



1. LIVE BAIT

draft version 1.2.2

Brightly painted buildings bordered a large market square. Each side of the square promoted a major landmark. On one side was the Court House, there were 365 steps that led up to the top. There was a stair for every day of the year. A poetic representation of life, the architects had said. All manner of business was conducted here.

On another side, a large and colorful theatre spread out on the street. The Theatre de Tri was a three-stage indoor theatre with two smaller outdoor stages too. It was often the centerpiece of a night on the town. Across the square facing the theatre was a black cathedral climbing into the sky. Finely carved details were etched into the dark stone. Though it was currently unfinished, it was glorious in every sense of the word.

Across from the courthouse, on a side by itself, was the gallows. When not in use, it was crowded with people wanting a shaded spot. Nic and Sol walked out from under the shade of the wooden Gallows and into the crowd. The two boys walked towards the square proper. It was crowded with people walking or riding wagons through the market. Nic was the shorter boy. His sandy brown hair matched his olive complexion. He led their expedition through the square, followed by Sol. Sol was darker skinned, like that of the people from the Iron Islands. He was tall too for his age too. The boys snaked their way through chaos.

It was busier today than normal. The square was full of racket from horses and wagon wheels clapping against the cobbled streets. People were packing into the city for New-Summer's Eve Festival tonight. Pop up shops were dotted throughout the market, and trailer wagons doubled as campers and shops on the outskirts of that main square. Nic and Sol approached the courthouse and took up residents on the steps off to one side. A man ringing a bell stood on a small wooden platform halfway

up the steps. A small crowd assembled to hear the Bellman. He was loud for such a thin man.

“See here, see here!” He shouted, holding up a sealed letter of decree. “The Nine have issued a new edict.” He motioned for a man to come stand with him. The man came up and confirmed the seal was unbroken. Completing his job, the volunteer rejoined the crowd. Then, in front of everyone, the Bellman broke the seal and began to read. “All privateering vessels not sailing under the United Regions shall hence force be liable to arrest and tried as pirates!” There was a gasp from the crowd. Pirates didn’t frequent Deldurn. Its military prowess had been set in motion when Nic’s parents were hired by one of the Nine Lords. They were tasked with turning the city into a major militaristic outpost for the Copper Navy.

“Pirates,” Nic puffed the word, turning back towards Sol, he added to his first statement, “We wouldn’t see pirates here if they were paid to come.” He tossed a rock down the steps. It skipped onto the road and disappeared under someone’s moving wagon. “Deldurn is impenetrable, no pirate would be dumb enough to come here.” Nic fished around on the steps for something else to throw.

Sol looked at Nic seriously. “I wouldn’t be so sure. My Ma’ told me that an old man was spinning a tale about how pirates robbed him of a whole day’s catch just off the shore of Makara. Get this though.” Sol paused for dramatic effect. “They left him with one fish! Nic, do you know what that means?” Sol’s excitement overwhelmed him. Nic looked at Sol questioningly.

“Who knows.” Nic shrugged nonchalantly and tossed a stick down the steps. “I mean, maybe they didn’t want him to star...” Sol put his arm up, stopping Nic, and motioned to the other side of the courthouse. A boy with jet black hair was shaking hands with a man wearing a powdered white wig. The man looked at a clock in his hand and then tucked it into the front pocket of his vest. Nic and Sol watched the black-haired boy start walking down the stairs and into the crowd. They stood up to chase after him.

“Ciaran is either going home or to the Blue Lobster. We’ve got to stay far enough back, so he doesn’t see us.” Nic was staring at his feet as they rushed down the steps. As they approached the bottom, a wagon pulled up in front of them.

“Desanté!” Greeted the old man driving a wagon. The word meant pupil or follower. The wagon creaked to a stop, glass jars rattled and clang. The boys looked at the driver.

“Mazdre!” both of the boys barked and bowed. They kept their heads down. Loosing site of Ciaran was killing them both, but they wanted to avoid being disrespectful to one of the Mazdre.

“In Piedi.” The Mazdre said. Sol and Nic relaxed and stood back up. Sol looked out, stealing a glance back into the crowd to search for Ciaran. Nic tried to conceal a leather satchel by scooting it behind him. The old man on the wagon narrowed his eyes.

“Solomon Marckel, Dominic Galavintree.” The old man snapped. The boys jumped to attention and put on a sheepish grin.

“Forgive us, Mazdre Herbalist.” Sol placed his right hand balled up into a fist against the center of his chest and performed a quick bow this time.

