

**Shattered Chains**  
**Nicholas Aevik, Shattered Chain**

“My Dearest Lord Murond,

By the time you get this, you should have completed your trip back from your local healing pool. The good news is, you’re now one step closer to leaving the worlds forever. The bad news is, at least from where you’re sitting, that almost dying permanently is the good news.

You probably haven’t had time, in between resurrecting, sputtering, and making futile threats, to visit your slave pens. I’ll save you the trip; they’re empty. I know, I know, it’s a terrible inconvenience to have to visit the Slaver’s Guild in town to pick up some more, but you’ll just have to... wait. There aren’t any more slaves there either, although you and the local Guildmaster can at least trade some fascinating stories about your local healing pool.

Even if there were slaves there, though, you’re about to learn that you’re broke. We found your treasury, and we’d like to compliment you on such a massive accumulation of wealth. It took ten of us almost eight hours to get all that gold out. I fear Your Rotund Lordship will be fetching his own tea tomorrow morning.

Screaming for your wife yet? Probably, since it’s a long walk from your bedchamber to your kitchen (honestly, a man of your girth really should have thought to have his bedchamber share a wall with the kitchen, it not only saves a long, horrible walk, but you can vent the stove heat into your room and keep it nice and toasty). Your wife, sadly, isn’t there anymore either, and neither are any of your five lovely daughters. You remember Bethany, that lovely Elven girl you purchased for a paltry hundred gold, some years ago? Well, she and your wife got to talking, and Lady Murond didn’t seem to like anything Bethany had to say. Didn’t like any of it not one little bit. Your wife is safe, and your kids are safe, and I’m very pleased to report to you that you’ll never see any of them again, unless one of them wakes you before she slits your throat.

But I’ve been inconsiderate, placing you in the mood for tea, when I should have remembered that there isn’t any tea, either. Imagine our surprise to find that your kitchen help was all composed of slaves; apparently, on top of being basically a land-bound manatee, you’re not very smart either. When you start getting new kitchen help, remember that the kitchen staff has to clean, too, and that lots of things are fine for cleaning that are terrible to eat. In all the strongholds we’ve ever raided, we’ve never found slaves as cooks. You must have placed great trust in your food taster.

Before you even look around: Yes, he’s gone too. Knowing how reliant you were on slave labor, I think the only people you’re going to find in your keep are your Knights. Well, not all of your Knights. A goodly number of them should be on their respective ways back from your local healing pool. Some of them were horrified at what you’d done with your “livestock”, and left your service (you can expect letters from them over the next few days, explaining their absences).

So what do you have now? Well, you’ve still got a nice stone castle; we thought about taking it, brick by brick, but that would take a lot of time and we’re busy people. You’ve still got your little town down the hill from your “impregnable” stone fortress (you should see whoever sold you your

castle and demand a refund, honestly). You've still got your villagers, although most of them will be suffering moderately serious short-term memory loss. You've still got some sympathetic neighbors who will join you in your outrage and swear to help you eradicate "whoever did this" from the plane forever (although I'd keep a close eye on Lady Mandragill, were I you, since she's turning slaves loose as fast as she can to avoid our attention). You've still got whatever friends you had before in the local Slaver's Guild, and you might want to drop by and ask them what happened to you. They ought to know the routine pretty well by now, since we've been pulling it on them for years.

Granted, we took a lot from you, but we don't want you to think we don't care, so we've taken great pains to give back as much as we took. We've donated dozens of traps to your castle, all over the place. There's even a map that shows where the traps are, and what they are, and how to disarm them. I'm ashamed to admit, though, that in our terrible rush to get in, take everything that ever mattered to you, and get out, we forgot to leave the map. We'd send you a courier with the map, if we weren't sure you'd enslave him when he got there. I'm sure you'll do fine, just keep a close eye out for little bitty wires and keep a sharp nose for poison.

We also left you a Curse of Death; the reason it took so long for you to get from your local healing pool to your million-gallon bedchamber was an ambush. Knocked over, Cursed with Death, and forgotten. It's not that we care about you knowing (obviously), but we really didn't want you to be able to identify the curser. We really hate "Wanted" posters. I'm sure even a man of your limited intellect can understand that.

