.”

The younger guard laughed.

“You’re looking for beastmen?”

“That would appear to be the term most commonly employed, yes.”

“What are you, some kind of monster hunter?”

“Good heavens, no.”

Adris sounded almost offended by the suggestion.

“My interests are purely academic. Should such individuals exist, I would much prefer a civil conversation to an unnecessary confrontation.”

The guard shrugged.

“Well, whatever you say. Just don’t cause trouble.”

“You have my word.”

After another brief inspection, the older guard finally stepped aside.

“Fine. You may enter. But if your... friend breaks anything, you’ll be paying for it.”

“Naturally. Thank you for your assistance, gentlemen. I wish you both a pleasant evening.”

Adris offered one final polite nod before walking through the gate.

Eiden followed.

They had scarcely made it twenty paces into the city when Adris released a long sigh.

“Gods, what a pain.”

Eiden turned toward him.

“Did the interaction distress you?”

“Not exactly. Just exhausting.”

“You appeared comfortable throughout.”

“That’s called being polite, Eiden.”

“Are you not usually polite?”

“Of course I am.”

“Then why was it exhausting?”

Adris looked at him.

“Because there’s a difference between being polite and having to explain to a grown man that my best friend isn’t a decorative boulder.”

Eiden remained silent for a moment.

“I do not believe I resemble a decorative boulder.”

Adris burst into laughter.

“That’s what bothers you about that conversation?”

“I was attempting to understand the comparison.”

“Forget it.”

Eiden looked back toward the entrance.

“The guard’s description of me was inaccurate.”

“Which part?”

“He referred to me as a thing.”

Adris’s smile softened.

“Yeah. People can be idiots.”

“I am aware that I am not human. I do not understand why his words were unpleasant.”

Adris glanced toward him.

“Unpleasant?”

Eiden appeared to consider the term.

“I believe so.”

“Huh.”

“Is that incorrect?”

“No, no. Not at all.”

Adris thought for a moment.

“Sounds like he offended you.”

Eiden lowered his gaze slightly.

“Offended.”

“Yeah. You didn’t like being treated that way.”

“I did not.”

“Then there you go.”

Eiden seemed unsatisfied with the simplicity of the explanation, but he said nothing more.

Adris didn’t press him.

There were some questions Eiden needed to answer for himself.

The city beyond the gates was considerably livelier than either of them had expected.

Narrow streets twisted between tightly packed buildings, their upper floors leaning so closely together that they nearly touched overhead. Merchants shouted their prices from market stalls, children darted between pedestrians, and the occasional carriage forced entire groups of people to flatten themselves against the walls.

The air carried the scent of freshly baked bread, spices, burning wood, and the less pleasant odors of a city containing far too many people.

Adris looked around with obvious interest.

“Not bad.”

Eiden observed the crowded street.

“There are many people.”

“Excellent observation.”

“I was commenting on the population density.”

“Even better.”

“Why do humans willingly inhabit such crowded environments?”

Adris considered the question.

“Trade, protection, employment, convenience... Take your pick.”

“Would smaller settlements not provide greater comfort?”

“Depends on what you’re looking for.”

Eiden watched two merchants arguing over the price of a barrel.

“These individuals do not appear comfortable.”

Adris followed his gaze.

“No, but they look very committed to being miserable.”

They continued walking.

Despite his relaxed demeanor, Adris occasionally adjusted the collar of his clothing, ensuring that the faint purple markings extending toward his neck remained concealed.

They were becoming increasingly difficult to hide.

What had begun as a strange consequence of an experiment had gradually become a permanent part of his existence. The markings had spread slowly over the years, accompanied by symptoms that no physician, scholar, or magical specialist had been able to explain.

The Academy had given the condition a name.

Progressive Magical Poisoning.

Adris had never been particularly fond of it.

Naming something, after all, was not the same as understanding it.

He had accepted the likelihood of his own death long before leaving the Academy. The uncertainty surrounding his condition bothered him considerably more than the prospect of dying itself.

There were still questions he wanted answered.

And while he remained capable of walking, speaking, and conducting his research, he intended to pursue them.

“Adris.”

Eiden’s voice interrupted his thoughts.

“Hm?”

“Do you believe the rumors are true?”

Adris glanced around the street.

“I think there’s something behind them.”

“That is not the same as believing them.”

“No, it isn’t.”

“Then why did we travel here?”

Adris smiled.

“Because we don’t know.”

Eiden tilted his head.

“That is sufficient justification?”

“For me? Absolutely.”

He gestured toward the surrounding buildings.

“Think about it. If these beastmen really exist, we’re looking at something extraordinary. Are they a naturally occurring species? The result of magical interference? Some kind of transformation? And if it’s a transformation, is it reversible?”

Eiden listened attentively.

“You have already developed several hypotheses.”

“Of course.”

“Without examining any evidence.”

“That’s why they’re hypotheses, Eiden.”

“Some appear rather speculative.”

“Well, forgive me for trying to have a little fun.”

Eiden considered the remark.

“Is research enjoyable to you?”

Adris stopped walking and stared at him.

“Eiden.”

“Yes?”

“We’ve known each other for years.”

“Correct.”

“Have you ever seen me happier than when something makes absolutely no sense?”

Eiden remained silent.

Then he answered.

“No.”

“Exactly.”

Adris resumed walking with a satisfied smile.

