

Under the Streets of Ashagor



Under the Streets of Ashagor

*Under the Streets of Ashagor*

*by*

*Vincent Lakes*

Web: <http://www.vincentlakes.com>

E-mail: [vincent@vincentlakes.com](mailto:vincent@vincentlakes.com)

Cover: The Rat King II

by Kristin Reger

Web: <http://gallery.kristinreger.com/>

Published in February, 2016

Unauthorized distribution and any modifications of this intellectual property, in part or in entirety, are strictly prohibited by local and international copyright laws. Please, refer to official documentations and settings for more information. This literary work has been exclusively published for the internet audience. All commercial and non-commercial printing and/or reprinting requires a written consent of the author. An exception applies to printing for your own private use for increased reading comfort.

Copyright © 2016, Vincent Lakes. All rights reserved.

## Under the Streets of Ashagor

A stench surged from behind the door and formed an invisible wall in front of him that could have just as well been made of boulders. A burning torch in one hand and a worn saber in the other, Kaden Rakhel glanced at the people standing in a semicircle around him, strange people he did not know. They were all waiting for him to step into that gaping mouth of death and decay, possibly never to return.

"Claim your prize! Claim your freedom!" They chanted loudly, for he was a lowly orphan, an outcast. Enslaved by Rajah Ziraj at the age of eleven, when he was caught stealing in the streets of Ashagor, he was placed to serve at the palace for the rest of his short life, for slaves rarely made it far in the southern kingdoms. It was either life as a slave or death as a thief, no other options were given, but life has a strange way of twisting even the most inevitable fate. Kaden quickly made name for himself by demonstrating his incredibly nimble fingers and excellent sense of balance, and after a few years of practice he was appointed as an entertainer. Working with daggers and sabers, he presented skill that was admired even by the padishah of Saladur, the high emperor of the great southern empire. The Ziraj family was one of the most renown jewellery producers in the entire Aradea, and to maintain this status of wealth and splendour, even the slave entertainers wore silk and gems.

With all this attention and admiration, Kaden became a little too proud, a little too arrogant, and it was soon noticed by Rajah himself, the feared head of the family. At the same time, there was a large outbreak of redspot fever in the city. This dreadful disease was carried by the vicious black rats that came from the sewers, and the rumor said that somewhere in the depths of the vast underground labyrinth there was a monstrosity called the rat king. The story goes that it was nothing that resembled a regular rat, but looked more like a blob of rats grown together with entangled tails and mutated bodies. The rat king was unable to move, but it was likely hidden somewhere in the deepest, darkest part of the sewer network, and it had hundreds of black rats protecting it. That was the source of the disease, and there was a prize set for a successful hunt - either freedom for a slave brave enough to test their courage or ten gold coins for a fearless adventurer willing to risk their life. Only one signed up, and with this false signature, Kaden's days seemed numbered once again.

The boy's constantly growing cocky behavior and bold advancements toward the ladies of the palace, who found his strong and agile appearance very desirable company, had angered more

## Under the Streets of Ashagor

than one of the masters, and so, without anyone bothering to inform him about it, Kaden's name had mysteriously appeared as a volunteer in the papers of the city watch. As a slave, he had no right to deny the once promised attempt to save the city, which in itself was very honorable and gallant effort. But he was never given the choice to speak for himself as one of the masters had given out his name in pure malice, and now he had to do his best in the sewers or die by the blade of a watchman.

One of the closest girls he had in the palace, Majha, the daughter of Krifar Ziraj, was there to witness him entering the endless tunnels filled with filth of the city. The entire situation was outrageous. Majha was engaged to Darum Arub, the grand master of the goldsmith's guild, and together with Ziraj's endless supply of valuable metals, they were planning to expand down to Galandria and conquer a sizeable share of the market there as well. But there she was, following Kaden's descend into the darkness with her deep brown eyes full of sadness and longing, openly rebelling against her family.

The golden and silvery domes, the narrow alleyways and bustling bazaars all shrunk down in front of the black doorway. Distant squealing echoed from the mouth of doom, blending into silent gurgle of water. The crowd had ceased chanting, and stared at the scared boy, who now approached the unknown with the saber in his hand slightly shivering. No one ever went into the sewers, no one dared. All the wild rumors and stories of what lived under the streets of Ashagor had reached the heights of legends, but there was no man brave enough to see what was the truth behind tales - no man until now. It was a perfect situation for the Ziraj, for the only loser in this plot was the slave. If he indeed got lucky, found the rat king and slew it, the family would gain a lot of fame and respect in the city. If he failed, there was no harm done to any party that mattered, and Darum would get rid of his absurd rival in love.

