

SC GOWLAND

A central figure in a dark, hooded cloak stands with their back to the viewer, looking towards a bright, fiery, and colorful background. The figure's right hand holds a glowing green sword. To the left and right of this central figure are four other figures in dark, hooded cloaks, also looking towards the background. They are holding various weapons, including swords and spears, some of which are glowing with purple or green light. The background is a swirling mass of fire and smoke in shades of orange, yellow, and blue, with a large, bright, circular light source in the center. The overall scene is dramatic and ominous.

THE
DARK
CROWN

THE SOULS' ABYSS - BOOK ONE

THE DARK CROWN



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By SC Gowland

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and please leave a review.

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The Dark Crown



The Souls' Abyss – Book One

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Written by a talented human, not AI,
and as humans have feelings and robots do not,
please leave a review.

Thank you.

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Map of Essealar

To see and explore the entire world scan the QR code below.



Dedication

For the ladies, who give everything meaning.

The Way of the Walker

*The path is strewn with shadows
I must walk aside the light,
And banish all the evil deeds
Stride in the path of right,
My strength will rise triumphant
and peace will be its aim,
As harmony is my journey
and Walker is my name.*

Paragon Master Raezrius

Chapter I - Questions

‘No more souls today,’ he whispered.

He shivered, grey-blue eyes taking in the scenery. It was still raining - a soft, silvery drone that soaked anything and everything beneath it. This only added to his irritation.

Why had they been allowed to survive? They had been there for the taking. The question rolled around his head like honey in a bowl.

It was early autumn and accordingly was dim, cold, and miserable, which somewhat reflected his mood. Dense, crooked shrubs scattered throughout the hillsides, intermingled with tall trees - reaching up like giant twisted hands - hardly the most uplifting of surroundings.

Leather creaked as he wriggled in his saddle - for what felt like the thousandth time - trying to achieve some sort of comfort. The rider's co-ordinated grey leather and black armour was digging into places it should not, but he took some solace because his journey was close to an end. Unfortunately, at the back of his mind was the grim knowledge that it would be needed again, and probably all too soon.

His grey panthera shuddered, spraying the light drizzle from his coat. He patted the big cat with affection, pulled his dark burgundy cloak closer - whilst still leaving easy access to his Walkerblade, more out of habit than need - and clicked his heels. No point hanging around.

Despite only being in his early forties, Kaoldan felt much older today, gloomy thoughts clogging his mind. A big man - more of long bones and ropey tendons than of muscle. He was not handsome, but possessed a strong, gentle face. His beard rustled as he ran his hand through dirty blonde hair. It was scratching a little too much, but the soft rain compensated somewhat.

The events of the last few weeks had been confusing but could have been so much worse. Granted he was tired, wet, and dirty, but he was also alive, something that could not be said of many. He took

in a deep breath through his nose. The rich smell of the forest was still refreshing compared to the familiar crude metallic odour of his armour.

To his left a line of people snaked outwards, disappearing into trees to a chorus of shuffling feet. Dozens of people and a handful of soldiers, some on horseback, some on makeshift pallets pulled by horses, the most seriously wounded in a few creaking wagons. But most simply ambled, a variety of dirty bandages the only evidence of the attack.

Many seemed lost; focusing purely on the effort needed to keep moving towards Thura and some semblance of safety. Even if this safety was an illusion, for some it was all the motivation they had. The scale and severity of the wounded and injured was perhaps the most unsettling part of their last encounter with the Krund.

Kaoldan snorted and continued to flex his fingers.

The Krund. Kaoldan had lost many colleagues, more than he could recall, or comprehend over recent years. He rubbed the back of his neck, working the tension out of his jaw.

A rustle of movement.

A boy, perhaps six years old, stood watching Kaoldan, a ragged silhouette against the greenery.

Kaoldan looked back. The boy didn't flinch.

'You in charge?' he asked, dark messy hair dropping to one side.

Kaoldan nodded. The boy looked him up and down, with no embarrassment.

'You're one of them Walkers, aint ya,' he said.

'What makes you say that?'

'Well, apart from being sat on a bloody big cat,' he pointed.

Tren yowled. The boy scampered backwards, boots slipping in the mud.

Kaoldan laid a hand on the bloody big cat and Tren fell silent.

The boy looked back, eyes wide, face hollow, breath heavy.

Kaoldan grunted as he lifted himself out of his saddle and approached the cowering boy.

‘It’s ok,’ he said, hands raised as he grew closer.

The boy eyed him suspiciously, gaze moving between the panthera and Walker.

‘Ignore him,’ said Kaoldan, ‘He just wants to get home.’

Tren snorted.

‘Home,’ said the boy absently. He looked up – dark eyes under wet hair - as Kaoldan reached down to help him up, the boy recoiled.

‘It’s ok,’ said Kaoldan, voice calm and even, eyes fixed on the wet youth as he knelt. ‘He’s just a grumpy old cat.’

‘I used to have a cat,’ said the boy, face brightening. He frowned, ‘Lost it. Used to have a...’ his voice fell away. His face creased up, speckled with dirt and a smudge of red on his cheek.

‘What’s your name?’ asked Kaoldan.

The boy looked up, eyes glistening.