After several more minutes, they reached a small intersection where a modest inn stood between a tailor’s shop and a merchant selling dried herbs.

A weathered wooden sign swung above its entrance. Warm light shone through the windows, accompanied by the muffled sounds of conversation and laughter.

Adris stopped.

“That’ll do.”

Eiden examined the establishment.

“Are we stopping for the night?”

“Eventually. First, I’d like to hear what the locals have to say.”

“Why here?”

Adris pointed toward the windows.

“An inn is practically a marketplace for rumors. Travelers, merchants, locals... Get enough people together, give them something to drink, and someone will start talking.”

“Alcohol reduces judgment.”

“Exactly.”

“Would that not make their accounts less reliable?”

Adris grinned.

“Now you’re getting it.”

Eiden stared at him.

“I do not believe I am.”

“Don’t worry about it.”

Adris approached the door, then paused.

“Actually, one thing.”

Eiden looked toward him.

“Yes?”

“Try not to scare anyone.”

“I have no intention of frightening anyone.”

“I know, I know. Just... perhaps don’t stand directly behind people without announcing yourself.”

“Why?”

“Because the last man nearly fell out of his chair.”

“He was not looking where he was going.”

“Eiden.”

“Yes?”

“Please.”

The construct considered the request.

“Very well.”

“Thank you.”

Adris pushed open the door.

Warm air washed over them, carrying the rich smell of roasted meat, freshly prepared stew, and burning firewood.

The common room was crowded. Merchants occupied several tables near the windows, a group of travelers argued over a game of cards, and an elderly musician played an enthusiastic but rather questionable melody beside the fireplace.

A few patrons glanced toward the entrance.

Then they noticed Eiden.

The conversations nearest the door gradually faded.

Adris pretended not to notice.

He approached the counter, where a middle-aged innkeeper was polishing a wooden cup.

“Good evening, sir. Forgive the interruption. Might you have a room available for the night?”

The innkeeper looked up.

His eyes moved from Adris to Eiden.

Then back to Adris.

“One room?”

“One will suffice, thank you.”

The man hesitated.

“Does your... companion need a bed?”

Adris smiled courteously.

“No, although I would appreciate accommodations spacious enough for him to move comfortably. I assure you he is perfectly capable of looking after himself.”

The innkeeper studied Eiden for a moment.

Eiden returned his gaze.

“Good evening,” the construct said.

The innkeeper blinked.

“Right. Good evening.”

He cleared his throat.

“Well, I suppose we can manage that.”

“Splendid. And might I trouble you for a meal as well?”

“Stew and bread. Three copper pieces.”

“That sounds delightful.”

Adris placed the coins on the counter.

As the innkeeper collected them, Adris spoke again.

“Actually, sir, there is another matter I was hoping you might assist me with.”

The man looked up suspiciously.

“What sort of matter?”

“My companion and I have traveled here after hearing some rather unusual accounts concerning individuals with animal-like characteristics. I understand they are sometimes referred to as beastmen.”

The innkeeper’s hand stopped moving.

For a moment, his expression became difficult to read.

“Beastmen?”

“Indeed.”

The man glanced toward the other patrons before lowering his voice.

“What business do you have with them?”

Adris noticed the change immediately.

He kept his own expression perfectly composed.

“Nothing untoward, I assure you. I am a researcher by education, and such phenomena are of considerable interest to me. I merely hoped to determine whether the stories possess any truth.”

The innkeeper studied him.

“And what would you do if they did?”

“That would depend entirely upon the circumstances,” Adris replied. “I would certainly appreciate an opportunity to speak with one, provided they were willing.”

The man remained quiet.

Behind Adris, Eiden observed the conversation without interrupting.

Finally, the innkeeper leaned forward.

“Listen, young man. I don’t know where you heard those stories, and frankly, I don’t much care.”

He lowered his voice further.

“But I’d advise you to be careful who you ask.”

Adris raised an eyebrow.

“May I inquire as to why?”

The innkeeper glanced toward the room once more.

“Because not everyone around here appreciates strangers asking questions about that sort of thing.”

Adris considered his words.

“I see.”

The innkeeper straightened.

“Your stew will be ready shortly. Take whichever table you like.”

“Of course. Thank you for your time, sir.”

Adris stepped away from the counter and made his way toward an empty table near the fireplace.

Eiden followed closely behind.

Once they were far enough away from the innkeeper, Adris sat down and leaned back in his chair.

“Well,” he murmured, “that was interesting.”

Eiden remained standing beside the table.

“The innkeeper appeared reluctant to discuss the subject.”

“Very reluctant.”

“Does that concern you?”

Adris glanced toward the counter.

“A little.”

“Should we reconsider our investigation?”

Adris looked back at him.

Then he smiled.

“Eiden, my friend, we’ve barely arrived.”

“That does not answer my question.”

“No, I suppose it doesn’t.”

Adris folded his arms.

“Think about it. We arrive in a city because of some ridiculous stories about beastmen. The guards have heard of them, the innkeeper clearly knows something, and suddenly everyone’s acting like we’ve asked about state secrets.”

Eiden considered the information.

“The rumors may be more credible than we initially believed.”

“Precisely.”

“Alternatively, the subject may be associated with something dangerous.”

“Also possible.”

“Then we should proceed cautiously.”

Adris nodded.

“Absolutely.”