Still don't feel like that's enough? Well, then, you'll be pleased to know we've saved the best for last. That Desert Elf girl you picked up earlier this year as an "entertainer"? Xandra? You remember her. Lovely girl, and very spirited considering what you've done to her. We were really hoping that she and The Former Lady Murond would have a chance to talk, but seeing how upset Bethany's story made your wife... well, we really didn't see a need to subject such a lovely woman to Xandra's story. Hell, most of us wish we hadn't heard it. No, no, don't worry about her, she's fine. She's bouncing back quite nicely, we think, and she shows a great deal of promise. Her family is, of course, thrilled to see her again; they'd feared she was dead forever, and never really figured to see her again. Wrong, wrong, wrong.

That's really the best part of this job, taking the slaves that bloated imbeciles such as yourself have wrongfully enslaved back to their homes and loved ones. You've never seen real happiness until you've seen a family reunited after they'd lost all hope. You see, we're really in the business of finding hope where there isn't any; cutting up persons who are evil, such as yourself, is only the icing on the cake. (No, don't get up, there isn't any cake left either. That, we ate while we were there. Moving pounds and pounds of gold is hungry work). What keeps us going is putting right what you put wrong, and that'd be worth it even if you caught us all (which you won't; you might want to interview your remaining Knights carefully to see if you can find out which one opened your gates and let us through).

Sorry for the sidetrack, I was talking about saving the best for last. We put in a word for you with your Duke, since we knew you'd be up in arms about your ancestral rights to your land and the peasants thereon, and your property rights regarding your slaves. Your Duke (he's really a lot smarter than he looks) agrees with you about your property rights, but some of Xandra's stories really turned his stomach, and... well, I wouldn't count on Ducal support when the bill comes due

for poor little Xandra.

And it's going to come due. As a friendly recommendation, go out and find all the mercenaries you can hire; you'll have to convince them to work on credit, of course, which could be kind of hard, but you're going to need them. You also can't tell them what you're up against, because no sane mercs would sign on for this job even if you still had your previously-formidable treasure hoard. While you're out looking for mercs, you'll have to find people other than the Iron Griffins; we've already spoken with all the local unit commanders, and we have them on retainer not to fight for you. You'd be amazed how much not-fighting you can out of mercenaries for very little money; once they understand that they're going to be paid to literally sit around on their asses doing nothing, their rates become much more reasonable.

Did you even bother to ask little Xandra her last name when you bought her in the back room of that tavern in Legios from her kidnappers? You should have. Her father is Marcus Meridius. Name still doesn't mean anything to you? How about Sergeant Marcus Meridius, 2<sup>nd</sup> Company, 7<sup>th</sup> Legion? Not scared of a mere sergeant? You'll probably need this explained to you; I'll use small words in deference to your limited mental abilities.

Xandra's dad is only a sergeant, but he's been a Legionnaire for nearly twenty years. He's skilled, disciplined, patient and dangerous, and that's just him by himself. He was all set to come down here and send you right back to the pool, and don't doubt for a second that he could. Without your Knights to hide behind (and remember, one of them is perfectly happy to let us right into your very bedchamber), you stand no chance at all against this man. Marcus even applied for leave to roll down into your lands and lay waste to you. That's the really bad news.

Legionnaire leave-request forms have a spot on them for "Reason for Leave". Marcus, very sensibly, put "Going to cut up the bastard that kept my daughter in slavery for a year" down as his reason (it's not good to lie on these things). His CO neither approved his leave nor denied it, just ignored it.

There, breathing a little easier? Good. Take a minute before you continue reading. All better? Relaxed now? Great. You see, in the interest of unit morale ("morale" is when your people want to work for you, instead of being afraid to not work for you), Captain Perdo relieved the squads under Sgt. Meridius' command of duty, temporarily. Soldiers love time off, and an unexpected month-long holiday with full pay makes for a very popular commander, and very happy troops.