Kaden stepped in and the iron door behind him slammed shut. Darkness wrapped him in its comfortless embrace, the noise of the outside world was almost completely silenced, and suddenly all the creepy crawlers of the bleak hallway seemed a lot closer. Sweat ran down on his neck, leaving an extremely irritating tingling sensation behind, as if something slimy was slithering down along the skin. Shaking his head in a furious manner, he focused on the darkness in front of him, and hesitantly took the first step to advance further. He really had no options, for the only way out was somewhere on the other side of the deepest core - the heart of this suffocating, repugnant maze.

In all honesty, Kaden was not sure if Majha was worth all this, for being a lady of the upper class, it was more than likely she had just played with him, and he was the one to pay the price for

## Under the Streets of Ashagor

being a fool. He wore shining gems and dashing trinkets at the palace, but none of it was his to claim. Sparkling pretty with borrowed beauty, but nothing real to own, not even his heartbeat. And if he was not so good with blades, excelling in acrobatics and handsome to look at, he probably would have been given to Darum for free, who could have flogged him to death for glancing at his bride. But Kaden was, despite his worthlessness for the great family that owned him, very liked among the eminent guests, and so without realizing it, he had developed some value for himself over the years performing.

All that agility, all that balance came to good use now in the confined, narrow tunnels of the sewers. The slime and filth covered the tressle on the side of the waterway. It was full of cracks and loose rocks, and each one formed a serious chance to obtain an injury. Jeopardizing the task by getting hurt badly enough was the same as if he took the knife and slit his own throat. The rats, snakes, worm colonies and other disgusting crawlers would eat him alive if he lost his ability to walk.

Every second he wasted at the door made the torch burn that much further, and it was only a matter of time before it would flicker and die, leaving him in the dark with everything that lurked in there. Kaden was afraid, but if he did not face those fears with solemn resolution, they would overcome him and leave wrecked, incapacitated. A shivering sigh accompanied hesitant steps as he pushed himself down the slippery slope. The rats were squealing louder, letting him know that he was entering a territory where he was not welcome. Every passing glimpse of movement in the shadows of the fire, every unrecognized tint of a figure made him breathe faster, turning the fear into a monster watching over his shoulder at every corner.

"Innsrah, watch over me," he whispered as a black chasm opened in front of him.

"What in the name of the stars is this?" he wondered and offered the burning torch to the gaping hole that seemed like a tear in the fabric of reality itself.

"A ladder!" he then exclaimed, but shut himself off before generating more eerie echoes in the pit where the wavering shadows came alive, and every fear haunting at the back of his mind came forth - waiting for him to make that one crucial mistake that would expose a weakness. But that was where he needed to go, thus before allowing those ghostly whispers in his head to talk himself out of it, he made sure the sabre and torch were firmly locked inside his clenched fist, then he climbed down.

#

## Under the Streets of Ashagor

A mercurial shadow, like a cloud of gnats at the far side of the perimeter, flickered and danced, but he could not focus on it. Could someone follow him? Was there some bloodthirsty thug in the darkness ready to stab him in the back? He almost wished there was, for the overwhelming suspense was already playing tricks with his unstable mind. Using the poor quality saber to cut his wrists was becoming an option to consider more and more by every passing second, but the survival instincts did not allow such cowardly solution, at least for now.

A sharp hissing sound brought him to a sudden halt. Eyes peering tirelessly to see, but the wall of darkness at the edge of the burning flames was impervious, yet the angry hiss sounded closer than an arm's reach. Pushing the torch as far ahead of him as he possibly could without risking of dropping it into the foul water that slowly flowed in a deep gutter next to him, releasing stench that continuously made his stomach turn, he gazed into the darkness, and there he saw a nightmare made into flesh.

"By Neferlyn's rotten fingers!" he cursed.

It was not one but at least five snakes bundled together in a partially fallen archway. On the other side of it he saw stairs leading down, and he knew that was the way.

"Down and down until you cannot descend any further. When you cannot see, breathe or hear the sound of your sanity, you've reached the bottom of the world. There you must complete this deed or accept the damnation of your soul." The words of Khan Ziraj echoed in his head as he slowly approached the slithering pile of shining scales and venom-dripping fangs.