Eiden looked at him.

“You are smiling.”

“Am I?”

“Yes.”

Adris chuckled.

“Can’t help it.”

For a moment, Eiden remained silent.

Then he asked a question.

“Do you feel afraid?”

Adris looked up.

“Of what?”

“Whatever may be responsible for the innkeeper’s reaction.”

Adris considered the question.

“Not particularly. Why?”

Eiden lowered his gaze toward the table.

“I am uncertain.”

Adris waited.

The construct took several moments before continuing.

“I believe I would prefer that nothing happened to you during our investigation.”

Adris’s expression softened.

“Well, that’s nice of you.”

“I do not know whether that is the appropriate description.”

“Sounds like you’re worried about me.”

Eiden considered the suggestion.

“Perhaps.”

Adris smiled.

“Well, don’t be. I’ll be fine.”

Eiden stared at him.

“You cannot know that.”

“True.”

“Your previous investigations have frequently resulted in injuries.”

“That’s a little unfair.”

“Three weeks ago, you attempted to examine an unstable magical formation and lost consciousness.”

“An unfortunate complication.”

“Before that, you—”

“All right, all right. I get it.”

Adris laughed, raising his hands in surrender.

“Gods, you’re starting to sound like my professors.”

Eiden remained silent for a moment.

Then, quite seriously, he answered.

“Your professors were frequently concerned about your safety.”

Adris let his head fall back against the chair.

“You’re never going to let me win one of these arguments, are you?”

“I was unaware we were arguing.”

“Of course you were.”

Eiden pulled out the chair opposite him and carefully examined its wooden frame.

After a moment’s consideration, he decided against sitting.

Adris noticed.

“Probably a good call.”

“I believe the chair would break.”

“Almost certainly.”

They settled into a comfortable silence.

Around them, the inn gradually returned to its usual rhythm. Conversations resumed, mugs clattered against tables, and the old musician continued his relentless assault upon the concept of melody.

Adris rested his chin against one hand, occasionally glancing toward the other patrons.

Somewhere within this city, there might be creatures unlike anything he had encountered before.

Perhaps they were born that way.

Perhaps magic had transformed them.

Perhaps there was an explanation nobody had considered.

Whatever the truth, he wanted to understand it.

But there was something else now.

The innkeeper’s reaction had made one thing clear: the people of this city knew more than they were willing to admit.

And Adris had spent two years at the Academy learning precisely how much trouble could be hidden behind a closed door and an unwilling answer.

He smiled faintly to himself.

Eiden noticed.

“What is amusing?”

“Nothing.”

“You appear pleased.”

“Just thinking.”

“About the beastmen?”

“Among other things.”

Eiden paused.

“Adris.”

“Hm?”

“Do you believe we will find one?”

Adris looked toward the window.

Beyond the glass, the last traces of daylight had disappeared, leaving the streets illuminated by scattered lanterns.

He thought about the merchant’s stories, the guards’ conversation, and the innkeeper’s sudden reluctance.

Then he looked back at Eiden.

“I think,” Adris answered, “that we’ve come to the right place.”

And with that, he reached for the bowl of stew the innkeeper had just placed before him.

“Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’m starving.”

Eiden observed him.

“You said that an hour ago.”

“Yes, Eiden.”

“And two hours before that.”

“Yes, Eiden.”

“Would it not have been preferable to eat earlier?”

Adris picked up his spoon.

“Would it not have been preferable for you to let me enjoy my dinner?”

Eiden fell silent.

Adris took his first mouthful of stew.

For the first time in several days, he looked genuinely content.

Outside, the city continued with its ordinary evening affairs, entirely indifferent to the arrival of two strange travelers.

For now, their investigation consisted of little more than rumors and unanswered questions.

Neither of them knew what they would discover.

Nor did they know how much their lives might change because of it.

But somewhere beyond the warmth of the inn, behind the crowded streets and guarded conversations, there was a story waiting to be uncovered.

And Adris Novas had never been particularly good at leaving a mystery alone.



CHAPTER II · VOLUME ONE

The Price of Freedom

The stew had gone cold.

Adris had been so occupied listening to the conversations around him that he had barely touched his food. Across the table, Eiden remained perfectly still, observing the room with an attention that occasionally made nearby patrons uncomfortable.

“You’re doing it again,” Adris muttered.

“Doing what?”

“Staring at people.”

“I am observing.”

“Yes, well, people generally dislike being observed while they’re eating.”

Eiden turned toward him.

“Yet you have been listening to their conversations for the past twenty minutes.”

“That’s different.”

“How?”

Adris opened his mouth, considered the question, then returned to his stew.

“Just eat something.”

“I do not require sustenance.”

“Then let me eat something.”

Eiden fell silent.

For a while, neither spoke.

Across the room, a group of merchants had begun discussing the increasing cost of transporting goods through the eastern district. One complained about damaged equipment, another about missing workers.

The third mentioned a name.

Ezekiel.

Adris raised his eyes.

“...and I’m telling you, the man’s making a fortune,” one merchant complained. “Half the warehouses are using his workers now.”

“Well, they’re cheap,” another replied.

“Cheap? They’re practically free!”

The third merchant laughed.

“That’s what happens when you get desperate enough to sign one of his contracts.”

Adris slowly lowered his spoon.

Eiden noticed.

“Have you heard something relevant?”

