

Linstan made his way through the foliage, careful neither to harm himself nor the protective wall of shrubbery hiding the tracks. He had left his bag in the tunnel behind him. The bag would mark him as a messenger; would mark him for dead. Although the messages he held were probably benign letters to reassure loved ones of the sender's safety, a soldier wouldn't hesitate to kill or detain him; wouldn't want to risk leaking a communication from rebels or spies.

Once upon a time, this railway was the most important route in all of the five kingdoms. It was the heart and the lifeblood of Delvia, running an endless circuit that took a week to complete. Once a week, when the train made it to their station, every person from every town across the five kingdoms would gather to collect their letters from loved ones. Because of this one week circuit, Delvia became known as "The Realm of 7 Days."

The Realm of 7 Days was a prosperous realm. Goods, food, messages, and thereby money, flowed freely between the kingdoms. The wealth of supplies and the ease of availability gave very little reason for unrest. The train was the sole reason for the realm's success and, for this reason, it was very strange that such an integral part of the society was known simply as "the train."

The train brought prosperity, but most importantly, it brought news. It was very common for families to be spread throughout the five kingdoms. In a family business, one sibling could enjoy the balmy atmosphere of Caldos while working the farm, another could run a merchant stall in the sparkling winter beauty of Thalden, and still another could keep track of finances in the Persheen mountains. These simulpra families had become such a common part of society that to have an entire family in one location was rare. Messages between the kingdoms were so numerous and so crucial that they took up three separate cars on the train. To be one of the sorters who worked in shifts around the clock on these cars was a highly esteemed appointment. Failing delivery of one of these messages could have dire consequences and one error meant the immediate termination from the position. To say nothing of the shame and exile that would follow. And so it was fitting that the last message the train had ever delivered had been news of The War.

The people of Delvia had enjoyed such a long-standing peace that here wasn't even a written recollection, let alone a living one, of having been in a war. They were sure there must have been wars in the past. They had guards in place to keep out the wars raging in neighboring realms, and someone must have conquered their lands initially, but no one knew how or when it had happened. And since this was the only war they knew of, they called it "The War."

Now Linstan used the deserted track to deliver messages between kingdoms. It's desertion had allowed it to become a safe haven. The herbage that surrounded it had become wildly overgrown, building a barrier that protected the tracks from the outside world. The train, which powered itself with inert energy, had been left to run wild forever. The ever-running train cleared the overgrowth from the tracks, thereby creating a train-shaped tunnel that was easy to travel, albeit dangerous to those with an unwary ear. The tunnel was the last place in the realm that was beautiful and peaceful and Linstan relished every moment he spent inside.

He hated coming to Megaris. They lived under the guise of freedom, of peace and honor.

Brutish violence was the way they enforced that peace. Linstan was lucky when he didn't have to pay with the black eye that served as the customary exit fee. The guards seemed unwilling to let you leave without suffering some damage to your face. He would usually need an extra day or two to heal since a freshly bruised face was the mark of a Megarisian, or worse, a refugee from another realm. While the other kingdoms were more civilized than Megaris, none of them welcomed travellers and would take care to let visitors know that on no uncertain terms.

Because of the difficulty both entering and exiting Megaris, this was where most of his messages were delivered. People preferred the risk of an undelivered message to paying the

travelling fee of a broken nose. While he couldn't blame them, he did wish they would do their business elsewhere. Like Thalden and its snowy, barren lands that could only coax a few guards to patrol its borders.

Linstan was relieved when he made it all the way into the first town on his list without incident. People in Megaris travelled in numbers to deter guards from hassling them. He would be able to make the rest of his stops with companions and avoid injury.

After delivering the first letter, he bought provisions at the closest store. He knew that he would be headed back to the safety of his tunnel tomorrow evening after he'd dropped off the next two letters. The most dangerous part would come soon, when he stole the outgoing mail. It was left for him to deliver, but it was also watched by the guards. They were just as wary of news leaving their kingdom as they were of it coming in.

The next two messages, though sent from different families in different kingdoms, were going to the same address. Linstan had only delivered multiple letters to one other address. The Cranton family wrote each other regularly and their parents lived in Persheen. This meant Linstan delivered at least two letters to them every time he visited. They were the only people he saw often enough to be familiar.

He stayed the night with the family of a fellow messenger. He couldn't imagine ever leaving Megaris as a citizen. The brutal, paranoid guards suspected everyone trying to leave of being a spy. He also couldn't imagine being a successful Megarisian messenger. The people of Megaris had the crest of the kingdom on their wrists which made it rather difficult to blend in as a native of another kingdom. Travelling to Megaris always made Linstan glad that he had not been born there.

The travel to the next town had been frustrating. His companions were staunch nationalists who lectured Linstan on the importance of showing pride. One of them actually had the crest tattooed on his face. He had been off getting provisions when Linstan had met them. He never would have joined them had he seen the face tattoo. It was nationalists such as these that were dangerous. These were the types that would call the guards if they suspected a messenger. He was glad that he only had two messages which were easy to hide in his coat. He left his unpleasant company to deliver his messages as soon as they made it past the guard.

