

# A KING'S RANSOM



A Novella by John Gill

Illustrated by Peter Austin

# A KING'S RANSOM

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## CHAPTER 1 RESCUE

A high pitched whistle howled for a moment in his ears. Wincing, he opened his eyes and looked up at the ruffled clouds that were drifting across the sky. The early evening sun shone through in patches, intermittently throwing fluorescent red and purple light across the high city walls immediately behind him. He squinted in the harsh brightness and raised a hand to shield his face. He never had liked the sun. It must be getting late. Lifting his head up from the mossy bank on which he lay, a rush of pain forced him to lower it delicately back down again. The ground was soft and springy, and patched with blood. He lifted a finger to his scalp and it came away streaked with dark stains.

There was a struggle... he remembered being struck... two assailants: cloaked, silent. Was it two? Feeling for his coin purse, he breathed a heavy sigh as it jangled with a reassuring weight. Why hadn't they taken it?

He drifted in and out of consciousness for a while. Presently, the sun slid down behind the horizon and the temperature began to drop. He shuddered and slowly lifted himself up on his elbows. The ache in his head had subsided to a dull throb and he screwed his eyes up as he looked around. The mossy bank he lay on rolled gently down into rough scrubs and bushes, and further on into dense forest. He could make out

the road in the distance winding its way north. There was not a soul to be seen. From some unseen height, the lonely cry of a kestrel echoed through the evening air.

He gathered his strength, and tried to stand. His left leg gave way and an unbearable pain shot up his spine and made him crumple back down. Panting, he tried again, lifting his weight onto his right leg. Finally he stood, and, almost hopping, made his way to the support of a nearby stunted tree.

His memory felt vague and fuzzy, and his head still throbbed relentlessly. He looked up at the walls towering behind the bank, reaching left and right out of sight. He had his leather walking boots on, and his outdoor jacket, but he couldn't even remember what he was doing outside the city, or where he was going.

"Think, Edwin, think..." he told himself out loud. "Edwin. Edwin Greenhill. At least I have a name..." He closed his eyes, willing his mind into thought. "This morning... I woke up..." The image of his room slowly gathered in the thick murk that clouded his mind. It was such a struggle – every memory he summoned fought against him.

Leaning heavily against the tree, Edwin sat down on the grass and tried to think. There was no way he was going anywhere with his leg like this. Even getting to the road seemed an unthinkable challenge. He looked up to the top of the walls. There was not a soul in sight.

The throb in his head subsided after a while, and his thoughts returned to his room... up the stairs, above the cobbler's shop... Edwin's memory was returning, image by image. Of course! The cobbler! Bartholomew – the wiry old man who took Edwin on as his apprentice. Edwin smiled. Old Bart (as he was affectionately known around the city) was an excitable little man, with a thin white beard and not a scrap of hair on his head. An incessant chatterer, but with a heart of gold. He would be worried.

Edwin's recollections were of no use as he lay in the deepening twilight gloom. His eyelids sagged heavily, and he fought the increasing desire to sleep. Grim determination set in, and he decided that he would at least make it to the road. He may be lucky and come across a trader returning late to the city.

He cracked a dead branch from the tree to use as a makeshift crutch and pulled himself up onto his good leg. The pounding in his head started to return. He set his eyes on the road, and started to hobble towards it. The thudding grew louder.

It seemed he was actually going to make it to the road. As he drew nearer, it became obvious to Edwin that the drumming was not coming from his head. This was the sound of hooves on hard earth. A feeling of alarm rose from nowhere as he saw three riders crest the ridge of a hill to the south. He looked around, but there was no cover anywhere near. He leant his weight onto his crutch, resigned to whatever fate these horsemen brought with them.

They were not riding fast. The sun glinted off metal helmets. Edwin narrowed his eyes, peering into the middle distance as they approached. They wore helmets of the Citadel guard. Edwin relaxed. He made to shout for help, but feared it would cause him more pain. He gently raised an arm and began waving it urgently.

They saw him whilst still a fair way off, and one shouted and pointed. All three of them turned and picked up the pace as they cantered towards him. The sergeant dismounted and strode purposefully up to Edwin.