Of course, the Legions themselves aren't coming for you, just Sgt. Meridius, and maybe a couple of his squads... well, all right, maybe all of his command. They'll certainly be court-martialed for taking an unauthorized military action against you, but since they did it on their own time, the punishment will probably be pretty light. Captain Perdo can rest assured that his Sergeant will follow him blindly into the gates of Acheron for overlooking some small legal details like "using military force in personal interests", the Efreeti will get to fight (they love to fight), your Duke will get to put someone nicer into your Barony, your former slaves will live out their lives in freedom, you'll spend the next few years in an Efreeti prison (and only a few, we're already tipping off the guards and prisoners as to exactly what you're in for), and all's well that ends well.

We'll also have your example to hold up for the next nightmare-made-flesh that thinks to value the life of a little girl in gold and silver coins.

Signed,  
Nicolas Aevik  
Shattered Chains”

## The Past

So maybe sending Lord Murond that letter was not the wisest thing I've ever done, but it felt so right. Just couldn't resist, and it's not like he'll be in any shape to do anything about it, not from his little cell in Legios. It was probably pretty stupid, but we go way back in doing pretty stupid things.

We don't lay any claims to being the oldest Order around; the Riverwalkers certainly older than we are, and no one knows how far back the Midnight Thorns go. We didn't really get started until a couple of hundred years after the Reality War was all said and done with.

The first of us were Ghouls, although all of the founders are thought to be dead now. Ghouls then, just like now, were hated by pretty much everybody, and occasionally rounded up and used as slave labor. Some of them even went along with it, since slaves have to get fed and have to have a place to sleep, even if they are... well, slaves. After a while, some of them got acclimated to it, and some even found happiness in slavery.

Marcus and Alyssa Maximus never did. They found slavery unsatisfying from the word go. There's a long story there; find a Ghoul and ask about it sometime. The short form is, they committed mutual suicide in the process of wiping out several hundred Greater Undead and setting free several thousand Ghoul slaves.

All those two ever wanted was to be together, and be left alone. They weren't crusaders, or freedom fighters, just two people with terrible luck that kept finding themselves in bad situations. After they orchestrated their escape and the mass murder of a lot of greater undead, they resumed their lives as well as they could. It'd be a mistake to call them the first of the Shattered Chains, but would be dead on to call them the Mother and Father of the Order.

Marcus and Alyssa, roaming free and happy like they'd never been in chains, set a glowing example for some of the Ghouls they freed. A lot of the former slaves set about emulating them, trying to run around the world happy, and some of them succeeded.

A number of them, though, weren't satisfied at merely being free, and followed a different example. The Maximus's had done an excellent job, completely untrained, of setting a large number of slaves free from very powerful masters. They didn't have to; they could have put their scheme together, executed their masters, and fled. Instead, they spent extra time spreading the word, hoping that others would seize the opportunity and flee along with them. It was dangerous, and added opportunities for failure, and it was worth it.

Looking at it that way, how much more effective could people be who made a study of the art? People who had patiently learned the ins and outs of rescue operations, people who the skills and arts of war had mastered. Such people, with such skills, combined with the cleverness and initiative of Marcus and Alyssa, might be able to turn the world upside down, and put an end to slavery forever.

Of the originally freed ghouls, there were perhaps a dozen that conspired to take down the slavers. They were already warriors and mages, and excelled at the freeing of slaves, but always

remained hunted. Nobles that might have been willing to overlook the presence of Ghouls on their lands would not suffer freedom fighters, and the hunts escalated. Our early efforts, I'm ashamed to say, were somewhat lacking.

Still, we did free some slaves in the early years, and the freed slaves talked, and more people came to the banner. Farmers, craftsmen, and slaves-turned-adventurers. With more numbers, we could strike in more places at once, but we were still the hunted. Every raid freed a number of slaves and then turned into an exercise in outrunning Knights or guards. At the time, it was still pretty good, and a lot better than the alternative of doing nothing.

Things ran pretty much like that for years; we learned after a while that the Sidhe weren't big on slavery, and that gave us a safe port to drop freed slaves after we'd freed them. We were still on the run, but at least the poor people who only wanted to live normal lives got the chance to do so. An improvement, and at the time, a great one. It had never occurred to us that we might do better than that, at least not until we grew so numerous that the slave trade dried up completely.