“I trust you boys aren’t about to run off into trouble.” The man looked down his nose at the boys before eying the bag behind Nic. A knowing gleam touched his eye. “The both of you are too bright to spend your time causing trouble. Life is troubled enough as it is.” He tilted his head down and met their eyes.

“Mazdre, we are simply eager to get ready for New-Summer’s Eve Festival.” Nic gave his most convincing smile.

“You should be smart enough to know that I know when you are lying.” The Mazdre snapped. “If I hear a shred of you two making trouble, I will have you both up to your elbows in pestle and mortars this summer.”

Nic and Sol both gave a sharp nod and smiled before saying together, “Yes Mazdre.” The older man’s face grew soft, and he sighed. He goaded his horse forward, mumbling to himself about how when he was a kid you listened to your Mazdre. The wagon drifted into the crowd of people. The jars in the back of it clanking together softly as he rode.

When the wagon was safely lost to the crowd, Nic and Sol took off running towards the way they had seen Ciaran go. A few minutes later, they were standing in an alleyway, peaking out of the shadows at Ciaran and a few of his friends. There

were four other boys with Ciaran. One of them was his cousin, and the other three were other nobles' children. They all sat on a wagon playing Boones.

"I would rather not spend my whole summer in the Herbary, man." Sol protested. He was pressed against a building, looking over his shoulder at Ciaran and the other boys down the street. "I'm hoping my Da' will come back this summer and take me with him on the Rebel Lively." The Rebel Lively was the name of the ship that Sol's father sailed on. Nic was re-packing things into the brown leather satchel after taking inventory for the second time.

"Don't worry, I'll take all the blame for this one. I'd give up my whole summer to get back at Ciaran for this last semester. Plus, maybe your Da' would take both of us on his ship." Nic stood up and clasped the buckle on the satchel before holding it out to Sol.

"Yeah, maybe." Sol's said noncommittally taking the bag. He eyed it wearily before tossing it over his shoulder.

"Ships man, it's not that big of a deal. It's just a harmless prank." Nic said.

"Nic, I think you forget that no one else on this island has Master Artisans as parents. When you do a prank, you have access to magic." Sol's face was grim.

"It's not magic." Nic said, shaking his head exasperatedly. "It's basic chemistry. Plus, I know you want to get back at Ciaran too. No one should talk about someone's mom like he did."

Sol signed, "Fine!" He dragged the word out before smiling at Nic.

"Okay, let's get going." Nic said. He moved out into the street, leaving Sol in the shadows, and walked casually towards where Ciaran and his friends were sitting. Nic thought about when they had all learned the history of the Icks earlier in the semester. They were a people group that used themselves as bait to fish for sea monsters. They would dive deep into the ocean with large hooks to catch massive fish that would feed their people for weeks or sometimes months.

Not only that, but they were believed to all be dead. Their theorized primitive way of living was considered all manner of uncivilized and repulsive. It was believed that vicious looking scars spiderwebbed their bodies from being in the belly of the sea monsters. Plus, they would probably always smell of rotten fish and fish guts.

Ciaran had been quick to point out the similarity in how Nic and Ick sounded. So, Nic became Nic the Ick, other students joined in and Nic was relentlessly taunted and treated like he smelled of rotting fish. Even though Nic's parents were the wealthiest on the island, Nic's father and mother were pacifists. Any complaint to them about the behavior of the other teens just won him a sympathetic hug and their ridiculous philosophy of turning the other cheek.

At General Assembly, all the students had parted, letting Nic and Sol through as they held their noses. One day, the school had been plastered with a crude drawing of him underwater, fishing for sea monsters. It read *Nic the Ick in his natural habitat*. Nic had enough. He worked up a plan to get even with Ciaran. He only wished he had been able to do it before they had all been dismissed for summer, but New-Summer's Eve festival might be even better. Nic walked closer towards the boys. One of them nudged Ciaran to look in Nic's direction as he approached their wagon.

"You guys smell that? I'm getting an overwhelming smell of fish guts," Ciaran said mockingly. All the boys laughed and got to their feet. Nic stopped walking and looked around theatrically, searching the crowd.

"I didn't see your Ma' around here, Ciaran." Nic said, meeting Ciaran's eyes. The boys' face went red, and he stepped forward, pointing a finger at Nic and shouting.