“Sir,” he began, a note of concern in his voice, “how badly hurt are you?”

Edwin glanced over at the blood-stained patch of moss. “I’ve taken a blow to my head. And I think my leg is broken, I can’t put weight on it, it hurts so much... I was attacked...” he concluded, weakly.

The guards exchanged glances. The questioner continued. “Can you tell us what happened?”

Edwin looked back to the mossy bank again, and diverted all his energies into focusing his attention onto the recent past. Dark images swam into his mind as he struggled with his memories.

“There were two men, in cloaks, dark red hooded cloaks, their faces were hidden,” he paused. “There could have been three, I don’t know.” He gave an exasperated gasp. “To be honest, I can’t even remember what I was doing out here in the scrubs in the first place.”

The guards exchanged glances again.

“We should get you back into the city and have your injuries looked at. Can you ride?”

Edwin looked around at the scrubland again. In the twilight the place had begun to exude a fresh atmosphere of foreboding.

“I will have to.” Edwin replied grimly.

After he was helped onto the back of one of the horses, Edwin and the guards turned for home, heading back to the south gate of the city.

As they trotted across the southern scrubs, Edwin tried hard to conjure up memories of his attack. What on earth was he doing out walking on his own in the scrubs? He'd never even left the city before. The only image remaining in his mind was that of the cloaked, hooded men. Everything had happened so quickly.

Once back in the city, the guards took him straight to one of the physicians. The sun had long since set and it was now completely dark. The sergeant hammered impatiently on the door, and a harassed-looking physician eventually appeared. He looked Edwin up and down briefly. “You'd better bring him in” he sighed. The guards lifted Edwin down from the horse and carried him through to the examination room.

After making sure Edwin was comfortable on the table, the physician took the sergeant by the elbow out into the ante-chamber. Edwin could hear their hushed voices, but couldn't make out what they were saying. He slid himself along the table carefully until he could just see them through the gap in the door. The sergeant pointed back at the room where Edwin lay with a forceful expression on his face, and the physician was gesturing earnestly. Finally, the sergeant dug into his pocket, pulled out a money pouch and counted out some coins which he handed to the physician.

Edwin quickly slid himself back into position on the table, breathing heavily. His mind reeled and he suddenly felt dizzy. Citadel guards? Paying for his medical attention?

The physician returned to the room, smiling kindly.

“Edwin, I hear you've been the victim of a brutal attack,” he began, pulling up a chair next to the table.

Edwin's mind raced and he surprised himself with his bold answer. “Sir, I'm only a cobbler, I fear I cannot afford your valuable services.”

The physician smiled and his eyes betrayed the slightest of fluster before he continued. “Edwin, don't worry about that, this is only an examination. Let's just have a look at you, shall we?” Edwin wasn't going to turn down the opportunity of a free medical assessment. But he continued puzzling over the exchange of coins in the ante-chamber.

The physician began gently pulling back the matted clumps of his hair. "The wound is no longer bleeding." He looked down and smiled at Edwin. "It will need cleaning and treating, to be on the safe side."

Edwin pulled away from the physician. "But sir, I told you, I cannot afford treatment, I am only a ..."

The physician cut him off. "Edwin, Edwin, please, you needn't worry about that now."

Edwin pulled himself up onto his elbows. "But I do worry about that. I will not be held to ransom." Edwin surprised himself at how far he was pushing this.

The physician sat back in his chair and paused, eyeing Edwin up. "Look, Edwin, your examination and treatment have been paid for."

"Paid for?" Edwin played his part perfectly.

The physician leant forward and sighed. "It would appear that your assailants, these cloaked men, are of particular concern to King Gauwyn."

"The King?" At the mention of the name, Edwin felt a cold chill run through him as he moved back into position on the table. King Gauwyn was renowned throughout the city for his quick temper and high expectations of his subjects.

The physician continued. "Your treatment has been paid for by the King. When you are suitably recovered, you are to be questioned about your attack."

Edwin's mind reeled again as he took in this turn of events. He felt a rising surge of panic as he considered his limited memories of the attack. What could the King's interest in these red cloaked attackers be? And besides, one doesn't simply say to the King, 'I'm sorry, I can't remember.'