It seems fitting now that it was another odd husband-and-wife team that catapulted us out of the gutters and into the ranks of the Orders. This time, it was Kazir al-Quraq, and his wife, Jenna. Kazir was a Efreeti, a Viper's Fang, who fell for his wife the minute he saw her on the slave auctions at the annual Fair in the desert. He paid for her, set her free, one thing led to another, and pretty soon she was Jenna al-Quraq.

She was also homesick, and missed her family, all of whom had been kidnapped and sold into slavery. Finding them all and reuniting the family was a nearly impossible task, but the Viper's Fangs are hard-pressed to back down from a challenge. Kazir quit the Fangs, and set out into the world.

Chasing sales records, interviewing merchant, threatening and bribing, they ran all over the plane, and they couldn't escape our attention. We saw them as a pair of slavers with very particular tastes, and went after them. They weren't hard to catch, since they really weren't expecting anyone to be hunting them (they hadn't done anything wrong, after all), but we put enough time into it that we got pretty curious about why they only wanted those few slaves.

Again, one thing leads to another, and before long, Jenna showed us what we'd been doing wrong this whole time. Between Jenna and Kazir, they introduced us to a whole new battlefield, a completely different world in which to wage our war, one that the Viper's Fangs had long since mastered in their efforts to guard dozens of disparate tribes of Desert Elves but do so without offending chieftains. It was like seeing for the first time; all the years we'd spent hunted and on the run could have been avoided, or at least scaled down to a manageable level. Kazir had given us a new battleground, and terrifying force to employ on that ground.

### **Kazir showed us politics.**

In the beginning, we were warriors, soldiers, farmers and craftsmen. We took orders, or gave orders, and that was life. For all our combat skills, not one of us had the inclination towards politics, and that was a grave oversight. Assault the keep of a noble for his slaves, and his entire county will rise up against you. Spend some time painting that same noble as a murderer, and showing his neighbors how they stand to gain his land if he's taken down, and the aftermath of that raid is a completely different thing. The attitudes that tempt people to keep slaves in the first place

are the same attitudes that make the political war profitable for us; greed, callousness, and a willingness to elevate yourself at the expense of your fellow man. Some people, even nobles, are genuinely thrilled to have us slice up slavers, many more are willing to turn a blind eye if they personally stand to profit from the slaver being sliced up, and virtually everyone is willing to allow us to proceed unimpeded if we can sell our target as a bad guy who's also profitable to rob. Since we never ask for land, or property outside of the slaver's blood money, our politicians are very successful in cutting down the repercussions of our raids.

### **The Present**

We've had a great deal of success, over the years. We can't claim personal credit for the Elves not keeping slaves, and we wouldn't think of insulting the Sidhe by saying that we turned them away from slavery, but there are many more lands now that are free of this plague than there were in the beginning. Our strategy has changed over the years; in the beginning, we simply killed all the slavers we could and set free as many slaves as we could find. We should have known that would never be enough, not as long as people are lazy, greedy creatures.

Since we can't win by killing everyone that might be inclined to own slaves, we've evolved our thinking a bit. We're fighting on economic and political battlegrounds now, driving up the price of slaves while being very careful to always avoid public responsibility for raids. Granted, we still kill an awful lot of slavers (this just wouldn't be any fun any other way), but now we're careful to take pains against being remembered and hunted down.

Our political corps (and it should come as no surprise that almost all of them are pretty girls or handsome young men, depending on the preferences of the local rulership) has envoys to every major Court of the plane. They're always counseling peace, looking for non-violent solutions, always trying to smooth the waters rather than fight. We do that for two reasons; one, because it presents an image of us as peaceful, sedentary, cowardly types who always want to solve a solution with minimum possible bloodshed, and two, because it makes people very inclined to believe our politicians when they say someone deserves to die. After all, that cowardly little girl wanted to make peace with those horrible Deep Elves, even though they're known to be depraved warmongers, and if such a person is willing to use force against a minor Baron... there's probably something about that Baron that could stand investigation. Our political corps is pretty well-liked everywhere they go; likeability is the major thing they select for.