"You better watch your mouth you backwards runt. I'll pummel you into the ground harder than god smacked the earth." Ciaran's words caused other people standing around to look in the boy's direction. Trying to get the attention off himself, he asked, "Where's your special friend. The *Miracle Boy*." Ciaran was talking about Sol. The boys had bullied him relentlessly because his father and mother weren't married. They would say *You shouldn't exist since you don't have a father. You're a miracle!* There were even more obscene things they said about his mother.

Sol walked out of an alleyway and joined Nic. "Ciaran, why are you always so worried with where I am. You'd think you're obsessed with me or something." Sol put on a mocking look. "It must be hard on you since you can't be your daddies little perfect boy. Maybe after summer, you'll be smart enough to ace a test without cheating from one of your little cronies." Sol was wearing an obviously fake apology. Ciaran had been caught cheating on his closing exams. His father ended up having to bribe someone on the Mazdre Council to make sure his son see summer classes.

“Alright, if you want a fight? I’ll give you one!” Ciaran’s eyes flashed angrily, and then he grinned like he had just heard the funniest joke. He looked at the three boys to his left, “Run after them and hold them down for me!” He swung his head to the right, pointing to his cousin, “You, go get Mr. and Mrs. Hund. I think I want them to be a part of this.” The boys nodded and took off running towards their prey.

Nic and Sol snaked through the busy streets. The colors from the buildings faded behind them in a blur. Disgruntled exclamation of people who were shoved or bumped by the boys in the chase laid in their wake. The chase went on for some time before Nic stole a glance back. He smirked, the three chasing them were a safe distance away. He signaled to a nearby wagon.

Nic and Sol weaved and jumped behind the stationary wagon and peered back down the way they had come. Their pursuers were just coming into view. Nic and Sol tried to catch their breath.

“You hide here, and I’ll lead them down the alley way.” Sol said. Nic nodded and moved, so he was in-between a few barrels and the wall of the alley. The three boys who were chasing them came into view, and Sol whistled to get their attention. “You three run like old women!” Sol made an obscene gesture. The boys growled and started after him.

The boys passed Nic’s hiding place, he waited for a moment and then moved out and started running after them. A few moments later, Sol stopped and turned around to face his perusers, just in time too. He watched as Nic plowed into one of the boys. The tackled boy and Nic rolled to the ground. Nic tried to stand up, one of the other boys shoved him, he tripped and fell back on the stone. His elbows cried out in pain as they caught his fall.

For a second a big shade blanked him, he looked up, it was Rylan Keeling, one of Ciaran’s friends. He was a much bigger kid than the rest of them. Rylan’s family owned much of the farmland that Deldurn had around its walls. He was a strong and dense boy. His family had been farmers for generations, and the genes showed it. He reared back, a meaty hand preparing a punch.

Nic winced helplessly and tried to block the oncoming blow, and then there was a muted thud off to one side. With the looming shadow gone, Nic blinked sun spots out of his eyes. Nic stood up, still trying to banish the bright spots. Rylan was laid out on the ground, unconscious. Sol and Tomos were trading blows a few feet away. Seb

was dancing around them, attempting to trip Sol up. Nic started running towards the boys. He yelled at Tomos, hoping to distract him. Tomos looked away for a second and Sol socked a solid blow on his chin. The boy fell back, grabbing his chin. He rolled over onto his stomach and crouch ran away from Sol.

Seb gingerly retreated backwards too. He turned and ran towards a corner wall. He kicked off the wall and climbed, pulling himself up and sitting on the wall. Seb was a real skinny boy with bushy black hair. He eyed Nic and Sol while he caught his breath. “Oh man, I can’t wait to see your faces when you meet the Mr. and Mrs.” Seb said. Rylan got to his feet behind Nic and Sol and shuffled over to a shaded spot to sit and collect himself. Tomos climbed next to Seb, they both put on a wry grin. Both boys looked past Nic and Sol, at something approaching.

As if summoned from the shadows, two Bully dogs came bounding into the mouth of the alley. One was brown with white fur coating its underside. The other was a bit smaller and stone grey with the same white hugging its belly. The dogs snarled and snapped viciously from behind leather muzzles. Their ears curved up and back like little devil horns. There wasn’t an ounce of fat on either one of them, they were solid muscle. The only thing keeping Nic from bolting right then was the fact they were muzzled.

Seb lost composure for a moment at the site of the ferocious looking animals and stood up. Chasing behind the dogs, trying to catch up, was a winded Simran. He was carrying two leashes, the ends of which were frayed and snapped. When he got about fifteen feet from the dogs, he doubled over, bracing himself by putting his hands on his knees. He was looking down at the alley floor, gulping lung fulls of air breathlessly complaining. Ciaran came trotting up behind his cousin. He eyed the broken leashes and then looked at Nic and Sol like a hunter looks at prey caught in a trap. The dogs had done their job. They had cornered the boys and were holding them in place.