The physician attended to Edwin's injuries, and gave him some lotion to rub onto his head wound. The skin of his leg had not been pierced, and after gentle pressing and manipulating, the physician concluded that it would heal well enough of its own accord. He bound it tight with splints to keep it straight.

"Now you must keep your weight off your leg – rest as much as possible, and come back to see me before this season's end. You are in no fit state to walk any great distance – my man can take you home in my carriage."

After his initial misgivings, Edwin had warmed to the physician, whose concern for his well-being was genuine. "Thank you sir, you have been most kind. I appreciate all you've done," Edwin smiled, "on the King's penny."

The physician stifled a chuckle and raised his eyebrows slightly. "I figure you'll still pay for it one way or the other though. I trust his investment will provide the information he seeks."

Edwin's smile waned, as he understood the physician's meaning only too clearly.

## CHAPTER 2

### RELIEF

**T**hank the gods! You're alive! I'm so glad to see you young Edwin. Where have you been? Oh! Look at you, all trussed like a turkey! My dear boy! What happened?"

The dancing light of lamps and torches cast long shadows through diamond-lead windows up and down the dark street. Edwin swung his bad leg out of the carriage and carefully set the foot of his crutch down on the ground. Old Bart ran out from the shop and took hold of Edwin's arm to help him down.

Edwin thanked the carriage driver, and began to hobble across the street. Despite his protestations, Old Bart helped him into the shop and sat him down. "I've been sick with worry, lad. Sick with worry. I'm so sorry - I feel absolutely terrible about all this, absolutely terrible."

"Sorry?! Dear Old Bart, you have nothing to be sorry for."

Bartholomew raised his bushy eyebrows to the top of his forehead. "But my dear boy, it was me who decided to send you out collecting accounts this morning in the Sandbridge Quarter, even though I know how it sometimes can get round there, and when you hadn't returned by lunchtime, well, I knew something awful must have happened. You've

always been so prompt and reliable." Old Bart stopped in his tracks and raised his hand to his mouth before springing off on another tangent. "You must be famished, dear boy! I've kept you some bread and cheese from tea - come through to the back and sit down. Here, the stove's still hot. I'll put the kettle on again."

He scurried through to his rooms at the back of the shop, and Edwin hobbled along behind.

Mention of the accounts triggered a light in Edwin's memory. "Accounts! Of course!" Edwin rummaged for the coin purse and held it out eagerly to Bartholomew. "Here! I have it all! None has been taken!"

"Oh, my dear boy." Old Bart stopped and smiled a warm, wrinkly smile at Edwin. "I wasn't concerned about the money." He paused for a moment before continuing, his voice subdued. "You're a good boy, Edwin. You have so much of your father in you."

Edwin's father, Gareth Greenhill, was a farmhand by trade. He and Edwin's mother, Cerys, were poor, but kind hearted folk. Edwin was their only child, and they had always dreamed of a better life for him. They bought a teaching book of letters and numbers, and by the time he came of age, Edwin could read, write, and perform arithmetic - a skill uncommon amongst his peers.

A wistful twinkle played in Old Bart's eye. "I remember when your father asked if I would take you on as my apprentice." He sighed in a melancholy fashion. Old Bart and Gareth had known each other since childhood. "I'd never had an apprentice before, but I had no hesitation. I knew it was the right thing to do." He lowered his head. "Gareth was a good friend." He paused and his thoughts went far away for a moment. He slapped his knees. "But listen to me carrying on!" He looked up and smiled awkwardly at Edwin.

"What happened to you anyway? When you didn't come back, I started asking around and no-one has seen sight nor sound of you since this morning. How did you get hurt?"

"I... uh, I was attacked," began Edwin, meekly.

Old Bart gasped. "Oh! Oh Edwin! Where? How? Who was it?"

"I was out on the scrubs," began Edwin.

"The scrubs?! Edwin, what on earth were you doing out in the scrubs?! The south gate is miles away!"

Edwin stared pleadingly at Old Bart, a note of frustration in his voice. "I don't know!" He slumped in his chair, crestfallen.