In the free lands, we can be a little more obvious about what we are and what we do. Our envoy to the Sidhe, for example, is a known murderer; a very pleasant girl, but has over a dozen confirmed, solo, cold-blooded kills to her name. She doesn't make any secret out of it, and the Sidhe are pleased with her warrior spirit and sense of nobility (although, admittedly, they might be somewhat less pleased if they knew that she poisoned half of those dozen from behind, without warning). She's a tactical and strategic advisor for the elements of the Sidhe that just can't stomach the High King's edict about not laying waste to slavers. David has to know what his Houses are up to, but as long as they're careful to avoid bringing it to his attention, he's careful not to look too hard. See how this game works?

In the sadly numerous lands where holding slaves is within the bounds of the law, we have to be a lot more careful playing politics. Again, we're always the voice of moderation, and we are

very careful to only resort to military force when we've got at least the tacit support from the surrounding political structure to let us get away with it. No Prince is willing to openly state that it's all right for us to overthrow one of his Dukes by main force, but the Prince doesn't need to. All he has to do is let the hint drop to our envoy that he's terribly pressed for time, and really wouldn't be able to spread his forces thin looking for any miscreants that might happen to assault the Duke. We'll take it from there; if we get caught, the Prince will be the first one calling for our heads, but if we get away with it (which we do, a lot more often than we don't) then the poor, overworked Prince will turn his eye from it, and it might as well have never happened.

It's good, solid strategy, and works out pretty well for us in a lot of places, but there are just as many where our activities are specifically illegal, and actually punished severely. We can set local nobles against each other, but when the King insists that freedom fighters be hunted down at any cost, there's no noble in his right mind that would refuse to chase us down. In countries like this (Runemaul Proper comes right to mind) we operate as cells, and do what we can, where we can. It costs us some degree of organization, and a lot of military force; our activities in Tesh are better described as "smuggling" than "freedom fighting", with all the sneaking slaves out that we do. In the territories where the King's arm doesn't reach, or doesn't reach with enough strength to make a slap hurt, it's business as usual. In the Deep Elven lands, we're right back to smuggling, and occasionally resorting to buying slaves to set them free.

But we hate doing that. Hate it. Passionately. It's not that we're cheap, or stingy, or that we don't feel a man's freedom to be worth a few gold. We hate doing it because it allows slavers to turn the profits they crave, and hence encourages them to go right back out a-slavin'. We've got battlegrounds other than politics; we're also fighting on the economic front. We're not naïve enough to think that the whole plane will wake up one day and realize how evil slavery is. We're pretty damned sure, though, that if we make slaves more expensive than hiring honest labor, honest labor will see sudden leaps forward in employment.

Driving up the worldwide price of slavery is a long-term project, and one that we've only really been working on for the last hundred years or so. It was the Iron Griffins that gave us the idea; never let them fool you into thinking that they're just warriors-for-hire. They also practice dark magics like "accounting" and "contract law", and they understand supply and demand perhaps better than any other group of the plane. They'd never say it out loud, but a good portion of the reason that there is so little war recently is because the Griffins have made it too expensive to fight. Launching a war requires either a standing army, or rapid hire of lots of mercenaries; the Griffins can afford to charge less for higher quality than the smaller units, and you can see where that's going. Why bother maintaining your own army? If you catch wind that your neighbor is massing, hire out the Griffins for a fraction of what your neighbor has to pay for his troops, and feel relatively safe that his troops can't handle them.

And we're doing something similar, in a different arena. The Griffins made war un-economical; we're making slavery unprofitable. If your Slaver's Guild has one caravan in three hit by the Shattered Chains, and that one caravan isn't guarded you lose a fortune in "goods", completely unanswered. So you have to guard your caravans, but if you do that, you have to hire people as guards (we can't very well have slaves guarding each other, now can we?). Hiring those people takes money; you either eat that cost as an operating expense, or you pass it along to your customer. If you're the type that's willing to sell little kids for coins, you're probably not the type to

eat a loss for any reason at all, and when you pass the expenses along to your customer, you raise the price. That higher price might make people reconsider the purchase, and the higher the price gets, the fewer people will be willing to pay it. Eventually, you'll have to have slaves of rare and exceptional talent to make it worth the while to ship them, and such slaves are not easily acquired.