“Be still.” Ciaran said to the dogs in a commanding voice. He never took his eyes off Nic and Sol. The dogs contained their growling and stopped barking. They sat down perfectly, eyes still fixed on the two boys. Nobody moved or said a word. The only noise was Simran trying catching his breath. The intense moment seemed to stretch on for minutes. “Nic, Sol,” Ciaran finally said, breaking the silence. “This is Mr. and Mrs. Hund.” His conversational tone made Nic’s hackles rise.

“I haven’t been able to take them out hunting yet, and suffice it to say, they’re eager for a chase.” Ciaran continued. “The poor babies spend all day cooped up in a cage. Now, they’re not savages like Nic the Ick.” He made a curt gesture. “But I wouldn’t let them catch me if you care about your well-being.” Ciaran’s face turned dark. Bully dogs were known for having a nasty bite. Even though they were muzzled, it was still very intimidating to think about being chased by one of these hounds. They were effective hunting dogs because they were easily trained and rigidity loyal. Once they got their teeth on something, they would only let it go if commanded.

“Give them a head start! It’ll make it more fun to watch!” Tomos said from onto the wall. He was still holding his jaw. Seb shouted in agreement. Ciaran looked at Simran.

“Are you ready to chase after them?” Ciaran asked his cousin.

“Yeah, I...” Simran was still winded. “Yeah I’m good.” He finally managed. Ciaran looked from Simran, to the dogs, and then to Nic and Sol. He held out his index finger. His face looked smug.

“One,” Ciaran started counting.

“Ah rust!” Sol said, pulling on Nic’s arm as he took off down the alley away from the dogs. Nic and Sol popped out onto an open street. People flowed around them, occasionally cursing the boys for standing in the street. Behind them, all they heard were taunted jeering from the other boys. Sol ran at the next split in traffic towards a stack of crates beside a building on the other side of the street.

They jostled and moved under his weight, but he quickly found his footing and climbed onto the roof. Nic ran after him. Before he even got to the crates, they were already tumbling over. He scrambled to try to make them work in some semblance of steps. But his nervous got the better of him, and they kept tumbling to the ground.

“God’s hand,” Sol cursed, “Nic you gotta run! Those dogs are running this way.” From behind him, Nic heard the crowd gasp in terror as the beasts cut through the busy street. They had already locked on to him. Nic had a fear of dogs, when he had been little one had chased him relentlessly until he climbed a tree. It had stationed itself to guard its prey, and Nic spent several hours in a tree afraid for his life. The

trauma had him frozen, his fear had full grasp of him now. All he could do was just watch the things get closer. A loud shattering sound brought Nic out of his trance.

Sol was distracting the dogs by throwing clay roof tiles at them. It worked, at least long enough to let Nic get his bearings. He looked around and started for an open window. Sol side-armed a sharp piece of tile. It hit one of the dogs in the muzzle. The leather muzzle split slightly, the dog shook his head and stopped to paw at it. The muzzle stayed on, the dog resumed its chase of Nic.

The open window Nic was running towards was higher than he had calculated. He wasn't so sure now that he would be able to get to it. He could hear the dogs closing behind him, he looked for something that could give him a boost. He jumped, kicked off the stone foundation and grabbed onto the frame of the window. His legs dangled and kicked against the wooden siding frantically. The dogs were taking turns jumping at his feet. Nic looked down and brushed one of the dog's muzzles with a kick. The dog fell back and pawed at its muzzle. Nic's blood ran cold. The dog's muzzle fell away, it stood up and jumped at Nic, teeth bared.

Nic continued to scramble, trying to get a footing that would propel him through the window. From inside the room, someone belched and then start growling, "All this godforsaken racket." A man shuffled to the window, a large, bearded face looked down at Nic. He squinted his eyes from the sunlight and cursed under his breath. The man wrapped a large hand around Nic's wrist and hoisted him into the window.

He fell into the room and twisted, so he could see his savior. His eyes went wide when they surveyed the giant. His legs looked thicker than Nic's whole body. He was bare to the waist and had dark pants on. His beard hung down over his chest, obscuring various tattoos. What you could see of his face was carved from stone. His nose had obviously been broken several times, and his chin looked strong enough to survive any knock out punch. His eyes were dark, an intensity accompanied them that made Nic shudder. The man had a thick white scar down the side of his face. His mouth turned into a snarl.