As the light of the flames reflected from their lidless eyes, they rose and hissed at him as the last warning to retreat. But Kaden could not retreat. He would have to cut the wiggling strands of the Gorgon's head that had spawned at the archway and continue toward the rat king, or die - abandoned and forgotten. Unsure if he could step over the threshold of fear in case he stopped to think about it, he charged at the snakes with his saber held high. Breathing frantically, he whacked around with the weapon, felt the blade sinking into the flesh, witnessed the strong twitches of the struggling serpents, and in his blind, panicky rage he moved closer to the enraged ophidians. Their heads shot in the air, scrabbling for bare skin to fight back this sudden threat. Crying in despair, Kaden continued slashing anywhere he saw movement, and as a miracle of sorts, he was lucky enough to avoid being bit. The green-striped, still squiggling bodies were cut in three and four parts by Kaden's striking arm that refused to halt for as long as there was movement on the ground, but little by little the hisses faded, until they died completely.

## Under the Streets of Ashagor

That was when he heard the rattle, like thousands of sticks drumming against marble at once. It came closer and then receded, but there was no room for confusion about one thing. Whatever monstrosity was lurking down there, it was on his path leading to the rat king's lair.

"It's a cheira," almost a lighthearted voice stated from behind his back.

Kaden was already in such a stressed state that, without questions or second glances, he swiped the saber at the unknown figure that had mysteriously materialized next to him, hoping to feel the same kind of resistance in his fingers as he had felt when the blade hit the snake. But instead of a dull, silent thud, a bright and steely chink returned him to reality, and he saw a girl with two long daggers crossed in front of her. She had easily warded off his clumsy attack.

"Be careful," the girl whispered and winked playfully. "You have nothing against cheira on your own."

"What in the name of Neferlyn's nails is a cheira, and who are you?" Kaden gushed, visibly upset, but also relieved to see a potential friendly face.

The girl smirked. "A cheira is a crustacean, an oversized crab, so to speak - very familiar to all fishermen along the coast of the Forlorn Sea, for they are bloodthirsty, vicious monsters, and they like to lay eggs in the relative safety of these sewers. Pincers larger than your arms, a cheira can tear you apart in a matter of seconds. It's very aggressive, and very fast." While speaking, she edged the daggers against one another, which created a creepy metallic fizz. "To answer the second question, I'm Lamiya. My family name makes no difference to you, so don't ask," she finished with a rather dour tone.

"Why are you here?" the young man then inquired, for he could not think of a single reason why such a beautiful girl should be in this foul pit.

"For the same reason you are," she said and giggled. The gloom that had crept to her voice was now gone, as fast as the glimpse of a smile she had shown at first. "I'm here to kill the rat king."

"But why? Are you a slave like me?" Kaden insisted, confused by the motives of this girl.

Lamiya tilted her head, like glancing into the eyes of a fool, and smiled impishly. "I'm free as a bird," she laughed. "But I do have a reason to kill the rat king. My reason, however, is none of your business, so let's move on. Before we can worry about the big rat, we have this rattling abomination to deal with."

Kaden found himself speechless, but he followed the pleasantly swaying hips of his unexpected ally, secretly glad that he did not have to be alone. The rattling became louder as they descended the next set of rusty ladder that looked like it was about to collapse at any time. Lamiya

## Under the Streets of Ashagor

climbed down first, and nimbly leaped into the dark with her daggers ready. Kaden, while physically as able as his firehearted companion, was a little too nervous and afraid to make it so gracefully.

"Keep your noise down," the girl snapped. "Even the rat king will grow tired of your racket and leaves before we even see it."

Kaden did not answer. Embarrassed by his unforeseen clumsiness, he attempted to balance himself better before rushing after the girl. The tiny metal rings that held her tight-fitting leather armor in one piece flickered dimly in the light of the flaming torch.

"Come here," he heard a muffled voice commanding, and he did. In Lamiya's every movement there was certain confidence that grasped Kaden's heart and helped him to overcome the pressing fear. He was happy to be in a position where he could just follow orders, and it never dawned to him that it was probably because he knew of nothing else.

"Throw the torch in the middle of that junction room ahead, the rattling comes from there, and I'm quite sure the crossing gutters form a pool there for the cheira to lay her eggs. This is where we're going to kill it."

"How exactly are we going to kill it?" the boy asked with a stream of sweat gleaming faintly on his face.

Lamiya laughed quietly. "With some luck," she said, which did not exactly imbue him with gallantry.

But it was too late to back off now, not that there ever really was such an option. Taking a few steps to build strength, he threw the torch in a large arc and watched it land almost in the middle of the platform. Gigantic shadows grew on the walls where the sewer network was mined taller than any of the tunnels they had walked through, and in the pool behind the platform, a squirming and wagging monster with clanking pincers was already coming toward them on its ten rapidly pacing feet.