‘Why do you wanna know?’ the boy sniffed.

Kaoldan shrugged, ‘Just asking. I’m Kaoldan.’

The boy hesitated. ‘Jaykhaus,’ he said.

Kaoldan shifted, the image of a face flashed through his head and he lowered his gaze.

‘My friends call me Jayk,’ the boy offered.

Kaoldan dropped his head. ‘Here,’ he scratched the back of his neck, trying to remove his cloak. ‘You have this. You need it more than me.’

‘I don’t need charity,’ said the boy, voice rising.

‘It’s not charity,’ his voice soft.

‘No?’

‘No. You are wet, I am not,’ his fingers fumbled with the clasp, but eventually he removed the scratchy woollen cloak.

The boy’s eyes widened as he glimpsed the Walkerblade at Kaoldan’s side, his hand absently reaching forwards as Kaoldan spread the cloak over his shoulders.

‘Something else you need?’ Kaoldan asked.

The boy snatched his hand away as if his fingers were exposed to flame.

‘It’s just. That...’ he pointed to the Walkerblade at Kaoldan’s side.
‘Is it?’

Kaoldan nodded.

‘Can I?’

Kaoldan paused, thought about it, then reached to his left. From his scabbard, he pulled a short rod of dark metal.

The boy looked at it.

‘Go on,’ said Kaoldan, offering it to him.

The boy looked at it, then at Kaoldan, then tentatively reached forward. He shivered as he touched the edge. ‘Cold,’ he murmured. He stood, the cloak consuming him, reaching he took the weapon, hefting it in both hands. Swirling it in circles. He frowned. He looked at Kaoldan, disappointment in his eyes.

‘Why doesn’t it...?’ he shrugged.

Kaoldan offered an open hand. The boy handed the weapon back.

With a flick of Kaoldan’s wrist, the dark rod flashed green. The boy’s mouth went slack. The green light faded as the rod morphed into a broadsword.

The boy looked at Kaoldan, eyes mesmerised.

He flicked his wrist, again the flash of green light, the broadsword morphed into a butterfly-shaped axe. Lowering the axe to the ground, he offered it to the boy handle first. ‘It’s ok,’ he said, voice cracking slightly.

The boy swallowed and reached for the handle. The second his finger touched it, it snapped back into a short dark rod, dropping into the mud. The boy flinched away.

‘How?’ he asked.

Kaoldan smiled. ‘Fajin,’ he said, wiggling his fingers.

‘Magic...?’

‘Some people call it that.’

‘You have it?’

Kaoldan nodded.

The boy’s face creased in concentration. He gazed at the rod on the ground, licked his lips and snatched it up, looking closer.

‘It only reacts to me or other Walkers,’ said Kaoldan. ‘I think about it and it changes into whatever I need.’

‘Could I use Fajin?’ asked the boy, face serious.

‘Maybe. Some people have it, others don’t. It’s simple. Just think about what you want and visualise it,’ he tapped at the side of his head.

The boy grasped the rod with both hands. He squeezed it between his fingers, air squeaking through his nose. It flickered green.

Kaoldan’s eyebrows rose slightly.

The boy trembled, holding his breath.

Green light spluttered and crackled along the edge, then nothing.

The boy let out a gasp and frowned.

‘It takes time and practice. Lots and lots of practice,’ said Kaoldan, reaching forward. The boy looked at the Walkerblade, then offered it back.

Kaoldan reached for it, but the boy didn’t let go.

‘Can you teach me?’ he asked, eyes fierce.

Kaoldan looked at his feet, then knelt, his knees clicking.

‘I’ll make you a promise. If you can help me look after these people, then when we reach Thura. I’ll teach you.’

The boy kept hold.

‘Only special people can help me. And I need someone I can trust,’ said Kaoldan.

The boy stood taller. ‘You can trust me,’ he said.

‘I’m sure I can,’ smiled Kaoldan. ‘Deal?’ he offered his other hand.

The boy looked at it for a moment, then snatched it.

‘Deal,’ he said, releasing his grip of the weapon. The boy’s fingers were small, white and cold in Kaoldan’s wide hand. He stared at them. The clatter of a cart jogged his mind.

‘Deal,’ Kaoldan coughed and raised a hand.

A stocky looking man pulled the reins back. Horses spluttered and stopped. Laden with cowering people, it rocked backwards.

‘You are needed here,’ said Kaoldan, leading the boy forwards, burgundy cloak dragging on the ground. He slipped his hands under

the boy's arms and with a grunt hoisted him up.

The boy was light. He hugged Kaoldan tightly as he was lifted. Kaoldan's body stiffened, then he released his grip. The boy settled into the back of the cart, wrapping the cloak around him.

'So I'm looking after them,' said the boy, eyes wide.

Kaoldan nodded. 'I trust you,' he said.

'Thank goodness you are here, young sir,' croaked an older woman from the back of the cart. From under her blue shawl her eyes fell on Kaoldan and she winked.

Kaoldan smiled back.

'We have need of a strong young man just like you.'

The boy looked back; his chin raised.

'See...' said Kaoldan. 'They need you, not me,' he opened his palms.

The boy looked back, still slightly uncertain.

'I trust you and so does she,' the old woman grinned back.