“Possibly.”

“What?”

“A name.”

“Whose?”

Adris glanced toward the merchants.

“Someone who apparently has a rather profitable business.”

Eiden followed his gaze.

“Should we speak with them?”

“Not yet. I’d rather hear what they say when they don’t know anyone’s listening.”

“That seems dishonest.”

“It’s called discretion, Eiden.”

“Is that another word for dishonesty?”

Adris sighed.

“Sometimes I really wish you weren’t so good at asking questions.”

The merchants continued talking.

One of them, a heavyset man wearing an expensive-looking coat, leaned across the table.

“Have you ever actually seen the workers?”

His companion shrugged.

“Once or twice.”

“Then you know why they’re so cheap. Half of them aren’t even human.”

The other merchant lowered his voice.

“Keep it down. You know how people get about that.”

“About what? They’re animals, aren’t they?”

Adris’s expression hardened.

Eiden turned toward him.

“Adris.”

“Hm?”

“Your expression has changed.”

“Has it?”

“Yes.”

“Then I suppose I’m not doing a very good job of hiding it.”

“Are you angry?”

Adris considered the question.

“A little.”

“Why?”

“Because I dislike people who decide what someone is worth based on what they look like.”

Eiden looked toward the merchants again.

“Does that include me?”

Adris stared at him.

“Of course it does, you idiot.”

“I see.”

A pause followed.

“Was that intended as an insult?”

“Affectionately.”

“I do not understand.”

“You’ll get used to it.”

Adris stood, adjusted his coat, and approached the merchants’ table.

“Gentlemen, forgive my interruption. I couldn’t help overhearing part of your discussion.”

The heavyset merchant looked up.

“Can we help you?”

“I certainly hope so. My companion and I are visiting the city for academic purposes, and I found your remarks concerning the eastern district rather intriguing.”

The merchant raised an eyebrow.

“Academic purposes?”

“Indeed. I am particularly interested in the unusual individuals reportedly employed in that area.”

The three exchanged glances.

“You mean the beastmen?”

“If that is the designation commonly used, yes.”

The merchant leaned back.

“Then you’ll want Ezekiel’s warehouses. Eastern district, near the old canal.”

Adris offered a grateful smile.

“You have my thanks, sir. Might I inquire as to the nature of his business?”

“Labor contracts,” the man answered. “He gets workers. Other people pay him to use them.”

“And the workers themselves?”

The merchant laughed.

“They get what their contracts say they get.”

Adris maintained his pleasant expression.

“I see. How very enlightening.”

He thanked the men and returned to Eiden.

“Well,” he muttered, sitting down, “I think we’ve found tomorrow’s destination.”

Their room was on the second floor.

It was small, poorly furnished, and smelled faintly of damp wood. A narrow bed stood against one wall, accompanied by a crooked table and a single chair.

Eiden examined the chair.

“I do not believe the furniture was designed to accommodate me.”

Adris dropped his satchel onto the bed.

“You’re telling me.”

“I could remain downstairs.”

“No, you couldn’t. You’d frighten someone just by standing in a corner all night.”

“That seems unreasonable.”

“Welcome to society.”

Eiden settled carefully on the floor beside the window.

Adris removed his coat and sat on the edge of the bed, rubbing his forehead.

The familiar headache had returned.

He closed his eyes for a moment, waiting for the discomfort to subside.

“Are you unwell?” Eiden asked.

“Nothing unusual.”

“That does not answer my question.”

“Then yes. A little.”

“Would you prefer to rest?”

“That’s generally what beds are for.”

Eiden remained silent.

Adris glanced toward him.

“Something bothering you?”

“I have been considering what the merchants said.”

“About Ezekiel?”

“Yes.”

Eiden paused.

“They described the workers as animals.”

“People do that.”

“But they also described them as capable of signing contracts.”

Adris looked at him.

“Go on.”

“If these individuals can understand agreements, perform labor, and make decisions, why would their physical characteristics determine their value?”

Adris smiled faintly.

“That’s a very good question.”

“Then why do humans behave as though the answer is obvious?”

“Because admitting they’re wrong would be inconvenient.”

Eiden looked toward the darkened window.

“I find their reasoning unpleasant.”

Adris studied him for a moment.

“Sounds like you’re getting angry again.”

“Perhaps.”

“Well, you’ve got a good reason.”

Eiden turned back.

“Does anger always require a reason?”

“No. But it helps to understand where it’s coming from.”

Eiden seemed to consider that answer.

Eventually, Adris lay down.

“Get some rest, Eiden. Tomorrow might be interesting.”

“I do not sleep.”

“Then pretend.”

“Why?”

Adris pulled the blanket over himself.

“Because I’m trying to.”

Eiden looked back toward the window.

“Very well.”

Outside, the city bells marked the passing hours.

Neither of them knew what waited in the eastern district.

But for entirely different reasons, both were beginning to care.

The following morning, the eastern district greeted them with the unmistakable noise of industry.

The streets were wider here, built to accommodate heavy wagons carrying timber, stone, grain, and other materials. Warehouses lined the canal, their walls darkened by soot and years of exposure to the elements.

Laborers hurried between buildings beneath the watchful eyes of overseers.

Adris stopped near a wooden sign displaying the names of several commercial establishments.

“Ezekiel’s Labor Services,” he read aloud.

Eiden examined the building indicated by the sign.