"Move out into the junction!" Lamiya urged as she fearlessly leaped to face the cheira.

Kaden's knees shivered, but he advanced out into the open. The cheira's attention was solely focused on the girl with shimmering weapons, and she was planning to keep it that way.

"What should I do?" Kaden cried, unsure what the clearly more experienced combatant wanted from him.

"Look for a crack or crevice on the ground, anything that can support your saber. Plant the handle in it and run away!"

## Under the Streets of Ashagor

Scanning the shadowy scenery with strained eyes, certain they would meet the end here at the darkness of this sickening filth as Lamiya entered the battle with daggers weaving a web of steel around her. Sparks flashed brightly as the pincers clashed against the daggers in a struggle that determined whether they would ever witness the repulsive miracle of a rat king, or if they would simply vanish from the pages of history as this giant crab hacked their bodies into pieces.

Thinking it was merely an illusion created by the deep shadows of the fading torch, Kaden had to look again, and there it was - a broken cobblestone, partially crumbled under the weight of time, giving a perfect foundation for him to finish the trap. Still scared, but now also excited by this sudden glimpse of faint hope, Kaden slipped nimbly by the furiously swinging claws that itched to tear off the arms and legs of the impudent intruder.

"Good job!" Lamiya shrilled as Kaden pushed the blade's dented handle between the cracked stones. It remained quite unstable and wobbly, but there was no time to build better support for it.

"Now what?" Kaden hoped for further instructions.

"Sit back and watch," the girl laughed, and there was a hint of madness in her bright voice.

With a high-pitched cry, Lamiya performed a series of strikes that were not meant to penetrate the pincers, but to distract the monstrous creature, then she ran past the cheira to turn it around. Now the properly placed saber was in line with her and the monster, and the giant crab wasted no time to come after her. It used all ten legs to rush at Lamiya, pincers snapping hungrily. The cheira wanted to end this battle quickly, for this aggression was pure mother's instinct. It had an overwhelming urge to spill the guts of these intruders into the murky, rank water and return to take care of its precious eggs. The water stored in its folds and joints sprinkled over the torch as it rumbled toward Lamiya, casting complete darkness upon them.

Attempting to see through the unseen, Kaden heard the most disgusting sound he would remember for the rest of his life. Apparently the monster had ran itself into the saber with such a brute force that it pierced its exoskeletal shell and caused lethal damage to the entrails. Desperate hissing and fast drumming of the legs filled the crossing chamber as the creature tried to free itself from the deadly trap.

"Halannar!" Lamiya's voice spoke in the darkness, and two sparks of white light appeared, like ghostly fireflies had suddenly begun to whirl around in the air. It took him a while to realize what it was.

"Enchanted blades!" he sighed in wonder and received a goodhearted laugh from the girl.

"Yes, a small gift from my mentor," she explained, but refused to go into more details, and

## Under the Streets of Ashagor

Kaden saw it improper to question her any further. They had light. That was all that really mattered.

Two small gems at the pommels of the daggers were engraved full of mysterious symbols, markings that Kaden recognized as Awen, the secret language mystics used to weave their spells. These gems were now glowing brightly, providing almost better light than the torch ever did.

"Come," the girl urged and stepped over the still twitching leg of the dying cheira. The tip of the saber poked through the chine, and the exit wound exuded slimy, blueish hemolymph, blood of the crustaceans. "I'm sorry about your saber," she then said. "I'm afraid we can't get it back from under that thing."

"It doesn't matter," Kaden said, shivering in disgust as he saw the state of his crude weapon, then he noticed Lamiya limping slightly as she approached the stairway leading down. "Did you get hurt?" he asked genuinely worried, for from this point forward his life was largely at the hands of this amazing young woman.

"It's nothing," she assured, but Kaden saw there was an unsettling amount of blood on the side of her leg.

It seemed like the cheira had gotten one blind cut in before the saber penetrated its dreadful torso, and now blood that looked black as night in the eerie white light oozed out from the deep wound on her thigh. He could have sworn there was no sound when she was brutally punctured, and that kind of discipline alone was very humbling to Kaden, who knew a thing or two about discipline. His acrobatic skills and nearly flawless handling of blades did not come easy and out of nowhere. It was all the result of extremely relentless training.