The boy set his jaw and nodded.

Kaoldan smiled, 'I'll be waiting for you,' he said, then instantly regretted it. He nodded to the driver. Leather reins snapped, and the cart rattled onwards.

He watched the cart roll away. The boy looked at him for a long time, then the older woman said something to him, and his attention was on their conversation.

He slid the Walkerblade back into his scabbard, hauled himself back into his saddle and watched the cart disappear, merging with the throng of people.

'Ho, Kaoldan!', a familiar shout brought him back to his senses.

The voice belonged to an identically dressed man approaching on a large white panthera. Kaoldan could not help but smile at the approach of his oldest friend. Despite blood and mud - evidence of the ferocity of their last encounter, and the fading light, the rider's large round silver shield glistened. Standards always had to be maintained, or so Zalen always said.

Zalen was a head shorter than Kaoldan with hulking arms - slightly

at odds with the rest of his body – he rode as if carrying items under his arms, causing them to stick out like a chicken.

‘Where have you been?’ shouted the breathless rider in a rich voice. ‘I thought you’d finally come to your senses and taken leave of this madness.’

Kaoldan’s smile grew. Despite all the surrounding carnage, Zalen could always see things in a different light.

‘I stayed purely because someone has to look after you,’ replied Kaoldan in a gentle voice, ‘I’m not certain you could survive on your own; Kubrean certainly thinks you can’t.’

‘Ah, well. There you may have a point...’ smiled Zalen. ‘Regardless of what you may think, I believe I am a man of extraordinary talents,’ he continued. ‘Or so I lead people to believe,’ he said sheepishly, then flashed a grin, causing a small laugh from Kaoldan.

For a second, he observed his friend. He was still the same carefree boy he could so clearly recall meeting 35 years before. The same tufty sandy hair, same bright even smile and the same attitude to life; not always in keeping with most of the world. Even though their lives had led to different places, they had always remained close, and the honest optimism Zalen possessed was one of the qualities Kaoldan admired most.

‘How much further do we have to go?’ asked Zalen, squinting into the distance, ‘You know how I lose track of these things, not one of my strengths you understand, I can’t be good at everything.’

Kaoldan considered the question. Their progress had been slower than he had hoped, but they were close to the city now.

‘We should arrive sometime after nightfall perhaps, don’t worry, you’ll be able to get cleaned up soon enough,’ he replied. ‘I suspect you might smell as bad as me,’ said Kaoldan, pointing his nose towards his friend.

‘Never,’ replied Zalen, looking shocked.

‘I think Tren might have a view to the contrary, I’m afraid,’ said Kaoldan. ‘What do you think?’ he asked his panthera, giving him a

rough stroke.

The enormous grey cat glanced at his passenger with a notable degree of contempt. He then turned to Zalen and extended his nose. His whiskers twitched, immediately regretting the decision with a loud snort and an irritable flick of his tail.

‘Exactly as I thought,’ said Kaoldan with a grin.

Tren then turned and sniffed his rider and shuddered.

‘Or maybe not’ said Zalen in triumph.

‘Hmm, was there anything else you wanted to discuss apart from geography and bathing habits?’ asked Kaoldan.

‘Erm, no. Not really,’ replied Zalen, attempting to shrug his shoulders. ‘Just thought I’d check on you in case you needed the company or wanted to see something not caked in mud.’

Kaoldan ignored that.

‘Our primary concern is getting everyone home more or less in one piece. We’ve lost enough people recently,’ he glanced at the stream of wounded people that continued along the trail.

Zalen nodded, business-like once again.

‘Check the back of the group, no-one gets left behind,’ said Kaoldan.

Zalen nodded again. He reined in his panthera, which bounced slightly, before charging off in the direction he had come.

‘And you and I need a small chat about manners when we get home,’ he whispered to Tren, who glanced backwards and snorted loudly.

Kaoldan’s thoughts returned to his surroundings, and his responsibilities. He inhaled deeply. A renewed determination rose within him.

‘No more souls today,’ he whispered.

Tren twitched, sensing his master’s change of mood, and he charged off to the front of the group.

The next few hours passed without incident, attending to the many and various needs of the wounded whilst keeping everything moving meant Kaoldan nearly did not notice the spires of Thura in the distance.

Despite the dull evening, tall coloured towers of varying shades; yellow, red and blue stood out against a grey curtain in the distance. Thura was a curious mixture of architectural styles and ideas, meaning that virtually nothing was the same. There was no uniformity to the layout or construction of the city. Lit beacons could be seen on top of the sandstone walls and in many of the taller buildings which comprised the inner city.

A small wave of relief swept over Kaoldan as he glanced back at the group. Slowly and in increasing numbers, figures emerged from the dark forest into the evening gloom. They gathered and moved together along the main road, flickering torches hung at regular intervals leading to the main entrance surrounded on each side by silvery, waving fields of grass. Kaoldan let out a long breath. They were nearly home.

If it had been any other person, they would not have seen it.

It began as a dark outline, something that could easily have been dismissed as shadows in darker clouds. But it had a shape, a consistent menacing shape, which moved with ease and power towards them out of the evening sky.