"I can't even remember leaving the shop this morning... I was hit on the head," Edwin raised a finger to the bandage, "and my leg's been broken." Old Bart's face was still drawn, stricken with horror.

Making the most of the brief silence, Edwin continued. "And the problem is, I can't remember much of what happened. All I've got is this picture in my mind – there were two, maybe three of them. They had these long, dark red cloaks with deep hoods up over their heads, so I couldn't see their faces. They were leering over me, their arms reaching out for me." Edwin sighed. "And that's all I can remember. I woke up late this afternoon, on the scrubs just outside the city wall, to the east."

"That's all you can remember?"

Edwin shrugged resignedly. "Yes. Oh, but it gets worse - I was picked up by a group of Citadel guards on horseback - praise the stars they were passing that way. They took me to the physician and paid for my medical attention. The guard told the physician that King Gauwyn wants to question me about the attack – there's something going on with these red-cloaked men and I think he's hoping I can give him information about them.

Old Bart gulped visibly. "The King?"

His gaze left Edwin and his eyes searched the room, desperately seeking something to settle upon.

"Do you think... you might... remember what happened?"

Edwin put his head into his hands. "I don't know. This has never happened to me before."

Old Bart fell silent and said nothing more for the rest of tea. He cared greatly for Edwin. A few months after Edwin moved into the rooms above Old Bart's cobbler's shop, Gareth took ill and died following a brief sickness. His mother, still fit and healthy, died in her sleep not a week later. "Of a broken heart" Edwin always said. Old Bart had no family of his own, and since Edwin's parents died, he felt quite a sense of responsibility for him.

**A**fter the tea things were cleared away and washed up, Old Bart helped Edwin up to his room. The stairs were narrow and steep, and his crutch just got in the way.

"I'll come back up in the morning and see how you're doing. But if you need anything, just bang on the floor, eh?" He smiled, and began closing the door. "Oh, and don't you go worrying about your chores." He swung the door open again and wagged a playful finger at Edwin. "It's bed rest for you, lad. We need to get you fit and healthy, and see if we can't help your memory... return..." His smile drifted a little.

"Thank you, Old Bart, you've been very kind. I'm sorry for causing all this confusion." Old Bart nodded in a melancholy fashion, and closed the door quietly.

CHAPTER 3  
INTERROGATION

After two days of bed rest, Edwin's head wound was considerably improved. His leg was also becoming less painful, but it itched terribly beneath the bindings. His memory was also returning in fits and starts, and the thought of the arrival of the King's representative no longer filled him with such dread.

Old Bart brought him up a plate of lunch.

"I hate feeling so useless! Surely there's something constructive I can do with my time? I feel awful knowing that you're down there doing everything."

"Don't you worry about me, lad, I'm coping just fine."

"But I don't want you just coping – I can work, there's nothing wrong with my hands. There was that stitch work on Mrs. Babbinger's that she brought in the other day, surely I can do that?"

Old Bart sighed in exasperation. "Oh, very well. I keep putting them to one side, and she'll be in for them at the end of the week." He paused. "And as it happens, there are some letters I need writing, and your hand is so much neater than mine. I'll bring them up for you after lunch." He

smiled fondly at Edwin, and laid his hand gently on his head. "You're a good boy, Edwin."

Two more days passed in much the same manner. Edwin had become quite good at hobbling around his room without his crutches. He was making some lunch when he heard muffled voices through the floor. He recognised Old Bart, but the other was not familiar to him.

After a brief exchange of pleasantries, he heard the door at the back of the shop click, and heavy footsteps proceed up the stairs. A brief knock sounded at his door, and without waiting for a reply, the door opened and a figure stepped into the room. He was both tall and broad, wearing plate armour and highly polished leather. He removed his helmet, which bore the insignia of the Citadel Guard.

"Edwin Greenhill?"

"Yes, sir."

"I am Captain John Fitzgerald of the Citadel Guard. I need to speak with you," he said gruffly.

"I am honoured, Captain. Please, come in, make yourself comfortable."

The Captain closed the door behind him before striding over to the fireplace.