“It appears to be a warehouse.”

“That doesn’t mean it isn’t an office.”

“Why would an office require such a large storage area?”

Adris looked at him.

“That’s what we’re here to find out.”

As they approached, something caught Eiden’s attention.

“Adris.”

“Hm?”

“Look.”

Across the street, a small group of workers was unloading a wagon.

At first glance, they appeared ordinary enough.

Then Adris noticed the ears.

One worker had long, fur-covered ears protruding from beneath a worn cap. Another possessed a thick tail that moved uneasily behind him as he carried a crate. A third had patches of dark fur across his hands and neck.

Adris stopped walking.

“Well...”

The workers moved with practiced efficiency, carrying heavy loads under the supervision of a man holding a ledger.

One stumbled.

The overseer immediately shouted.

“Careful with that! Any damage comes out of your wages!”

The worker hurried to recover his balance.

Adris watched silently.

Eiden turned toward him.

“They are real.”

“So it would seem.”

“Does this satisfy your curiosity?”

Adris continued observing the workers.

“Not even remotely.”

The overseer shouted again, ordering the group back to work.

Adris’s expression grew thoughtful.

“Actually, Eiden, I think we’ve stumbled across something considerably more interesting than the rumors suggested.”

“What is that?”

Adris glanced toward the warehouse.

“A question.”

Eiden tilted his head.

“Which question?”

Adris looked back at the workers.

“Why do none of them look particularly happy to be here?”

They spent the next several minutes observing the warehouse from a distance.

The workers were remarkably varied. Some possessed tails, others claws or feathers, and a few had faces that bore little resemblance to those of ordinary humans.

Yet they wore clothing, used tools, and communicated with one another just like anyone else.

Adris found himself increasingly uncomfortable with the word beastmen.

“Eiden, what do you make of all this?”

“They appear to be performing manual labor.”

“Yes, I noticed.”

“The conditions seem unfavorable.”

Adris glanced toward him.

“What makes you say that?”

“They are being reprimanded for minor mistakes. Several appear exhausted, and their supervisor has threatened to reduce their compensation.”

Adris smiled faintly.

“You’re getting rather good at this.”

“At what?”

“Noticing things.”

“I have always been capable of observation.”

“Right. Silly me.”

They approached a woman carrying a basket of damaged tools. A pair of feline ears protruded from her hair.

“Good morning, madam,” Adris greeted her. “Might I trouble you with a question?”

The woman stopped.

Her ears flattened slightly.

“What do you want?”

“Merely some information. My companion and I are unfamiliar with this establishment.”

She glanced toward Eiden, then back at Adris.

“Then keep it that way.”

Before Adris could respond, she continued walking.

He watched her leave.

“Well, that was encouraging.”

“She appeared frightened,” Eiden observed.

“Yes.”

“Of us?”

Adris shook his head.

“I’m not sure.”

A nearby overseer called for the woman to hurry.

She immediately quickened her pace.

Adris followed her with his eyes.

“No,” he murmured. “I don’t think it’s us.”

They continued farther along the street.

Near the main entrance, a noticeboard displayed several documents beneath a prominent heading.

LABOR AGREEMENTS — EZEKIEL’S SERVICES

Adris stepped closer.

The contracts described wages, accommodation fees, equipment expenses, and various penalties for failure to meet expected performance.

At first glance, the language was almost respectable.

But the longer Adris read, the less respectable it became.

“Well, that’s clever,” he muttered.

Eiden looked toward the documents.

“What is?”

“The workers are paid, technically. But almost everything they need is charged back to them.”

“Would that not prevent them from accumulating money?”

“Exactly.”

“Then how do they repay their debts?”

Adris stared at the board.

“That’s the interesting part.”

Eiden waited.

Adris’s expression darkened.

“I don’t think they’re supposed to.”

A sudden metallic crash interrupted them.

Across the courtyard, a wagon had come to a halt beside one of the warehouses. Its rear wheel sat crookedly against the axle, preventing the driver from moving it.

An overseer was shouting at someone crouched beneath the vehicle.

“Well? Can you fix it or not?”

A voice answered from beneath the wagon.

“I could if you stopped kicking it!”

Adris turned.

That was new.

A moment later, the speaker emerged.

He was unmistakably avian.

Black feathers covered much of his body, while a sharp beak and dark eyes gave him the appearance of an enormous crow. Yet his proportions were strangely human, with arms and legs beneath worn work clothes. A pair of feathered wings rested against his back.

Adris stared.

The crow noticed.

“What?”

Adris blinked, realizing he had been watching rather intently.

“My apologies. I did not intend to be discourteous.”

The crow regarded him suspiciously.

“Then don’t stare.”

“A reasonable request.”

Eiden stepped closer.

“The wheel appears damaged.”

The crow looked toward him.

Then stopped.

His eyes widened.

For several seconds, he appeared to forget the broken wagon entirely.

“What... are you?”

Eiden looked down at him.

“My name is Eiden.”

The crow tilted his head.

“That’s not what I asked.”

“No. But it is how I prefer to introduce myself.”

Adris suppressed a smile.

The crow slowly circled Eiden, inspecting the joints between his stone and metal components.

“Those aren’t ordinary hinges...”

Eiden watched him.

“No.”

“And there’s no visible power source.”

“Correct.”

The crow leaned closer.

