

Chains

"I sobbed as they placed the chains upon my back, and for many years they were a terrible weight to bear. On the day my freedom was purchased I finally set them aside, yet to my horror, I found that I still laboured under their burden.

I learned that day an awful truth: freeman or slave, our chains are never left behind."

Anonymous Slave

"The pursuit and aggregation of power is an end unto itself.

The order of Travium shall pursue this end, and we shall be the ones to answer the greatest riddle of existence. We shall stand on the edge of oblivion and see... what lies beyond. None shall deny us, for we are the future of this world."

Master Balavan Cek, the Lord of Lines
Primus of House Travium

"By the time I was thirteen, the time of my bleeding, I had been a slave for twelve years and seven months," said the woman softly, a palpable feeling of sadness running through the words. "My father sold us - my mother and I, just a bawling babe, to pay off his debts at the gambling house," she continued, her bronzed face a picture of complete serenity despite the misery of her story.

As she spoke, six huge boulders of stone circled above and around her position, held aloft by the tremendous power of Ghyr, magical root of the World Tree and that one wielded solely by House Travium. They displaced the air as they moved, sending a light gust through the chamber and causing the hundreds of candles lighting the room to dance in the breeze.

The speaker was seated on a dais in the centre of the room. Her body was lithe and firm, possessed of a youthful energy, though it had been many years now since her childhood. She sat in a relaxed meditative pose, with her legs crossed, her eyes closed, and her hands held at ease by her side. The effort to hold the huge stones aloft was unreadable in her expression, a feat that few Wizards in Mellorian could match, and one that held her audience in awestruck silence.

Sat in a throng around her in the brightly lit room were the assembled acolytes of House Travium; scores of apprentice Wizards whose rapt attention hung upon her every measured word. They were eager to learn from Master Amara - one of the greatest mages of their house, of any house in fact. Amara was a living legend to them, the embodiment of the great power that Travium represented and that they all hoped to wield in time.

Amara continued, enjoying the excitement of the crowd around her. "Because I was but a useless infant, the slave masters worked my mother twice as hard, simply for the right to maintain my life. I was a cost, an inconvenience and a burden, nothing more to them. Despite this, my mother would not take the easy decision to end my life; to deliver me from certain misery simply to make her life a little easier. She knew then what I know now, in the very fibre of my being: that there is always hope where there is strength left to carry the fight onwards." Amara breathed softly in the silence that followed, her mind reliving fond memories of her beloved parent, long since gone.

The boulders gently changed their orbit, moving slowly through the chamber and hovering effortlessly over the heads of the acolytes, to the panic of many. Amara smiled, her eyes still firmly closed but her senses aware of everything happening around her.

"My mother taught me the first lesson of strength," she said. "If you believe you have it, then you have it." While she spoke, a number of the acolytes stealthily got to their feet and moved to positions of safety, away from the boulders that hung precariously above them. Though she did not mention it, this action drew another wry smile from Amara.

The faithless acolytes yelled as they were scooped up into the air by an irresistible force, gentle yet utterly resistant to their struggles. The acolytes joined orbit with the great chunks of stone that were slowly circling the Chamber of Lessons, and the other students jeered them for being cowardly wretches. Amara's voice quieted them and she continued with her tale.

"I was four when I was first put to work, and by this time, my mother had been reduced to a pitiful state by endless toil. We had been sold many times over, when our owners suffered poor fortune, or when they judged my mother was no longer fit to continue for them. Despite my lack of comprehension, I was glad to finally be of help, to ease her burden by contributing in my own small way."

Amara's face lost its aspect of serenity for a moment, a grim pallor suddenly creeping over her flawless copper skin. "The masters took this joy from me like all the others," she sighed. Her jaw tightened and the floating objects in the room dropped sharply by almost a foot - the acolytes below drawing in a collective fearful breath. "They worked her even harder," she spat, her teeth grinding in anger, "hoping to draw out the last days of labour from her battered frame."

The mage inhaled deeply, and the floating objects were righted to their original orbit. The look of calm repose returned to her face. "She died four years later," Amara continued reverently. "Four years of endless labour that would have crippled men double her size." Her voice betrayed more than a hint of pride; a great swelling of power and emotion behind the façade of her stillness.

For a time Amara did not speak and no one in the room dared break such a poignant silence. "I was but eight years old and already doing the work reserved for men" she said, her proud voice breaking the stillness. "My strength was great and my body hardened by the many tasks forced upon me. The masters were well pleased with my work, for I consumed fewer rations despite my labours and they used this to taunt my fellow slaves and to justify feeding them less," Amara exhaled slowly. "This made me... less than welcome among them, and in their fury and helplessness the other slaves spurned me."

Amara's voice took on a wistful tone: "There I was, nine and alone; a slave girl with no more guidance than the cruel whips of the masters. Yet I had strength of will, like my mother, and a special gift besides. One that I took pains to conceal from my owners, for I knew well even then what they would do with a slave found to have the second sight." With a raise of her brow, the airborne acolytes were deposited safely back to the ground, and the boulders began to rise and fall as part of their circuit.

"What would they have done?" asked a naïve apprentice from the rear of the group.

"They would have cut my throat as I slept the very night they discovered the truth," replied Amara promptly, without a hint of emotion. "They would be terrified that one with the sight would break free of their confinement and take revenge for their captivity." Some of the acolytes from wealthier families of the south gasped at the revelation, for slavery had been banned in the southern states and such thoughts were strange to them.

"The thing is," Amara continued drily, "they were quite correct to fear such an incident. That is precisely what happened in my case." The apprentice wizards inched closer to their teacher, eager to learn more than the fanciful rumours they had already heard about their teacher. Amara's escape from slavery was a legendary tale within house Travium, although she spoke about it very infrequently. Every person in the room was therefore fixed on the remainder of the tale.