"Rust 'n god's bloody hands! Shut up!" The man screamed at the dogs outside the window. The dogs responded in a cowed whimper. "Are these your dogs' boy?" He eyed Nic. Nic couldn't move or speak. The man got down in Nic's face. His eyes were yellowed and bloodshot. His breath smelt like he had just been drinking brandy

before Nic grappled to his window. Nic tried to think, but the big man's face silenced him.

From outside, Simran started yelling up at the window, "I thought Icks weren't scared of anything. You and your pacifist family are a joke!" From outside the window, there was laughter as the rest of the boys caught up. The man looked at the window and back at Nic. He shambled up to the window and looked down at the boys.

"Who are you, old man?" Nic heard Ciaran's voice say. Nic watched as the man pulled something out of his waistband. It looked like a primed flint lock pistol. Nic's heart sank when he saw the weapon. The dark stained wooden handle disappeared in the man's large hand. This wasn't anything like other guns Nic had seen. They had always been brightly polished, well oiled, meant for show not for use.

"Go away, you little maggots. I'm trying to sleep." The man's voice was gravely and rough and dripped with disdain.

"Why don't you make us, ugly!" Nic wasn't sure which boy said it. But the man didn't hesitate, he pointed the gun out the window.

"Wait!" Nic finally found his voice. "Wait, don't shoot them." The words came out shakily. The man looked back at Nic, a snarl crossing his face, and then he pointed the pistol into the street and pulled the trigger. Nic flinched from the loud explosion, it pulled his eyes shut. Even with his eyes closed, he saw the burst of red light from the street.

The boys in the street whooped and hollered as they ran to get out of the way, and the dogs barked, getting excited again. Nic pried his eyes open, scared at what he would see. The man pulled the smoking gun back into the room and tossed it in Nic's direction. Nic watched it fly and land on the bed. He had been wrong, it was a flare gun. The man shot off a flare gun at Ciaran and his friends. Nic edged backwards towards the door leading out of the room. The man gave into a coughing fit from laughing so hard.

When Nic was almost sure he had made it to the door, he scooted back and placed his hand on a weathered boot. He pulled it away like he had touched hot iron and looked at the boot then the leg it was attached too before looking up at the man. He wore a nasty smile that said he had devious plans for the boy.

“What’s this little maggots doings?” The voice slithered out of the man, and when Nic looked up, he saw the man’s tongue looked like snakes. He was skinnier, but dressed like the reverse of the man in the room. He had shorts on and a baggy t-shirt stained in several places. He reached down and grabbed Nic by the shirt and held him up. Nic grabbed onto the arm holding him up, it was covered in tattoos.

“Leave em’ be.” The rough voice coughed from behind Nic. “It’s my good deed for the day.” The skinnier man growled at Nic and tossed him out of the door into the hallway. Nic stumbled to his feet and ran. He ran down the hallway, through the commons area of a tap room, and burst out the front door onto the busy street. He was frantic as he ran, he ignored curses and swears as he shoved through crowds. He never looked back, he was too scared, he blew through the city running for his life.

Nic’s lungs were a blazing inferno. He felt like he would kill over if he took another step. Ducking behind a building, he sank behind some rain barrels. He rested his head on the wood, his whole body moved with each breath. The blood in his ears pumped loudly. Only now was he becoming aware of the sweat that coated his body. The muscles in his legs screamed at him. His recovery was a longtime coming. He sat there panting in the alley, fearing the worst.

“Dude, I’ve been trailing you for like six blocks. What gives!?” Sol had slid around the building and was crouching across from Nic. He had seemingly appeared out of nowhere and Nic jumped, stopping in a half crouched half running position before recognizing Sol. “What were you running from? Nothing was chasing you.” Sol trailed off as he leaned out to peer down the street before looking back to Nic.

“Ships man, you scared the rust off of me.” Nic laughed the words breathlessly and slumped back down against the barrel. “I thought you were, I thought you were.” Nic still hadn’t caught his breath, he gave up on the thought. “Sol, I don’t know where Ciaran is. And I think you were right. I think I saw pirates.”

“That’s okay.” Sol said. He was still focused on the street. “Let’s go grab the bag. I stashed it on a roof. We can still get Ciaran tonight.” A smile split Sol’s face. “In fact, I’ve laid a little trap. Come on, let’s get going, I’ll tell you on the way.” Sol and Nic stood up, Nic walked like a baby dear.