The shout from Kaoldan came too late for many of the refugees and slower moving injured. It landed just beyond the trees, straight on top of them with incredible force, like a deep boom of thunder, their screams quickly silenced.

Coloured orbs began emerging from each dead body - showing the losses to be great - rising into the sky gently; a rainbow of death as the orbs headed to the Abyss.

The creature thrashed around them, dwarfing the screaming and scattering horses. It let out a piercing screech; body juddering, wings unfurled; a silhouette of oily black against the coloured orbs and grey

of the evening. Veins coiled and protruded from its main body. They rippled and pulsed, something underneath squirming to be free.

It screeched, raising its long neck high into the air. Shivering as it stood to its full height, calling out again, but sharper this time, body shifting, a mass of coiled tendons. There was a cracking sound; like a thousand eggs breaking at once. It cried out as if in pain, main body fractured, sections of black veins peeling away like dead skin dropping to the floor.

The veins slithered, coiled together to form shapes; legs, a torso, arms and then a head; like men made of tree roots. A dull orange glow grew within each one, then they moved as one towards the refugees.

Tren had automatically turned to face the melee. Kaoldan kicked him into a run and reached for his Walkerblade. He was still a few hundred metres from the lumbering creatures, a stiff wind whipping in his face. Faintly he could hear other Walkers on pantheras following his charge towards the conflict. His breaths were deep and heavy as Tren charged.

The creatures advanced. They were tall and slender, about twice the height of a human. They had the shape of men but appeared to have no skin. Merely black tendons, like sickly twisted tree branches, moving like a herd of elephants; lumbering and heavy set. The treemen began tearing into the wounded and families around them striking, left, and right stamping and crushing to screams of pain and agony. Twisting and turning, searching for more to kill.

It was a slaughter.

Pleas for mercy quickly silenced.

More green, blue and yellow orbs began rising into the night sky.

‘Tren, Run!’ barked Kaoldan.

Tren shuddered, relaxed, and then ran, his thundering paws tearing up large chunks of grass and soil beneath him, and quickly he began to outpace the others.

As Tren raced forwards Kaoldan began gathering his will and felt the warm familiar tingle of Fajin rising within him. Kaoldan reached

for his Walkerblade and it flashed into a large green warhammer. The treeman at the front of the advance braced itself, raising its branch like arms in protection of the advancing Walkers, but it was of little consequence.

The shock-wave of the impact when Kaoldan's Walkerblade crashed into the creature's raised arms, combined with the power of his Fajin strike, knocked the creature clean off its feet and backwards several metres. The treeman struggled to rise, seemingly groggy from the impact – allowing Kaoldan the opportunity to morph his Walkerblade into a large heavy single bladed axe. He gritted his teeth, swinging it in vast arcs, straight into the head and neck of the creature. The green blade bit with a dull, heavy thud. The creature made no noise. No cry or scream. No blood. Merely silent, as they continued to deal death around them. It took several heavy blows to the neck of the creature before it slowed, as its head toppled, twisting to the side before falling off. The creature fell to its knees with a crash and then collapsed onto the floor.

Strangely, no orbs emerged from the body, only the orange glow within it disappearing like the embers of a dying fire. Kaoldan spotted Zalen and several other Walkers following his lead and began hacking, swinging their blades towards the head and neck of the creatures. Dozens of other Thuran warriors, dressed in light grey and blue armour, had now joined them, attacking with long handled spears, pikes and arrows. The treemen fell back.

Out of the corner of his eye. Kaoldan saw something, he squinted. Icy fingers crept around his heart.

It was his burgundy cloak, sprawled - like a pool of blood - across the ground. He nudged Tren closer.

The fingers around his heart grew tighter, squeezing at his insides. The cart was a wreck; axels pointing in the air, wooden wheels splintered and shredded. The clang and crash of the battle around subsided to a dull hum. It was the blue shawl flapping in the breeze that confirmed his worst fears.

The old woman's arms were spread outwards, body face down.

Close by the burgundy cloak lay the young boy's body on the ground, one thin pale arm reaching towards him pleading.

Jayk - he felt his guts turn to water.

He turned away, trembling, ragged breaths in and out, the air cold. He set his jaw hard and looked again. The arm still pointing, but terribly still.

Kaoldan paused and on instinct turned to see the winged creature, some distance away from the main battle, simply watching. It did not try to help the slowly floundering treemen, it merely sat.

A deep rage grew in Kaoldan. He gritted his teeth, and he turned Tren to charge. The creature, as if sensing the imminent danger, turned its long neck and snake-like head in Kaoldan's direction. It then rose, perching on its two rear feet, but waited.

This was too much for Kaoldan, the arrogance of this damned creature. He roared and kicked Tren into a full-blooded charge. He was aware of his own heavy breathing and the thunderous sound of Tren bounding across the grassland. As he approached, the creature suddenly spread its huge wings and pushed easily into the night sky. It was at this moment that Kaoldan caught sight of the angular and dark shaped rider close to the head of the creature.

The rider in long flowing robes watched Kaoldan approach with no hint of fear. The creature slowly hovered safely in mid-air as Kaoldan reined Tren in. The rider observed Kaoldan and then laughed. A twisted cackle, which resonated clearly despite the slow flapping of the creature's wings.