It's a worthwhile goal, perhaps the worthiest. We've got no illusions about how difficult it'll be, but we are as relentless in our own way as the Legions are in theirs, and it's a matter of time, not likelihood.

## **The Future**

All things considered, the future's looking like it's going to shape up nicely. Freedom's an infectious disease, and the more territory and the more land we can free through force of arms or economics, the easier it gets to free up the next lands. Since it's been working well, if a bit slowly, there's no good reason to change our basic operation.

Tesh is next on the list. We've got some envoys placed fairly high in official circles, lots of illegal former-slave-smuggling operations in place, and we're building towards ripping slavery out of the place by main force. It's not going to happen soon, but that's the nature of politics. We're also slowly bringing the price of food down to where it's less profitable to buy slaves and force them to work the land than it is to let the people grow their own and resell it (slaves cost money; free men, paying taxes, generates revenue, and sooner or later that math is going to make sense to someone, tradition be damned). The economic battle is a long-term one here, just like anywhere, but we're very patient people on such topics.

When Runemaul's slave trade falls, that ought to be the next thing to a killing blow for the practice pretty much the world over. They take up a lot of space, and if it's illegal to even move slaves through their lands, the price of slavery will shoot through the roof overnight. That only leaves some isolated pockets, like the Deep Elves and the sea bound Minotaur.

Not that we're going to let them be; remote or not, isolated or not, they're still slavers, and their way of life is still going to get flipped upside down. The Minotaur, for all that they can sail, aren't very numerous, and can be brought down by brute force, or starved to death with trade embargoes. I'm making that sound easier than it really is, but the point holds. The Minotaur can be dealt with once we've freed up enough of the world that starving them to death is realistic.

The Deep Elves are a more complicated proposition. It's hard for us to get envoys in their lands, since most of our really good politicians are women, and the Deep Elves just won't have that. They've got their own food sources in their lairs, their caves are a navigational nightmare, and they could realistically just seal out the world and hold. We could stir up the Dwarves against them and launch a two-front war, but we don't really have any illusions about how such a war would come out. So far, we don't really have a good answer for the Deep Elves; surely there'll be lots of fortune and glory for the Chain that comes up with one.

## **Membership**

With all the Knightly "servants of justice" types out there (as though it were possible to endorse slavery, even tacitly, and still claim to serve justice), people tend to get the impression that



Orders are elite secret societies at their best, and snobbish, childish clubs at the worst. We're very pleased to be the exception to those rules.

The only real requirements we have for membership are a willingness to slice up people you don't know, in cold blood, for no better reason than slavery, and skills that the Chains can use. That's a very wide spectrum; we can find a use for almost anything you can imagine. Back in the beginning, we might have rejected a girl with no weapons skills and no magic, but now we're perfectly happy to have her as a politician. The Order was started by Warriors, so there's still some bias in that direction, but not very much, and less every year.

We aren't racists, exactly. If you're a Deep Elf, you're going to have a lot of explaining to do on why it is that you want to throw away your entire culture to sign on with a group that ranges from "tolerated nuisance" to "outlaw", but if you've got a compelling reason and skill at anything, we'll probably take you. Especially if your compelling reason is that you yourself were a slave, and you want revenge.

Let's be upfront about it; all of us, to the last man and woman, believe that in order to have a real appreciation for the evils of slavery, you have to have been subjected to it. If your dad was a slave, and you weren't, then we're deeply sorry for what he's been through, and for what that's done to you, but we don't believe for a second that you understand. All of us can tell you horrible stories about the things we've seen, and the things that have been done to us, but the telling doesn't even shadow the reality. Nothing does.

Don't take that as discouragement; we're still perfectly happy to have sympathizers in the ranks, but unless you show rare dedication and skill, odds are that you'll never make it into the leadership without having been a slave yourself. If it brightens your spirits, remember that slavery is a very common punishment for us in the slave lands, so odds are, sooner or later, the slavers will catch up with you and put you in chains eventually.

You're also going to need to be able to keep your mouth shut. We very often operate on the wrong side of the law, and while we all know it's great fun to sit around the tavern bragging about how we murdered 20 slavers and set a hundred slaves free, doing that is certain to cause problems. We run force operations in secret, and secret is how they damn well better stay. Nothing sets out collective teeth on edge like having an operation burned by an overeager kid that couldn't keep quiet.