"When I was thirteen," she said, her mouth curling in the hint of a smile as she reached the part of the tale she knew they wanted to hear. "One of the more vicious overseers took exception to something I had, or perhaps, had not done. I admit, I cannot recall what it was now, these many years later" Amara gave a small shrug. "It matters not, I suppose, for the telling of my story."

"In the days that followed, he whipped me before I began my work, he whipped me throughout the work, and he even whipped me when the darkness caused the site chief to ring the bell, signalling the end of day. He whipped and he kicked and he punched and he tripped me as I carried heavy loads. On and on it went, and even in my dreams I felt the blows," she said grimly.

"I took the blows, for to speak out or to raise a hand back meant certain death. I had taken a beating or two in my time, even as a child, and so I knew how to deal with the pain." The boulders now picked up in speed, increasing the breeze and guttering some of the candles across the chamber. The diminishing light added a quality of danger to her story.

With her eyes still closed, Amara took a breath; a frown forming on her face as the memories came back to her. "But on the final day, it was no ordinary beating. My skin was raw and cut in so many places, and it got to the point that even when I took a breath I felt such pain that I felt I could not go on any longer." Her jaw tightened sharply.

"I was confused, fearful, but above all I was angry. Angry with my Father, angry with my slave masters, angry with the vicious dog that continued to beat me. To my shame, I was even angry with my Mother, for not having the courage to drown me as a babe. The anger grew and grew until I could feel it all around me. Even then I did nothing, for the fire within me had not yet been exposed to the air for nourishment. The conflagration inside me waited for the tinder, but it did not wait long."

The boulders now picked up more and more speed, displacing the air around them and extinguishing all the candles, plunging the room into a murky darkness. Many of the acolytes called on Ghyr and held it aloft, lighting the room with an otherworldly sheen of azure light. Amara took on a more menacing quality in the witch-light, with the boulders dancing in the air above her and yet she remained perfectly still.

"The spark that ignited the inferno came soon enough," she continued, her voice suddenly booming throughout the chamber. "The overseer leaned close to me as I took rest from my pains, his sour breath I could feel upon the skin of my neck, which made my flesh crawl. I did not look at him directly; I did not wish to challenge him, but I could hear his cruel smile through his reedy, soulless voice.

"Girl," he said. "You know how to take a beating, and this I like greatly. Now that you are sufficiently tender, I shall be visiting you this night and shall enjoy you like I would a fine tavern wench. If you please me then I shall visit you each night, and you shall have gifts and food aplenty."

Amara laughed scornfully, echoing off the stone walls of the chamber. The boulders increased in speed once again, blurring in the blue light and causing the acolytes to look at each other with fearful glances. They wondered if the telling of the tale had finally driven Amara mad.

"His voice," Amara rasped, "it was like the filthy touch of an unwanted hand, and it made my soul explode with rage, for I had seen such things happen to the other female slaves. I had never thought it should never happen to me, for somehow I thought myself too valuable for such treatment. What a vain fool I was!"

Amara's voice ran cold in its fury. "In that moment I heard the grinding of metal and felt my chains become loose as they wrenched themselves from the hitching post. As I stared at them dumbly, they began to move of their own accord - like a maddened snake fighting off a horde of fire-ants. I looked up to see the overseer looking at me with an odd mixture of hatred and terror. Before I knew what was happening the chains had wrapped themselves around his neck and were throttling the life from my would-be abuser.

More chains joined them, wrenched free by a great power from the shackles of the other slaves. They gripped his arms, his legs - anywhere they could gain purchase. I recoiled in confusion and fear - I could hear him gurgling in pain and shock under the immense pressure. More and more joined until they lifted him into the air and ripped him limb from limb in an explosion of gore." The acolytes cheered fiercely in that last revelation; it confirmed grisly rumours that had been whispered about why Amara was named "the Unfettered" by some.

As their cheers still rang off the walls, there was a sudden flash of indigo light and Amara teleported across the room, reappearing behind them, eyes opened, radiating the majestic power of Ghyr. The acolytes turned to face her in astonishment and confusion. "No Overseer survived that night," Amara thundered. "The chains had taken on a will of their own: but it was nothing more than the echo of my will. They hunted down each man like a pack of frenzied serpents, and I was revenged over and over until all the slaves were free simply by the virtue of no gaolers to confine us." Again, the acolytes screeched their approval, enthused by the display of power yet threaded through by the ever present fear of being crushed by the boulders that still span around their heads, now at a dizzying speed.

"This was the first lesson of power I learned, as you shall learn in time, if you are wise," Amara boomed, her words ringing in the ears of the apprentice wizards that gazed up at her, enthralled by Amara's majesty." As she spoke, blazing chains of magical power shot from her hands and contacted with the boulders flying above their heads. In an instant, all six were shattered into clouds of dust, which rained down onto the students. Not a flake landed on Amara, however, who blazed with the light of Ghyr in a display of power none of those present had ever seen the like of.

"We all are bound by chains that the world places upon us," she roared with an ethereal power, her dark eyes seeming to fix upon every face in the room. "The powerful must break those chains, while the weak shall be forced to endure their burden. Only in doing so, can you take the first step on the path of Traviium, of mastering your destiny." There was another flash of indigo light, and Amara was gone. Only the echo of her words remained.

As Amara walked away down the musty corridor that led from the training room, she heard the reverberation of approval of her students, a great howl of animalistic pleasure at the display she had wrought. She allowed herself a half-smile as she paused, despite the nagging doubt that she had failed to break her own chains. She sighed quietly before continuing down the corridor, disappearing into the darkness of the house.