'Pathetic,' spoke the rider. It's voice whispering and hoarse. 'If this is the might of the human; we shall conquer you swiftly and completely,' it hissed.

'You are as nothing compared to us. You bleed, you have fear, you are few.' It laughed again. 'You have no comprehension of what is at hand, so timid and concerned are you for your kind; it blinds you to all. When He comes, and He will, nothing will stop us.'

Kaoldan said nothing, jaw grinding.

The rider laughed once again and then with a powerful push of its

wings the creature soared up into the night sky and was gone.

Chapter 2 – Appetite

The next morning, Kaoldan awoke late. His room, although light, warm and inviting, had not encouraged the sleep he had craved. He shook his head to clear the cobwebs, then sat for a few minutes with his head in his hands at the end of his wooden bed. Pushing away the familiar nightmares, the clouded faces, the heat and the smell of burning and inevitably the same feelings; panic, anger, fear and loss, and the dazzling array of lights from numerous orbs.

The arrival of a cold, wet nose and short, wiry fur being pushed into his lap brought him back to reality. He looked up, blinked, and smiled.

‘I wondered when you’d find me,’ Kaoldan said.

Sat patiently in front of him was a tall, square muscled pile of coarse short black fur. It had a long pink tongue sticking out of his distinctive bushy beard and eyebrows, and deep black eyes. It seemed to struggle to control itself, waiting desperately for permission.

‘Come here, Dref,’ gave in Kaoldan.

With permission granted, Dref did not waste a second before pouncing straight on top of Kaoldan. Given his considerable size, Dref the dog almost winded Kaoldan. He began nuzzling and whining in happiness.

‘You’ve put on weight,’ winced Kaoldan.

Dref did not seem to take such an observation well. The playful wrestling between the two - who had not seen each other for a while - continued for several minutes before they collapsed into a heap on the wooden floor.

‘Did you miss me?’ Kaoldan asked.

A deep bark back suggested so.

The following playful yelps and growls then sort to update Kaoldan that such behaviour was not acceptable to a giant Schnauzer like Dref. And further still, that *going somewhere dangerous* would not

suffice as an excuse for leaving him at home in the future. Dref cocked his head to one side, to emphasise his point, and one of his tall pointy ears drooped over his head.

It all made perfect sense to him.

Kaoldan smiled. He had missed his furry friend.

He had found Dref, as a small and slightly fuzzy ball of black fur in a village the Krund had attacked in the early years of the war. He was the sole survivor of a small litter of puppies. The bodies of Dref's mother and small siblings lay still by his side as he let out barely audible whimpers. Strangely, it had been Tren who had directed Kaoldan toward him. Since then the panthera and the dog had developed a special if slightly unusual friendship. They ran in fields together, Tren always winning races, but Dref always willing to keep trying to beat his much larger friend. Dref was most definitely the noisier of the pair. Growls and whines, his attempts to draw something more substantial than silence from his feline colleague - conversation was difficult. What was easy for anyone to see was the close bond between them. They had travelled hundreds of miles together on long and complicated adventures with Kaoldan and had grown inseparable, but that was another story.

Despite his fitful sleep and the events of the previous day still fresh in his mind, Kaoldan's thoughts immediately turned to food. He was ravenous. He bathed and could finally shave in the warm waters of a wooden bath. Before dressing in a soft grey top, suede leggings and brown boots. It was good not to have to face the prospect of cold, wet armour for a change. He belted his Walkerblade to his waist and prepared to head downstairs. Sniffing the air and sensing a good chance of sausages, Dref followed by his side as Kaoldan slowly descended the wooden staircase towards the kitchen.

The chapter house which Kaoldan had called home over the last few years had always been to his liking. Once the residence of a spice merchant, it had become a new and very much welcome home to Kaoldan and his colleagues. The main house had four floors, naked wooden doors, a minimum of plain furnishings and lots of warm,

natural light.

Strangely, it had always smelt of jasmine, a legacy perhaps of the previous occupant. It had also been a place that had not only provided him with time for his thoughts and a chance to move on with his life, but had been a place of laughter, smiles and friendship. Many memories had no doubt been absorbed by its high, thick sandstone walls.

The large wooden door creaked as Kaoldan entered the room.

‘About time you were up,’ announced a deep voice at the far end of the kitchen. The owner of the voice had his back to Kaoldan and was slowly stirring a copper pan with a large wooden spoon. Whatever its contents, it smelt delicious.

‘Let me guess, you’ve been up for hours?’ said Kaoldan.

‘Can’t say, I hadn’t really noticed,’ replied the cook who slowly turned to face Kaoldan, who had taken a seat at a large stout wooden table. Kaoldan looked up to see the familiar face of Kubrean.

Despite being considerably older than Kaoldan, Kubrean never appeared to get any older; his dark skin sharply contrasted with his white teeth, his long thick grey and white dreadlocks tied back in a simple ponytail and trimmed silvery beard. Under his brown apron he was dressed in a simple white shirt and dark trousers with brown riding boots, his signature outfit.