Because of the fact that we have to stay underground (metaphorically speaking, until we go after the Dark Elves), you also can't expect a great deal of information handed to you. We'll be certain to make sure you have every relevant tactical detail before we ever ask to you walk out with swords cuttin' and mana flarin', but if you're looking for the overall picture, who our commanders are, that kind of thing, you're out of luck. We can't afford to have you captured and Enslaved or tortured into compromising the entire order, and what you don't know can't be cut out of you, and that's pretty much that.

So. You can handle being left in the dark, you can keep your mouth shut, and nothing lights up your eyes like ripping up slavers. Where from there? Basic training: Who the major slavers are in whatever region you happen to be, our legal status in said region, and lots of other boring schoolwork. If you can stay awake and pay attention through class, we move on to tactical school; freeing slaves from a slaver's pens is a different kind of fight than what you probably grew up on, and you'll need to know the differences. Training generally goes on for a few months, dependent on

how much you knew before you got here. It takes a long, long time to train up a farmer's daughter into a viable combat engine; it takes almost no time at all to train an experienced rogue in stealing slaves.

Assuming that you make it through training and still find the Chains to your taste (training almost always includes cutting up a slaver, and preferably one you've never met, just to make sure you have the stomach for it), you're in. There's a formal induction ceremony, of course; we started off as a military group, and the leader types still hold to a love of ceremony found only in officers and nobles.

## Organization

As much as I'd like to tell you that we're a tightly structured, strictly disciplined military force, it'd be a lie. The nature of our work precludes that kind of organization, and it'd lead us to ruin the first time a Chain got rounded up and Enslaved. He forks over the name and location of his superior, so they round that guy up, and so on and so forth.

So, we do what most successful sublegal groups do; we break down into cells. One per town, as a rule, in areas where the law frowns on us, and the number of Chains in that cell ranges from one to about 20, depending on the size of the city.

Cells have leaders, of course, but cell leaders are very careful never to be seen or heard by the rest of the cell. They send news and questions in by randomly-chosen courier, and that courier is invited to have a healthy drink at both ends of his route. It causes some short-term memory impairment, but that's best for everyone concerned.

Cell leaders report to region leaders, and operate in very much the same way. Over the spans of distance that tend to be involved, we can't rely on forgets and couriers, so we've found other ways of getting news back and forth. Around Tesh, we've got a couple of Iron Griffin scouts that periodically run messages back and forth; they charge a fortune for work they see as "beneath them", but as long as they're running messages on a direct contract, they swear there's no way known to man to force them to give that information over to anyone. Since it's never happened, and they seem so confident, we're perfectly happy to take them at their word.

Region leaders periodically meet with each other on secure ground; we figure that if the forces of darkness have managed to capture and interrogate a region leader, then we've already been compromised so high up that we're about to have far worse problems than one command-type's name being circulated. Also, even if one region leader does fork over the names of the rest, they all live in... well, different regions, and no matter how badly the Runemaul wants to round up a region leader from Essence, they probably aren't going to get him without a lengthy, expensive, and ultimately, losing war.

Any way. The region leaders sit down, compare notes, keep their metaphorical finger on the metaphorical pulse of slavery, and work out who needs to be hit, who we are in place to hit, and who we need to think about hitting. They keep track of the average price of slaves from year to year, to keep tabs on the economic war. They have detailed notes of our political/legal stats, both official and actual, in every corner of the plane (or at least the corners we happen to inhabit). We aren't sure how many there are, or how they decide on new leaders to replace losses, and that's probably just as well.

## Off Time

So, what do we do when we're not actively going out and cutting up slavers? I've mentioned that getting the politics in place for a force operation takes time, and during that time, we've got to be doing something, right?

Wrong, at least taken as an Order. We, like any soldiers in any war anywhere, spend a great deal more time waiting than fighting. Our politicians are almost constantly busy, but the rest of us in the field have copious amounts of spare time.