The torch was gone, but the pale, colorless light of the daggers showed the way. As they climbed down the stairs, the change in the rats became evident. Instead of timid rodents looking for any scraps to feed on, they suddenly appeared more aggressive and unified as they began to harass the duo, who clearly had intruded into a place important to the rats.

"We must be getting closer," Lamiya confirmed the thoughts that had passed through Kaden's head already.

"Don't let them bite," the boy warned, using his barely covered feet to kick back some of the enraged animals.

Never seen such behavior from rats, they continued carefully into the stale depths, unsure of what they might be up against next. The high squealing and constantly increasing number of the black rats was becoming overwhelming. They turned more aggressive and less fearful by every foot they pressed on, and it was only a matter of time before their teeth would taste the sweetness of

## Under the Streets of Ashagor

fresh blood.

"We will never find the rat king, if there even is one," Kaden cried while desperately keeping the foul animals away from him. Redspot fever, blackhide rash, and whatever other diseases those filthy maggot-tails carried, were all things that forced his tired muscles to keep working.

"I'm sure there's something these little pests want to protect at the end of this tunnel," Lamiya grunted. "They're coming on like we're trying to steal a fresh carcass they've claimed. Keep pushing, Kaden. We're almost there, I'm sure of it!"

The ghostly light of the enchanted gems revealed a tunnel that was pulsating with living crud, swarming like Trows around a lonesome traveler. And there was one thing in common with all the slithering movement - it was flooding toward them!

A sharp pain glinted in her calf, and she instantly realized what it meant. The first vermin had found its way high enough to reach her naked legs. Grinding her teeth together, she refused to scream, but the panicky reaction of sudden jerk and disgusted whine was noticed by her companion. Kaden did not ask, for there was no reason to. He knew what had happened, and what it could mean. The other rats smelled blood and worked twice as hard to obtain their share. Lamiya was getting overran, and she would not survive if this endless sea of hungry rats made her fall. They would eat her widespread eyes, crying tongue, wildly waving arms and every last strip of flesh around the bones. Then they would come after Kaden, who was already having problems to keep the bloodthirsty rodents at bay.

Bleeding and growing increasingly desperate, Lamiya did something that left Kaden astounded. With a wild, primal cry, she leaped over the initial group of rats biting at her, and charged toward darkness, drawing majority of the pests after her. This left the flabbergasted boy practically to himself, opening a free way to advance into the lair that was so eagerly defended. And he ran, ran like he had never ran before. Surely it would be the end of them both, but he had developed great admiration for this woman in such a short time he thought not possible, and now he blindly followed the bravery he thought did not exist in this world. He would die with Lamiya, a meaningless, yet glorious death.

In the flashing light of the wildly swinging daggers, Kaden finally saw it, saw the reason he had entered this nest of decay. A shapeless blob, up to his waist tall and at least six feet wide, laid at the back of the tunnel, swarmed by giant rats. It looked slimy, bundled heap of squiggling tails entangled together, half-developed eyes, claws and hungry mouths without defined form. In

## Under the Streets of Ashagor

constant throbbing movement, it seemed like it was breathing rapidly. Suddenly Kaden had an urge to throw up, but he swallowed down his disgust and rushed forward to help his companion.

Approaching the rat king, Lamiya fought like the legendary Hurons, fearless northmen known for their bloodlust and courage, but there were too many enemies, too many teeth that gnawed her legs, arms and torso, wherever she had skin exposed. She was bleeding badly, feeling how her strength was drained with each new stream that made her hands sticky.

"Take one of my daggers and finish the rat king!" she cried, and threw the other blade at the boy, who picked it up and numbly moved toward the throbbing blob. Some rats came after him, but with frenetic struggle she kept most of them concentrated on her, stabbing, slashing and slicing anything that moved. A line of dead and dying rats formed behind her, but her speed was diminishing with each step she took. Kaden had no time to hesitate, and from somewhere deep in his heart, he found strength to overcome his fear.

With a furious battle cry, he leaped over the thin line of rats in between him and the rat king, and as soon as he reached the repulsive monstrosity, he sank the dagger deep into the putrid mass of nature's aberration. A thick splatter of liquid that looked like a mix of blood, greyish slime and pure filth flooded out and the entire rat king shuddered in motion that resembled pain. Every rat that was eagerly biting Lamiya now turned to Kaden, and they both knew what it meant.

"Kill it! Stab it again! Quickly!" the wounded woman cried in panic, for it seemed their efforts were in vain.