He was tall with broad shoulders, with a keen eye for a good beer tavern and a love of cooking. Despite these potentially unhealthy hobbies, Kubrean was a powerful built man with a barrel chest and enormous arms. Kubrean was mainly a modest, relatively quiet and thoughtful man. He was also the most intelligent person Kaoldan had ever known. His deep voice was not powerful, but when he spoke people listened. Be they Kings, Queens or members of the Royal court, they all listened.

The surroundings of the well-equipped and always well-stocked kitchen were his favourite. Kubrean was at his happiest when surrounded by all manner of vegetables, fruits, spices and meats. He would spend hours chopping, dicing, curing and cooking; creating

new meals for which there was never a shortage of willing tasters from within the household. Kubrean was a fellow and more senior Grey Walker and had been Kaoldan's mentor, friend and confidant for more years than he could recall. He had been able to reach Kaoldan when others had not, and had helped him make some sense of the madness of the world. Kaoldan loved the old man dearly and any time away made the world seem a greyer and more confusing place.

'Breakfast would be good,' said Kaoldan.

'Yes, it would,' replied Kubrean flatly. He then placed a large nearby plate of bacon and sausages on the floor with a loud clatter in front of a very pleased Dref. Kaoldan let out a slow breath and raised his hands in protest when Kubrean cut in.

'Breakfast always firstly goes to those who obey the house rules,' explained Kubrean.

Dref looked up smugly before continuing to devour his meal.

'Why did I have to hear about the attack last night from people other than you?' he continued. 'We always talk things through before sleep, why was last night any different to normal?' he asked, raising a bushy eyebrow.

'I don't really know,' replied Kaoldan with a shrug, looking down at the floor. 'Perhaps it was the lateness of the hour or the fact I was too shattered to discuss it,' He looked up and attempted a small smile.

'Fair enough,' snorted Kubrean before returning to the stove and his copper pan. 'Maybe bacon and eggs will help remind you how we do things here,' he glanced back at his friend with a reassuring smile.

'So, what do you know about last night?' asked Kaoldan, making himself comfortable at the table and reaching for a wooden cup of water.

'People died and other people are very worried. They are wondering if Ul'Thadra and his Krund are looking at Thura next. Mainly they are anxious for their lives,' replied Kubrean, slowly stirring his pan. 'Any way you look at it, it's not a good development

and goodness knows we need something positive right now.'

'It was erratic, reckless and stupid, but not something that is necessarily out of character for Ul'Thadra,' said Kaoldan. 'Maybe he is just getting that bit braver, or overconfident. Either way, it will unsettle a great many people, so in some ways it was worth the effort and the losses. Whatever those things were,' he shrugged. 'I take it you've been out to have a look at them?' asked Kaoldan.

'Naturally,' replied Kubrean. 'Nasty looking things, but what else would you expect. They've turned hard as stone; we can't move them either. Nice little reminder for the good people of Thura I'd expect. If Ul'Thadra is trying to make a point it worked,' said Kubrean. 'But you killed them and that I am happy with. As long as we can kill them, we stand a chance,' said Kubrean, plating up a large portion of eggs and bacon, with homemade brown bread and butter. Kaoldan was suddenly consumed with hunger and tucked straight into the breakfast.

'I'm not too worried,' said Kubrean, taking a seat with a cup in his hand.

'Too worried?' frowned Kaoldan.

'Okay, I'm worried,' admitted Kubrean, shrugging his shoulders, 'But we've seen bigger, nastier things, right? Do you remember those crab things in the desert of Emn?' Kubrean leaned on to the table, hugging his drink. 'Horrible, stubborn big bastards. Took twelve of us to kill one, as I remember. Now *they* were trouble. Armour like nothing I've ever seen, but once you got into them, mighty tasty. Fed us for days...' He erupted in a roaring, hearty laugh.

Unable to help himself, Kaoldan smiled. 'Always able to find a practical use for things, aren't you?' he mocked his friend.

'Waste not, want not,' replied Kubrean, sitting back, resting his large boots on a chair. He grinned like a crocodile; his bright smile was one of the main reasons Kubrean never seemed to get any older. He always looked so healthy and happy.

'Anyway, enough of that,' said Kaoldan. 'Do we have any idea what they were doing so close to Thura?' The bacon and eggs were

divine; spiced and salty, and disappearing far too easily.

‘Maybe,’ said Kubrean, removing his feet from the chair.

A creak of the large wooden door behind Kaoldan announced the awakening of another member of the household. Lauden was the youngest Walker in the chapter house and as usual strolled into the room, having just carried out some exercise. Wearing a sweat stained dark short-sleeved top and loose trousers. He placed his hands on his hips as he took a long thirsty drink of water from a tall cup near the doorway.

‘Must you?’ complained Kaoldan. ‘Some of us are trying to keep our appetite.’

Ignoring the comment, Lauden finished his drink and then smiled at Kaoldan. Although not as tall as Kaoldan and some twenty years younger, he was more powerfully built, and his dedication to keeping battle ready and in the peak of physical condition was plain for all to see. His bright smile grew as he spied the breakfast and his blue eyes glistened, at odds with his short black hair.

‘Some of us must put in the effort for those that don’t,’ he retorted. He walked over to the table and pulled a sizeable chunk of bread from Kaoldan’s plate, and helping himself to a large dollop of butter took a seat.