So, if we're not doing anything as an Order, what are we doing as individuals? The answers might surprise you. No few Shattered Chains have legitimate businesses, trading in whatever they trade in. Some active Chains are farmers, and only leave their farms when there's killing to be done. We've got a few professional thieves that spend their off time stealing things from other people (which is fine by us, unless they happen to get caught stealing from other Chains, in which case a beating generally ensues). Some are soldiers in professional armies, some are professional spies and never stop working.

For some reason, though, most of the Chains are adventurers by profession. Maybe it's the chance to see the world unbound, maybe it's an itch to keep fighting skills in prime shape, maybe it's both of those reasons and a score of others. Whatever the cause, that detail alone gives us a gigantic advantage over the stay-at-home-and-practice-fighting types; we know how combat works in the real world, not on a chart, and we're used to it.

In between operations, then, mostly what we do is dive into filthy holes filled with unspeakable creatures, and we do it for very little provocation. Since you're very likely to be in that hole for some period of time ranging from "hours" to "weeks", leave a note with your cell before you go, and let them know when you get back. If something goes down while you're away, we may or may not make an effort to find you. Depends a lot on how critical your skills are, and exactly how dark the hole you've crawled into it.

Of course, just because you aren't running on "official Chains" business, that's no reason to suffer slavers. If you find some slavers in your deep dark hole, far away from the eyes of man, we'll all be disappointed if you don't cut them up. If you find slaves in that hole, we'll all be disappointed if you don't get them out, or at the very least take careful notes on how to get back to them so a Chain with the necessary skills can go in later and get them out. Here's hoping it's self-evident that we don't accept adventures for slavers; if some slaver comes approaching your team and asks you to help recover his slaves, you know what to tell him.

## Leaving the Ranks

What I said before, about no one being here against his will, was the exact truth. The Chains don't hunt down "deserters", no matter what conditions they deserted under. Freedom fighting is a hard life; almost no one can take it forever, and very few can take it for very long. We don't begrudge anyone the right to quit and go start up a farm somewhere. If you get into the slaver's bedroom and just can't bring yourself to cut up an old man that you've never met, feel free to leave.

But when you leave, leave. It's fairly easy for us to spot infiltrators now; anyone that a)

can't display our Order abilities and b) has no Chain standing over his shoulder as an instructor gets no sensitive information of any kind. It would be much more difficult to uncover moles that had already been among us, already knew the ins and outs, and had been seen by other Chains displaying our skills. We're happy to let anyone in that wants in; we're happy to let anyone out that wants out, but pick a side of the door and stand on it.

We appreciate some notice that you're leaving; we consider it polite for a future-ex-Shattered-Chain to let his local cell know that he won't be back. By long tradition, we don't question why. We don't want to embarrass you by implying you're a coward, even if you are. You're free to explain why, should that interest you, and if you're starting up a farm, we'd also appreciate discounts on food, and it's usually just about as cordial as that. A handshake, some well wishes, and a wave, and it's over.

### **The Bad News:**

The Shattered Chains have a number of restrictions; failure to abide by these rules may result in a loss of Order Abilities or expulsion from the Order.

1. Don't suffer slavery; this is not to say that you must immediately set upon any slavers you see and free their slaves, but when you encounter slavers, they must be dealt with as soon as is practical. How you go about doing that is all you; viable options include assault on the spot, gathering information for future military action, reporting the slavers up the chain of command to get more qualified personnel involved, or whatever else you feel confident will lead to the freeing of those slaves.
2. Shattered Chains intensely dislike binding effects; you may at great need or under special circumstances employ things like Pin, Web, and Contain (as examples), but if it becomes a habit, the Chains will expel you. Find ways to fight that are not binding effects.
3. Along similar lines: No member of the Shattered Chains may ever, for any reason, employ an Enslavement and Charm effects (and whatever reason you're thinking of, no, not that one either). You may be capable of wielding such an effect; that's fine, so long as you don't actually use it.
4. Don't release information that implicates any Shattered Chain (including yourself) in Order-related criminal activity. If you go rob a house for the fun of it and run your mouth about it, fine. If you go set a dozen slaves free and kill their owners, shut up. If someone succeeds in Enslaving you and dragging such information out of you, that's acceptable. Running your mouth for the sake of running your mouth gets you kicked out on the first offense.