"I am glad to see that you are recovering from your injuries," he began, and then paused. "That was quite a fall."

"Fall? Captain, I was attacked," Edwin retorted, feeling more than a little affronted.

"I know that," spat the Captain, "I mean the fall from the city walls following the 'attack'."

Edwin's mouth went dry.

"I fell from the city walls?" His heart gave a long slow thump as the Captain eyed him with suspicion. "But, I was, I thought... I don't remember..."

The Captain cut him off. "Don't waste my time Mr. Greenhill. According to my sergeant's report, he saw you on the walls, he says, talking with these... cloaked men."

The Captain paused. Edwin felt a bead of sweat linger on his forehead.

"He shouted out and ran up the inner steps, during which time a scuffle broke out, and on reaching the scene, the cloaked men had

disappeared, and you had taken a tumble over the parapet. Do you realise how inconvenient it is that nobody else was there to witness it? My sergeant could see you on the scrubs way below, and presumed you dead. He set out with his men to recover your body."

Edwin's eyes glazed over as he struggled to take in what the Captain was saying.

The Captain stared threateningly at Edwin. "I was hoping that the fact they tried to kill you would encourage you to furnish me with the details of what you and they were arguing about."

"Captain, I wish I could help you, but the blow I received to my head has affected my memory. It is coming back in patches," Edwin looked pleadingly at the Captain, "but I still do not remember everything that happened to me that day."

"So I believe." The Captain took a couple of paces towards Edwin. "But," he brought his face down to within a few inches of Edwin's and growled through gritted teeth, "if these men were just common street thugs, do you think the Captain of the Citadel Guard would be in this swill hole making small talk with a cobbler?"

As he met the Captain's gaze, Edwin saw that despite the polished armour, high rank and threatening bravado, his eyes betrayed a deep anxiety.

“Captain, I do not know what you think I have done, but everything I have told you is the truth. I am an honest man; I want to help you.”

The Captain held Edwin's stare for a moment, looking for something in Edwin's face. His eyes softened slightly and he stood up straight, returning to his place by the fire. He rocked back and forth on his toes a couple of times with his back to Edwin.

“Edwin, what do you remember?” His voice was less harsh now.

Edwin let out a long slow breath and anxiously rubbed his chin.