After the large man who was the recipient of the letters invited him inside, as was customary since delivering letters in the open was suicidal, he excused himself and told Linstan to wait in the sitting room. This was strange, but sometimes people wanted to give him something for his trouble, so he walked into the sitting room and sat in a comfortable chair, messages still in hand. People usually had whatever they wanted to give him in hand when he arrived. In case of suspicious eyes, a messenger would stay at least a few minutes to give the impression of a visiting friend, but they would usually just stay in the entry way.

Then Linstan realized it. The silence. The sound of betrayal. He had been so distracted by planning how to pick up the outgoing mail, he hadn't been paying attention to how long the man had been gone. But now Linstan was aware of the void of sound and hoped that he had noticed in time.

Those working for the guard, those who would send themselves letters to entrap messengers, were not unheard of, but they were rare. Linstan had only encountered a few himself, and had been able to smell their trap and escape without difficulty.

There was a saying among travellers and messengers in particular, "A first encounter was also

a last encounter.” The reason you never heard about an encounter was not because no one had ever run into the trap before, it was because no one had survived to warn others. The idea was not to walk into a suspicious situation in the first place so as not to end up facing your last encounter.

He got up and crept toward the door and peeked through the window beside it. He saw guards still making their way down the road toward the house. This was not a relief. It said nothing of guards that could already be in place at the back door.

Linstan ran toward what he hoped would be a kitchen with a back door. As he feared, there were two guards already at the back. They were turned away from the door, apparently having a smoke break. If he was lucky, he would be able to sneak into the neighboring yard without incident.

He was not lucky. He was halfway across the yard when he heard a guard shout, “Hey!” He started running toward the fence at the back of the yard. He jumped over it and ran toward the woods ahead of him. He knew if he could make it into the woods, he would probably get away. However, there was a good stretch of field before the woods started and he didn’t know what sort of weapons the guards were carrying.

He noticed that he still had the fake messages in his hand. He was about to toss them away when he thought better of it. Being able to pass around the handwriting and address could save the lives of other messengers he might run into. He stuffed them into his inner coat pocket as he finally got to the edge of the woods.

Knowing addresses of known traps had saved his own life on several occasions, and he had even recognized handwriting on a fake letter once. It would be foolish to throw these away. The return addresses were likely also traps. Often messages did not have return addresses on the outside. Relations between some kingdoms were worse than others. Just having a letter from Thalden was a crime punishable by death in Persheen. Linstan usually discarded any “suicide notes” before he even returned to the tunnel.

Linstan collapsed on the soft grass inside the tunnel, panting until he caught his breath. He had run all the way here and his lungs felt like they might explode. The guards must have been particularly thirsty for blood because they had chased him pretty deep into the woods before finally giving up. When he had gained a lead away from them he had climbed high into a tree. He could hear them nearby, but they couldn’t find him and he eventually heard the sound of them leaving. After climbing out of the tree, he made his way back to the mail pick-up. It was left unguarded since the guards were busy looking for him elsewhere or believed he had already escaped. Not wanting to test his good luck, he checked carefully for guards laying in wait before running the whole way back to the tunnel. He didn’t want to risk any of them following him. It was a safe route as long as it remained forgotten. If guards, especially Megaris guards, started patrolling it, it would be transformed into the most dangerous place in all of Delvia overnight. He sat up and began sorting through the letters. He was glad to see most of them were for Thalden and Stoll. Stoll was his birthplace and he was glad he would be visiting home. He never had a problem entering his own kingdom, and he certainly never had to withstand violence. He had served on the guard before the war and was friends with many of the captains. The times when a young guard with something to prove caught him, he would get taken to one of his friends who would warmly greet him, and the embarrassed guard would trudge away dejected.

Only once had he needed to prove his loyalties to Stoll. And as a native citizen, that had been easy.

People from Stoll were very easy to identify, although those from other kingdoms did not know this. On the bottom of each Stollish foot, the left one, was a symbol that had been tattooed at birth. The symbol represented the family they belonged to and only those born in Stoll could receive it. While immigrants were allowed to get markings to show they were permanent residents loyal to Stoll, only those born in the kingdom with native or loyal parents were marked with the official ink. It was only visible, glowing white, when exposed to special lights and the effect could not be duplicated.

Only those from Stoll would ever request that you check their foot to prove their loyalty. Anyone who did not ask for this was easily identified as a foreigner and was usually turned away. This simple secret made Stoll the safest kingdom in the realm.

He hoped there wouldn't be many outgoing messages when he got home so that he'd be able to stay a while.

Linstan placed the messages carefully in his bag along with the provisions he had acquired. As eager as he was for his homecoming, he had to stop in Thalden and Caldos on his way. Entering Thalden would be easy as long as he was wearing warm enough clothing to survive the horrible weather. He kept a set of clothes in the tunnel for when he stopped there. And while he didn't need special clothing to survive Caldos, travelling there came with its own list of dangers.

He stood up, slung his bag across his shoulders, and started on his journey. He smiled as he watched the ever changing pattern of sunshine and shadow on his arms as he walked. He began whistling, adding his own tune to the twittering of the birds.