“How are you moving?”

Eiden paused.

“I am uncertain.”

The crow stared at him.

Then, unexpectedly, he laughed.

“You’re uncertain?”

“Yes.”

“That’s ridiculous.”

“Perhaps.”

The crow’s gaze sharpened with interest.

“Can I see your arm?”

Eiden glanced toward Adris.

Adris raised an eyebrow.

“Why are you looking at me? It’s your arm.”

Eiden considered this.

Then he extended it.

The crow examined the articulated metal with fascination.

For the first time since arriving in the district, Adris saw one of the workers smile.

“Remarkable,” the crow murmured.

He carefully examined the connection between Eiden’s forearm and wrist.

“Stone, metal... but there’s something else. The movement doesn’t make sense.”

Eiden tilted his head.

“Does that trouble you?”

“Of course it does.”

“Why?”

“Because I want to know how it works!”

Adris laughed.

“Well, Eiden, I believe you’ve found someone who shares my particular affliction.”

The crow looked toward him.

“You’re sick?”

Adris paused.

“Ah. No, I meant curiosity.”

“That’s a strange way to describe it.”

“You have no idea.”

The crow turned back to Eiden.

“Does your arm ever get stuck?”

“Occasionally. Dirt and other materials can accumulate between the components.”

“And what do you do?”

“Adris removes them.”

The crow looked at the mage.

“You maintain him?”

“Among other things, yes.”

“Huh.”

The bird examined Adris’s hands, then Eiden’s joints once more.

“You must have some interesting tools.”

“A few,” Adris admitted.

“What about the rest of him? How do the larger pieces connect? Can you replace damaged components? Does he feel pain?”

“One question at a time,” Adris replied, smiling.

The crow hesitated.

“Right.”

Adris offered a polite nod.

“Forgive me. I don’t believe we’ve been properly introduced. My name is Adris Novas, and you’ve already met Eiden.”

The crow looked between them.

For a moment, his enthusiasm seemed to disappear.

“Names aren’t very useful around here.”

Adris noticed the change.

“Nevertheless, I find them preferable to referring to people by their appearance.”

The crow remained quiet.

Then he answered.

“Gabriel.”

Adris smiled.

“A pleasure to make your acquaintance, Gabriel.”

“Eiden,” the construct added, “is my name.”

Gabriel glanced toward him.

“I know. You already told me.”

“I wished to acknowledge your introduction.”

Gabriel stared at him.

Then his beak opened in what Adris assumed was amusement.

“You’re a strange one.”

Eiden considered the remark.

“So I have been told.”

A shout interrupted them.

“Gabriel!”

The crow immediately stiffened.

The overseer was approaching.

“What do you think you’re doing?”

Gabriel stepped away from Eiden.

“Examining something.”

“You’re supposed to be fixing that wagon!”

“I was. Then these two—”

“I don’t care!”

The man’s voice echoed across the courtyard.

Adris’s smile vanished.

“Excuse me, sir.”

Adris stepped forward, placing himself between Gabriel and the overseer.

The man turned toward him.

“What?”

“I believe the interruption was largely my responsibility. I approached this gentleman while he was attending to his work, and I would be grateful if you directed any complaints toward me.”

The overseer frowned.

“This doesn’t concern you.”

“On the contrary, sir. I would consider it most discourteous to allow another person to be reprimanded for an inconvenience I caused.”

Gabriel stared at him.

The overseer folded his arms.

“He’s wasting company time.”

“Then I sincerely apologize for the interruption. May I ask whether his compensation is calculated by the hour or by the completed task?”

The overseer blinked.

“What?”

“I merely wish to understand the nature of the inconvenience. If I have caused a financial loss, I would prefer to know its extent.”

The man’s expression hardened.

“Listen, boy, I don’t know who you think you are—”

“Adris Novas,” Adris interrupted pleasantly. “As I was attempting to explain.”

Behind him, Eiden took a step forward.

The heavy sound of stone against the courtyard floor attracted the overseer’s attention.

He looked up at the enormous construct.

Then back at Adris.

“Are you threatening me?”

Adris’s expression remained composed.

“Certainly not, sir. My companion has simply taken an interest in our conversation.”

Eiden looked toward him.

“That is correct.”

The overseer seemed to reconsider his approach.

“Well, you can take your interest elsewhere.”

“Naturally. Although I was hoping to speak with the individual responsible for this establishment.”

The man narrowed his eyes.

“Why?”

“I have a professional interest in the services offered here, particularly the unusual nature of your workforce.”

Gabriel looked sharply toward Adris.

The overseer studied the young mage’s clothing, his mannerisms, and the satchel hanging from his shoulder.

Finally, he spoke.

“You’re looking for the owner?”

“If he is available, yes.”

The overseer hesitated.

Then he gestured toward a building overlooking the courtyard.

“Wait there.”

He turned toward Gabriel.

“And you. Get that wagon moving. Now.”

Gabriel lowered his head.

“Yes, sir.”

As the overseer walked away, Adris glanced at the crow.

“My apologies. I hadn’t intended to cause you difficulties.”

Gabriel gave him a strange look.

“You really shouldn’t have done that.”

“Why ever not?”

Gabriel looked toward the office.

“Because now he’s going to come out.”

Adris followed his gaze.

“Who?”

Gabriel’s voice became quieter.

“Ezekiel.”