Kaden obeyed instinctively, pulled the dagger out and struck again and again before the rats would be on to him. Ignoring the first bites, he continued hitting, but soon he was forced to step back in order to defend himself. Lamiya, weakened from the loss of blood and excruciating pain, saw the way to the rat king opening before her and instantly limped toward the still living source of disease and death. As her dagger punctured the soft surface of the rat king, those attacking Kaden turned to her once again. Now it was his time to strike again. They were both bitterly aware of how well the blob seemed to withstand damage they inflicted on it, but after a time that felt like eternity, they noticed how the throbbing movement of rat king's tails, lumps of rough hair and gaping mouths began to slow down. It was impossible to say whether it was mortally wounded, but it had become very clear that instead of a one man mission these sewers required purging by fire.

"Run back to the crossing where we fought the cheira and turn left," Lamiya said while crushing one large rat underfoot.

"You will come with me," Kaden insisted, but Lamiya shook her head.

## Under the Streets of Ashagor

"I won't make it, but you still can," she smiled at the boy, and Kaden realized what she was about to do. By sacrificing herself, she would make sure that Kaden made it out alive.

"No," he said intently, pierced a rat through its throat, threw the dying rodent on the cobblestones and reached out to help Lamiya. "You will come with me. I'll help you."

And as they retreated slowly from the lair, the rats did not chase them very far. Whether the rat king was dying or not, it was enough for the vermin to focus their efforts to protect it from further attacks instead of trying to kill the intruders that were finally fleeing.

#

The harbor of Ashagor was located near the place where Kaden had entered the sewers, and Lamiya had sneaked in not too far from the crossing where they had faced the cheira, so she knew of this remote entrance that would not reveal them to anyone. The last rays of the setting sun were still gleaming upon the endless waves of the Forlorn Sea as two bleeding and exhausted adventurers emerged from the depths of the sewers. The stars twinkled dimly upon the low cliff they were standing, and the shady buildings around the harbor were sinking in the shadows below. No one could see them up there, and no one would have a clue that they had survived. Just barely, but still. It felt unreal to stand outside in the fresh and cool breeze blowing from the sea, but the wounds, cuts and toothmarks on their bodies were a painful reminder that the nightmare they had just gone through had been very real.

Fetching as many palm tree leaves as he could find, Kaden attempted to make Lamiya's conditions as comfortable as he possibly could. She smiled at him tiredly, which was all the reward he desired. Then she removed a tiny golden necklace she was wearing and put it in Kaden's hand.

"Take this," she whispered.

"What is it?" he asked as he grasped it and took a closer look at it.

The locket had a small, yet very highly detailed flower carved on both sides. Kaden suspected it had something to do with Lamiya's reasons to enter the sewers in the first place, and he received confirmation almost instantly.

"It's an emblem of the order that can set you free. To break those chains of slavery and truly give you an opportunity to forge a destiny of your own," she explained quietly. "It's a lotus flower, the symbol of the Purple Lotus."

This revelation was a little scary, but at the same time Kaden had to admit it sounded

## Under the Streets of Ashagor

compelling.

"But why are you giving it to me?" he still insisted.

"I'm dying," Lamiya said without regrets in her voice. "I'm dying, and I want you to take my place in the order, for this task was my initiation. Take this chance and make the best out of it. You've probably been infected with the redspot fever, but they have shamans, even vicars. They can help you through it, and after that you are free to choose what you want to be. Take this chance for me."

After a brief moment of silence, Kaden finally spoke with a hint of determination in his voice. "Where will I go?" he asked.

Lamiya smiled faintly. "Take the locket to a man named Thornan. He's a Midborne selling squid ink at the docks. He will tell you what to do. But before you go, I'd like you to hold my hand until I've breathed my last breath. It won't be long."

Now it was Kaden's turn to smile as he took Lamiya's little hand and said. "It doesn't matter, I'll be here until you sleep."

The woman sighed deeply and closed her eyes. The sun disappeared behind the waves and darkness took over, but now there was no fear or anxiety in the air - just sadness for the inevitable.

Sitting there quietly, Kaden listened to the song of the sea until at some point near dawn, he realized how Lamiya's hand had gotten cold. He knew what it meant, but he did not want to let go - not yet.

The sun was rising when he finally got up and gathered more leaves to build at least something to honor her passing, then he placed a large rock on top to make sure the wind would not blow them away anytime soon. Bidding his last farewells to the girl that had saved him, Kaden left to follow the last wish of his fallen companion, and to claim the gift of freedom she had so selflessly offered. The strings that had played him as a puppet in the palace were all broken, and he was free to follow a path of his own choosing.