

Pedro was not contacted directly. In fact, he received very little information. Though he knew the locations and faces of his foster family members, Pedro knew that communicating with them was all but forbidden. Too many years and too much money was at stake for anything but the briefest transmission of information. In this instance, his message came from a drunk who was besotted with slavers' juice. The message simply instructed him to get a job at a smithy, any one would do. Once that was done, he was to make plans and ready possible methods. More information would follow.

As far as the drunk who slurred the message to Pedro, his fate was unknown. Using such people was fairly common. One of his family would befriend such a person, buy them drinks and make sure that the watered-down slaver's juice was not so watered down. Once the person was drunk enough, they would be instructed to perform a task and promised riches if they did. Once the task was done, the drunken sot was left to his own devices sometimes with payment. The next day, the drunk would need the slaver's juice. In time, the patsy's will would be destroyed and he would be a pariah. At that point, he would cease to be a liability.

Pedro and his family were not without morals. They did not relish violence or senseless death. Being educated, they realized that life and civilization were complicated and precious. They also realized that death and violence occurred everyday. It was often better to direct some of those events rather than let them occur randomly. People had to die. If some of those people became his families' clients, then only two things changed. The client died earlier and the family got paid.

So Pedro's last few days had been spent studying the shop in which he was now employed. He did his observing covertly. He was perfect for it. He was of average build. He was not too unkempt, but he would certainly not be mistaken for a young lord. Though he bumbled about, he did perform enough tasks adequately to keep himself employed. His boss kept him busy, but not busy enough to prevent Pedro from seeing how the forge's door was often left open. He noticed too that many of his boss's finest swords were hung from a large chandelier-like display rack. Any one of those heavy swords could fall at any moment. There were broken crossbows, tools that could be tripped over, and scores of blades that might have an infectious substance. It was true that his new job was fraught with danger.

It did not take too long for the next bit of news to come to him. This time the messenger did not know he was the messenger. A lord had come to the shop seeking a sword. Part of Pedro's duties was to tend to the customer's horses. As his training demanded, he routinely studied everything. The lord's horse had a fine saddle that was well worn. The saddle had an innumerable amount of scratches in it. Some of the scratches had been placed there by one of his family. It was a language that few people in the known lands knew. The scratches were not deep. In a short time, with constant riding, the message-bearing scratches would be worn completely away by the lord's buttocks.

The message was clear and simple. Regent Lilandra. When Pedro realized who his client was, he shuddered with excitement. Not in his wildest dreams had he thought he would ever be assigned so powerful a target. At least not for years. That she was a client of his family did not overly surprise him. People died everyday. But, no one paid the family to speed the death of poor people. His family's clients were almost always rich and noble.

The noble rode off, his bottom quietly buffing away the covertly scrawled message. Pedro wondered if any other messages were being delivered today. Certainly, his family had other clients.

Rumors quickly spread through the smithy section of Atani City that Lilandra was to visit the smithies today. It was a fine day. There was plenty of sunshine and the city seemed to be bubbling with excitement. There was talk of a new statue being constructed in a wooden warehouse inside the great stadium.

The citizens meandered about in the streets. They sought each other's company to discuss how their gowns were similar to the Regent's latest display. They gossiped about the success of the recruiting effort and how no one could possibly be successful against the growing Atanian Army. Of course, the main reason they were out in the streets was they hoped to catch a glimpse of their beloved Regent. Even his usually gruff and serious boss was in the street talking to other craftsmen.

Pedro however was not in the street. His boss had given him plenty of work to do. The overhead sword rack had to be checked. Possible tripping hazards had to be examined. Indeed, even the metal filings that lay strewn about could have sharp edges that might permit something to enter a person's bloodstream through the smallest puncture.

From his position in the back of the shop, he could see that his boss and those around him became slightly more active in their gestures. The regent was coming. His education had shielded him from the hysteria that many people felt for the Regent.

He could only imagine the crowds doing their best to not mob her. She would not appreciate that. She would not want them fawning over her as if she were better than they. Pedro, of course, knew that all people were not equal. No one paid the family to make a client of a farmer.

As she walked down the crowded lane, there were occasional cheers, but mostly people simply waited and desperately hoped for her to notice them. To some, it would be the highest honor to have the Regent choose them to converse with.

Pedro automatically began his tranquil breathing techniques when he realized she was indeed heading to his boss' shop. The exercises came easily to him. The family had trained him, his brothers, cousins, and uncles how to appear casual while delivering death. Excitement led to mistakes. Mistakes led to discovery. Protecting the family was the single most important lesson he had learned.

Maintaining his composure was difficult. When she entered the shop, he saw she was more beautiful than the rumors had foretold. She was not however, arrayed in a fancy gown and draped in jewels. She was wearing a simple skirt, blouse and boots. Boots! What type of noble felt comfortable enough to wear the clothes of the working people?

His boss followed her in chatting all of the way. She patiently listened to his thoughts and even told him that they were good. His flush was deeper than forge-heated iron. She asked probing questions about how much he produced, what he needed and what hindered him from producing more for the growing army.

She like anyone who was unfamiliar with a blacksmiths shop was careful not to touch anything. People who had not trained with weapons were afraid of them, as if they could jump up and hurt them of their own accord. Pedro watched for his moment. He was ignored by his boss simply because his boss wanted all of the Regent's attention.

That was how Pedro preferred things. It was always better if the client did not notice you.