The office door opened several minutes later.

A well-dressed man emerged onto the steps, accompanied by the overseer. His clothing was immaculate, a striking contrast to the dust-covered workers surrounding him.

He surveyed the courtyard before approaching Adris and Eiden.

“I understand you gentlemen wished to speak with me.”

Adris straightened.

“Indeed. Might I presume I have the pleasure of addressing Mister Ezekiel?”

“You do.”

The man extended his hand.

“And you are?”

“Adris Novas, sir. An independent researcher. My companion is Eiden.”

Ezekiel shook his hand.

“Charmed. And what brings a researcher to my rather humble establishment?”

“I have recently encountered several accounts concerning individuals possessing both human and animal characteristics. Naturally, I was intrigued.”

Ezekiel smiled.

“Ah. Our workers.”

“Precisely.”

“Quite remarkable creatures, aren’t they?”

Adris maintained his expression.

“Remarkable individuals, certainly.”

Something flickered across Ezekiel’s face.

“Of course.”

His gaze shifted toward Eiden.

“And your companion? I don’t believe I’ve seen anything quite like him.”

“Nor have most people,” Adris replied.

“Fascinating. Is he some form of artificial servant?”

Eiden answered before Adris could intervene.

“I am not a servant.”

Ezekiel raised an eyebrow.

“Ah. My apologies.”

Adris’s smile remained courteous.

“Eiden is a completely autonomous individual. His existence is rather difficult to classify, but I assure you his independence is beyond question.”

“How interesting.”

Ezekiel studied the construct with renewed curiosity.

“Tell me, does he require payment?”

Adris paused.

“I’m afraid I don’t follow.”

“For his services, naturally. A being of such strength must be tremendously useful.”

Eiden looked toward Adris.

The mage’s expression remained unchanged.

“His assistance is given entirely of his own volition, Mister Ezekiel.”

“Of course. Of course.”

Ezekiel chuckled.

“Forgive me. Occupational habit.”

He gestured toward his office.

“Perhaps you’d care to discuss your questions somewhere more comfortable?”

Adris glanced toward Gabriel.

The crow had returned to the wagon, although he was clearly listening.

“That would be most agreeable, sir.”

Eiden followed him inside.

Gabriel watched them disappear through the doorway.

Then he returned to work.

Ezekiel’s office was considerably more comfortable than the courtyard.

Bookshelves lined the walls, and a large wooden desk occupied the center of the room. Several ledgers lay open beside a carefully arranged collection of documents.

Adris immediately noticed the contrast.

Outside, the workers struggled beneath the morning sun.

Inside, the owner sat comfortably among polished furniture and expensive decorations.

“Please, gentlemen, make yourselves comfortable,” Ezekiel offered.

Adris took a seat.

Eiden remained standing.

Ezekiel glanced toward him.

“Does your companion not wish to sit?”

“The furniture would likely be damaged,” Eiden explained.

“Ah. Naturally.”

Ezekiel settled behind his desk.

“Now, Mister Novas, what precisely would you like to know?”

Adris folded his hands.

“I understand that your establishment employs a considerable number of anthropomorphic individuals. I was hoping you might explain the nature of their employment.”

“Certainly. We provide labor opportunities to individuals who would otherwise struggle to find respectable work.”

“Through contractual agreements?”

“Exactly.”

“And these agreements are entered into voluntarily?”

Ezekiel smiled.

“Every worker signs a contract.”

“I see. And may they terminate these agreements at their discretion?”

“Provided their outstanding obligations have been fulfilled.”

“Obligations?”

“Accommodation, food, equipment, administrative expenses, transportation... Maintaining a workforce is hardly inexpensive, Mister Novas.”

Adris nodded slowly.

“Of course. And their wages are sufficient to cover these expenses?”

Ezekiel hesitated.

“That depends upon the individual.”

“Naturally.”

Adris looked toward one of the ledgers.

“And should their expenses consistently exceed their earnings?”

Ezekiel’s smile diminished.

“Then the debt remains outstanding.”

“For how long?”

“Until it is repaid.”

Adris remained silent.

Beside him, Eiden spoke.

“Then an individual whose debt increases faster than their earnings cannot leave.”

Ezekiel turned toward him.

“That is an unfortunate possibility.”

“Yet you continue charging them.”

“They agreed to the terms.”

Eiden considered this.

“An agreement that cannot be fulfilled does not appear to provide a meaningful choice.”

Ezekiel’s expression hardened.

“I assure you, my contracts are entirely lawful.”

Adris inclined his head.

“I have no doubt that considerable effort has been devoted to ensuring they are.”

For a moment, the room fell silent.

Ezekiel leaned back in his chair.

“Forgive me, Mister Novas, but I am beginning to wonder whether your interests are truly academic.”

Adris smiled politely.

“I assure you they are. However, understanding a phenomenon requires examining the circumstances surrounding it.”

“And what phenomenon are you examining, precisely?”

“The existence of your workers, initially.”

“Initially?”

Adris glanced toward the window.

Beyond it, several laborers were moving heavy crates beneath an overseer’s supervision.

“I confess that their circumstances have raised additional questions.”

Ezekiel followed his gaze.

“I see.”

The warmth disappeared from his voice.

“Allow me to make something clear. I provide employment, accommodation, and security to individuals whom much of society refuses to accept. Without establishments such as mine, many would find themselves destitute.”