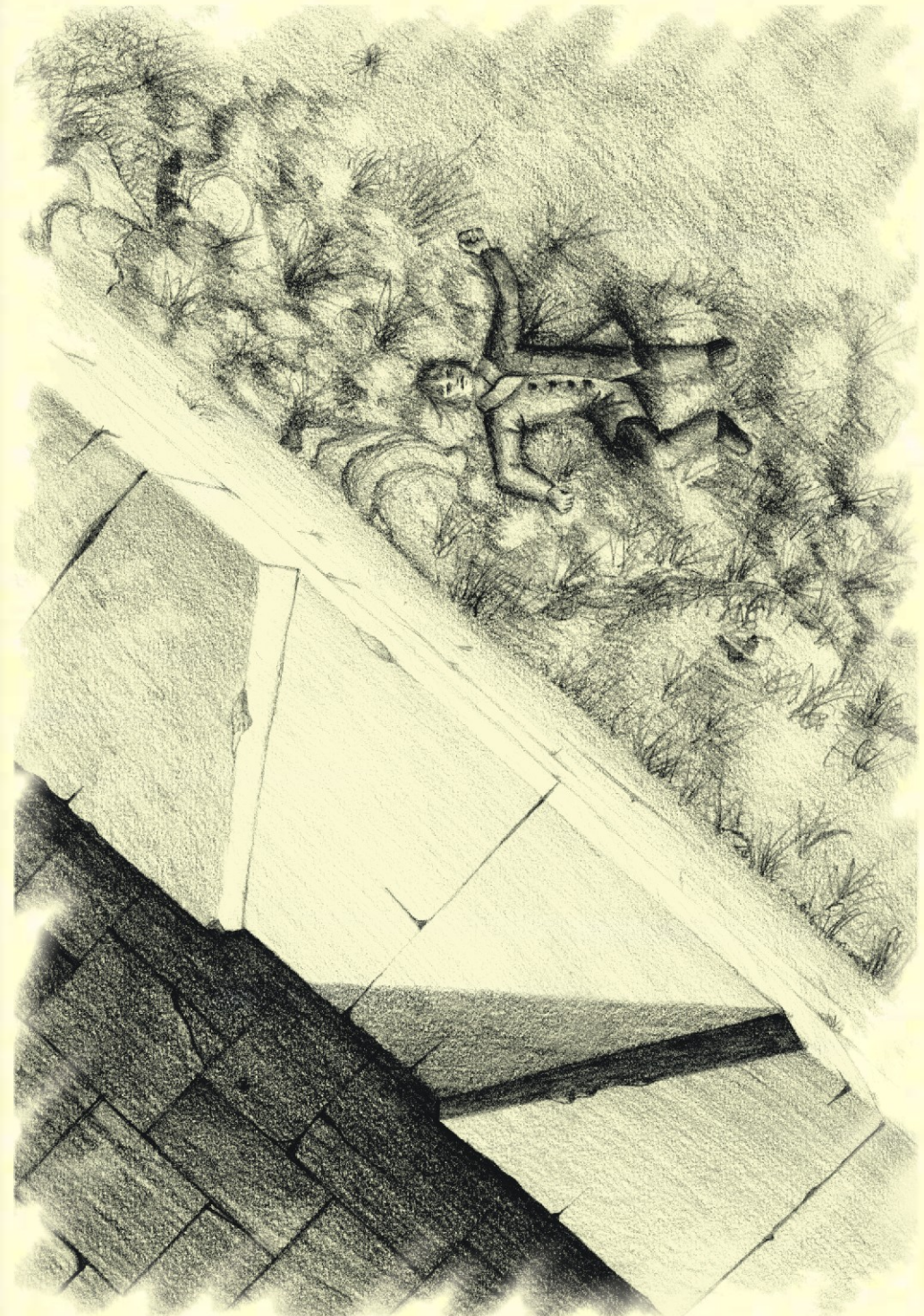
“There were two, possibly three, men, I can't be sure. They were wearing these dark red hooded cloaks, as I told your sergeant. I honestly don't remember talking with them at all. I...”

“Were they armed?” the Captain interrupted.

“Armed?” Edwin felt a pang of alarm chill his heart.

“Weapons, Edwin: swords, daggers, bows, clubs?”

Edwin winced. “No, no... no.... I don't think so... I remember seeing their hands reaching out for me. I suppose they could have been carrying weapons hidden underneath their cloaks, but no, the one who grabbed me certainly had no weapons drawn.”



"Grabbed you?"

"Yes! I remember... his arms, reaching out for me, and me trying to push him away, I was terrified..." Edwin stopped.

"The next thing I remember is waking up on the embankment... at the foot of the walls."

The Captain waited expectantly for a moment. "And that's all you can remember?"

Edwin wracked his mind. "That's all I can remember." He shrugged in resignation.

The Captain continued to rock on his toes, still facing away from Edwin. "Did they take anything?"

Edwin perked up. "No, no, that's the strange thing, I'd been out collecting accounts for Old Bart that morning, I had a full coin purse on me, and when I came to, I still had it, not a coin was taken."

"Did they take anything else? Were you carrying anything on that day that you don't usually carry?"

Edwin considered this question for a moment.

"Captain," Edwin began tentatively. "Who are these men? If, as you said, they had been street thugs, I would probably be a dead man somewhere on the eastern scrubs. If there is anything you know about them, please... I would like to know." A sudden fear flashed through Edwin's mind. "Suppose they come back again?"

The Captain's head drooped slightly as he drew a long slow breath. He turned round and faced Edwin. His eyes were once again filled with that barely concealed anxiety.

"I'm sorry Edwin, I can't tell you."

He paused as his expression melted away. Then he drew himself up again. "And there is nothing else you can tell me about them? Any insignia or identifying markings on their cloaks?"

"Markings?"

"Decorations of any kind?"

Edwin shrugged and shook his head slowly. "I'm sorry. I don't remember."