‘I hear that you’ve been keeping yourself entertained. Running into danger and not bothering to ask for help. Having said that, they were nasty looking things. Think you might need my help next time, old man?’ said Lauden as he settled into his seat.

‘Less of the old if you don’t mind,’ said Kubrean shifting uncomfortably in his seat.

‘Yes, you’ll remind certain people of things they like to deny are happening,’ interrupted Kaoldan.

‘I’m not getting that old,’ grumbled Kubrean defensively. ‘Not too old anyway,’ he slowly admitted with a frown. ‘Anyway,’ he said, getting to his feet. ‘Enough of taking swipes at your elders. The Duke wants to see you, Kaoldan. He’s one of the many people who are very unsettled by the events of last night. He’s very hands on and

wants to speak to you himself. We'd best not keep him waiting.'

'Duty calls, I suppose,' sighed Kaoldan, rising to his feet and gently stretching.

'Don't suppose you'll have time for this then?' said Lauden, leaning in and helping himself to the last of Kaoldan's breakfast.

'I suppose not,' said Kaoldan mournfully.

An hour later Kaoldan and Kubrean were dressed in their grey and black uniforms and slowly making their way through the wide and luscious streets of Thura.

Sunshine streamed in through the trees with a light breeze for company. The smell of the sea contrasting with the trees. Kaoldan seated on Tren who gently padded alongside Kubrean on his slightly larger black and ginger panthera, Max.

The city and its inhabitants seemed strangely subdued that morning, street stalls, usually bustling with business, noises and smells were vacant and even those that had bothered to open seemed to be doing little in the way of trade.

The people of Thura were normally very colourful and proud people. It was something that Kaoldan had first noticed when he had arrived in the city. The inhabitants always dressed in many colours and in ways that reflected their mood that day, it was a curious custom. He was unsure whether it was an unintentional outwards expression of their state of mind or a habit that had developed over time. Today the mood of the city was clear to all, sombre.

Kaoldan and Kubrean rode in silence in the main, the two at ease in each other's company and enjoying the warm breeze that blew in through the city. The dusty streets were pleasant surroundings for their journey to the castle. The number of two and three-storey buildings with lightly coloured wooden fronts and terracotta roofs covering a mixture of shops, houses, and taverns, grew as they entered the city centre. They seemed to climb effortlessly out of the

ground towards the sky on the main streets and thoroughfares.

The castle was the centre of the city and all major roads led to it despite the haphazard layout of Thura. The castle was enormous and mainly in the shape of a hexagon, tall and proud turrets at regular intervals adjoined by thick, high sandy coloured walls. The towers making up the other part of the castle stood out the most, their blue and red topped spires looking strangely like flower heads reaching towards the sky. The castle overlooked the main docks as it faced the sea, a stoic calming presence whilst being surrounded by the hustle and bustle of traders on the waterfront.

He could see blue and grey garbed Royal Guards in groups with long spears and halberds near the main entrance, and they turned expectantly as Kaoldan approached the main entrance. They crossed a thick stone bridge leading over a narrow moat to the main gates, the soft padding of the panthera's paws the only noise, silence in the air and the peace of the surrounding parks.

Kaoldan acknowledged nods from some within the Royal Guards, along with some less welcoming looks that greeted them as they approached the main gates. It was always the same, regardless of where they were or who they were with some elements supportive of the Walkers and all that they represented and some less so. Walkers divided opinion wherever they went, and Thura was no exception.

As they dismounted from their pantheras in a square courtyard with high walls which blocked out the sunshine casting vast shadows on the ground, a familiar voice rang out from the main gates.

'About time you both arrived, don't you know how long they have been waiting?' The question and the person asking it waited impatiently for both acknowledgement and an answer.

Kaoldan turned to see the tapping foot and ruffled attire of Nova, Head of the Royal Court and close adviser of the Duke. The stresses of carrying out both roles were plain to see. His crumpled shirt and tweed overcoat had changed very little since Kaoldan had last seen him.

The old man twitched and blinked like a rabbit, his messy moustache and ill-fitting clothes adding to the overall picture of a man always seemingly close to a breakdown. Yet despite his dishevelled appearance and odd outwards demeanour Nova was always completely focused and never missed a detail. He was a shrewd and eccentric old man, and someone that Kaoldan had grown increasingly fond of.

‘Well?’ Nova asked, blinking nervously. ‘Are we going to do anything or are we staying here all day?’ He jabbed his cane into the gravel with a crunch.

Kaoldan and Kubrean turned to each other and slowly shrugged their shoulders.

‘It IS a nice day,’ Kubrean started looking admiringly at their surroundings, hands on his hips, ‘and pleasant weather...’

‘And I am still slightly weary from the journey,’ added Kaoldan with a badly hidden smile.

‘Impossible,’ cried Nova, waving his hands in the air, ‘How you can treat both me and members of the Royal Court like this is quite beyond me. There are pressing matters to discuss and no time to delay.’

‘Well, why didn’t you say so,’ gestured Kaoldan. He smiled as he moved forward to pick up the small old man in a gentle bear hug.

‘Will you put me down,’ spluttered Nova, half embarrassed and half surprised by the gesture.

Kaoldan placed the old man softly on the ground and grinned.