“An admirable intention,” Adris replied.

“Indeed.”

“Although I imagine its merits would depend rather heavily upon whether those individuals are permitted to leave.”

Ezekiel’s smile vanished.

“Careful, young man.”

Eiden moved slightly closer to Adris.

The mage noticed, but continued speaking.

“Forgive me, sir. I mean no disrespect. I merely find it difficult to reconcile the concept of voluntary employment with an obligation that may be impossible to discharge.”

Ezekiel stood.

“I believe our conversation has reached its conclusion.”

Adris rose as well.

“Naturally. I thank you for your hospitality.”

Ezekiel looked toward Eiden.

“And I would advise you both to refrain from interfering in matters that do not concern you.”

Adris offered a courteous nod.

“Your advice is duly appreciated.”

They left the office without another word.

Only once they were outside the warehouse gates did Adris finally exhale.

“Well, that went terribly.”

Eiden looked toward him.

“You remained polite.”

“Yes, and he still hated every second of it.”

“His explanation was contradictory.”

“Very.”

“Should we inform the authorities?”

Adris glanced toward the warehouse.

“Perhaps. But first, we need to understand how much influence he has and whether anyone would actually intervene.”

Eiden considered this.

“I find myself wanting to return.”

“To ask more questions?”

“No.”

Adris turned toward him.

Eiden looked down at his hands.

“I do not know what I would do. I only know that I dislike what is happening inside.”

Adris’s expression softened.

“Sounds like anger again.”

“Perhaps.”

“Well, try not to tear the place apart just yet.”

Eiden looked at him.

“Would that be wrong?”

Adris hesitated.

“Not necessarily. But it might make things worse for the people we’re trying to help.”

Eiden slowly nodded.

“I understand.”

They had almost reached the main street when a familiar voice called from behind them.

“Hey. You two.”

Adris turned.

Gabriel stood near the entrance to a narrow alley, glancing nervously toward the warehouse.

The crow gestured for them to approach.

Adris exchanged a look with Eiden before walking over.

“Gabriel. A pleasure to see you again.”

“Keep your voice down.”

“My apologies.”

Gabriel looked toward the street.

“You spoke to Ezekiel.”

“We did.”

“What did you ask him?”

“About the contracts. The workers. Their circumstances.”

Gabriel gave a humorless laugh.

“And what did he tell you?”

“That everyone signed willingly.”

“Of course he did.”

The crow leaned against the wall.

“That’s what he always says.”

Adris studied him.

“Gabriel, may I ask you something?”

“Depends.”

“Did you enter into such an agreement yourself?”

Gabriel became quiet.

For a moment, he watched a pair of ordinary crows perched upon a nearby rooftop.

Then he answered.

“No.”

Eiden tilted his head.

“Then why are you here?”

Gabriel looked back at them.

“Because someone sold me.”

Adris’s expression changed.

“Sold you?”

Gabriel nodded.

“A man named Matthew Solaris. He taught me things. Words, tools, how people worked...”

His voice became quieter.

“I thought he was helping me.”

Eiden remained motionless.

“And then?”

Gabriel glanced toward the warehouse.

“Then I ended up here.”

Adris took a moment before answering.

“I see.”

“No,” Gabriel replied. “I don’t think you do.”

The mage accepted the correction without protest.

“Perhaps not.”

Gabriel looked between them.

“So what now? You’re going to ask a few more questions, write everything down, and leave?”

Adris remained silent.

It was a fair question.

He had traveled here looking for an extraordinary biological phenomenon, not a system of exploitation hidden behind contracts and commercial language.

Yet the distinction hardly mattered now.

“I cannot promise you a solution,” Adris finally answered.

Gabriel stared at him.

“That’s reassuring.”

“However, I would very much like to understand your circumstances before deciding what can be done.”

“Why?”

Adris looked at him.

“Because you deserve better than this.”

Gabriel said nothing.

For several seconds, the only sound was the distant noise of the marketplace.

Then Eiden spoke.

“Gabriel.”

The crow turned.

“Yes?”

“Would you like to leave?”

Gabriel opened his beak.

Then closed it.

His eyes wandered toward the rooftops, where the two crows had taken flight.

“I...”

He hesitated.

“I don’t know.”

Adris watched him carefully.

Gabriel lowered his gaze.

“I don’t even know where I’d go.”

Eiden considered the answer.

“That is understandable.”

Gabriel looked surprised.

“Is it?”

“Yes. I frequently do not understand what I want either.”

For the first time since approaching them, Gabriel seemed to relax.

Only slightly.

But enough.

After a moment, he stepped away from the wall.

“I have to get back before someone notices.”

Adris nodded.

“Of course.”

Gabriel turned to leave, then stopped.

“If you really want to know what’s happening here...”

He glanced toward the warehouse.

“Come back tomorrow.”

Adris inclined his head.

“We shall.”

Gabriel disappeared into the alley.

Eiden watched him leave.

“Adris.”

“Hm?”

“Do you believe he trusts us?”

Adris shook his head.

“Not in the slightest.”

“Then why did he speak to us?”

The mage looked toward the rooftops.

“Because I think he’s running out of people he can speak to.”

They continued walking.

And for the first time since arriving in the city, Adris found himself thinking less about the mystery of the beastmen’s existence...

...and more about the lives they were forced to lead.