The Captain held Edwin's gaze for a moment longer, then lowered his head and nodded slightly. "Thank you for your time, Edwin. You never know - they may actually have been nothing but street thugs." He strode towards the door. As he pulled it open, he turned round and looked directly at Edwin. "But if you remember anything, anything at all, please, ask for me at the Citadel Guard House as a matter of urgency. Tell them your name."

As the door clicked back into place behind the Captain, Edwin sat and stared into space until the sun went down. He became aware of a strange feeling that it may have been better for him to have died out on the scrubs.

CHAPTER 4  
RECOLLECTIONS

Captain John Fitzgerald was in one of the Citadel Guardhouse rooms, poring over old maps when there was a knock at the door.

"Come in." His voice was brusque.

An anxious looking Man-at-Arms took three steps into the room, and stood to attention.

"Yes?" The Captain didn't look up.

"Captain, sorry for the intrusion, but that man, Greenhill. Well, he's here. Downstairs."

The Captain glanced up. "Thank you. Bring him up."

The man swung round and marched out of the room, returning moments later with Edwin. The Captain indicated a chair, into which Edwin was ushered.

Edwin glanced at the maps scattered over the table; maps of the Citadel. The Captain casually rolled them up and stacked them in a cupboard in a corner of the room.

"Thank you for coming to see me, Edwin," began the Captain. He nodded to the Man-at-Arms who turned and left the room, closing the door behind him. "You have some more information for me?"

The Captain threw himself into a chair opposite and dragged it up to the table. He pulled a pencil from his pocket and spread a sheet of wrinkled notepaper on the table.

Edwin let out a long, slow breath.

"What you said about markings, the other day, got me thinking. I keep getting these... flashbacks... about the attack. There *were* markings on their cloaks."

The Captain went deathly still, his gaze boring a hole into the table.

"I can't remember exactly what they looked like but..." Edwin ran his finger around his cuff. "They were round the ends of their sleeves. They were some kind of zig-zags."

The Captain continued staring at the table in front of him.

"Anything else?"

Edwin cleared his throat. "No... well... there was... it's a bit strange, but..."

He shuffled uncertainly in his chair before continuing.

"I'm not normally given to this kind of thing, but I had this exceptionally vivid flashback to the attack whilst I dreamt last night. I mean, it's really odd, it must be my mind just playing tricks on me or something..." Edwin paused, hoping the captain would interrupt, but he didn't.

"I was on the city walls, like you said, and there were three of them there in red cloaks. I don't remember where they came from. One minute there was no-one. Next minute, I turned around, and they were there. One of them approached me, and I could see under his hood. His eyes were like..." Edwin stopped and swallowed hard. "Well... big... and all black, like an animal's." There was a sharp crack as the tip of the captain's pencil snapped. "I mean, it's ridiculous, isn't it? I mean, it was a dream after all." Edwin cleared his throat nervously. He looked intently at the Captain, whose knuckles were white from clenching. The captain kept his head down, eyes on the paper, and said nothing. Edwin continued tentatively.

"Anyway... so, in this dream, they came towards me, and I was about to run away, but the nearest one said, 'Edwin, you must listen to me, your life is in danger'. It must have been a dream, I mean, how could he have known my name?" Edwin paused. "He had something the matter with his skin too. It seemed all... well, kind of... grey..." He paused again. "And then I woke up in a cold sweat."

Edwin attempted a dismissive laugh, which didn't really work. "I guess I'm not as recovered from that blow to the head as I thought."

Edwin watched a bead of sweat glisten on the Captain's forehead. It slid down his cheek. The Captain took a deep breath, and spoke quietly.

"I think you have a very active imagination, Edwin. No doubt your mind is still troubled by the unpleasant events of that day. Dreams are our minds' way of working such situations out of our system. I would pay no further thought to it."

The Captain forced an encouraging smile at Edwin then scraped his chair back slowly. "But the information you have supplied about the marking on their cloaks is significant. It will help us in our investigations – you were right to come in. If anything more comes back, you know where to find me. I will see you out."

As Edwin made his way back home, his mind gnawed at this conversation. There was something that the Captain wasn't telling him.