Nova shook himself out and then glared at the pair from under his bushy eyebrows as a small smile grew on his face.

‘Now that we finished messing around, come this way,’ he nodded towards the large rounded entrance to the castle. ‘We have much to discuss,’ he intoned, moving off.

‘How bad is it?’ asked Kubrean, dropping into step beside Nova as he looked up at the imposing wrought ironwork of the main portcullis.

‘Never in my considerable years have I seen them this bad,’ began

Nova, quickening the pace through the large vaulted doors of the main hall. Sunlight streamed in from large windows on either side of the hall illuminating the stone floors and the paintings of varying shapes and sizes on the lightly painted walls.

‘They are frightened and worried; this never makes for measured or intelligent thoughts. Why Ul’Thadra would want to do this is beyond me. How much power does one need? I shall never understand it,’ mused Nova. ‘The Duke wants answers, and I am hoping you’ll have them,’ he continued.

Kaoldan glanced at Kubrean, who grimaced.

‘You *do* have them, don’t you?’ asked Nova, suddenly stopping, eyeing the pair.

‘Of sorts,’ offered Kubrean with a shrug.

Nova snorted, ‘It’ll have to do, I suppose. Just do me and yourselves a big favour, don’t add to it. Reassure them, calm them down for all our sakes. Rich, fat bodies do not always equal clever minds in my experience, and the less they have to think about the more we can do about it without additional interference. If you catch my meaning,’ said Nova with a twitch and a hard stare up at both men, before turning once again, moving with haste through the many halls and corridors of the castle.

‘Any news from surrounding towns?’ asked Kubrean, dropping into step beside Nova with Kaoldan not far behind.

‘Nothing yet,’ replied Nova. ‘But that might be just what we need...’ he mused as his staff tapped rhythmically along the hallway floor as they walked. They came to a halt outside two large oak doors surrounded by an arched stone doorway, six huge door hinges glistened in the sunlight with two blue and grey Thuran soldiers at either side.

‘Please be mindful when we enter, gentlemen,’ whispered Nova. ‘Keep it brief, to the point, with no surprises, and leave the rest to me.’ He turned then hesitated. ‘And welcome back Kaoldan, you have been missed,’ Nova said with a wry smile before turning the handles of the immense doors.

There was a deep air of conversation that escaped out from between the doors as they were opened, and almost immediately the noise levels within the room lessened as the three men entered.

The royal throne room was a large circular room, with rows of seats around the sides, and narrow grey stone steps that slowly descended to the circular wooden floor, which was overlooked by the two thrones of the Duke and Duchess. The high walls of the room were finished in wood, with long colourful drapes surrounding the windows at the crown of the ceiling, numerous paintings adorned the walls and beneath. The hush that quickly and completely descended onto the room was followed by intense observations by the three dozen or so individuals who all turned to gaze at the three men as they made their way down the stairs to the centre of the room.

The audience contained colourful clothes of yellow, red, blue and green - every shade and combination imaginable. They were lavish and proud, much like the people who wore them.

Kaoldan did not recognise any of the men and women who slowly began taking their seats to a rustle of dresses and fine clothes as the men walked forwards, but one thing he saw universally and within them all was anxiety. A million questions etched on the faces of the people within the throne room, all wanting to know more, but only able to fill the information void with their own fears and dread through speculation and gossip. The tap of Nova's staff and the heavy-booted feet of the two Walkers, the only audible sounds by the time they finally reached the thrones. The thrones were modest and plain, white marble in the main, with large animal paws for feet. The two people sat upon them waiting expectantly, their eyes scrutinising and taking in every detail of the three new arrivals stood before them.

Duke Lomman sat, eyes fixed upon the three men. He looked pensive, Kaoldan noticed, understandable given the circumstances. Kaoldan knew him to be a proud man, of little patience, and it

appeared to take every effort for him to remain silent and seated.

He wore his blue surcoat and trousers with ease, and a simple gold circlet sat on his shaved head. He shifted uncomfortably on his throne, then glanced towards the main entrance, the doors closed with a boom. His eyes narrowed as he turned and stared at Nova, then he nodded. Who then bowed stiffly and took a breath, closing his eyes for a few seconds, then he began.

‘Your Royal Highness,’ said Nova in a clear and confident voice, strolling around the outer circle of the floor. He looked into the main audience. ‘May I introduce Grey Master Kubrean and Red Master Kaoldan of the Order of Walkers, they are here to update the Court of the events of last night,’ said Nova who had slowly walked into the centre of the stone-floored area between the court and the thrones.

‘Before Master Kubrean begins, I am certain that members of the Court would wish to show their appreciation to Master Kaoldan, who bravely led the force which defeated the abominable creatures who dared to attack our great city last night. A fine victory I am sure you will all agree.’

A small ripple of applause steadily grew within the room, causing Kaoldan to look at the floor - and the scuffed state of his boots - avoiding their gazes. Kubrean winked at Kaoldan as the applause gradually died down.

‘Now Master Kubrean, if you would be so kind as to update us on the current situation, now the danger appears to have passed...’ said Nova, leaving the words hanging in the air.

Kubrean bowed deeply to Duke Lomman and then to Duchess Li, a stiff-looking woman compared to her husband, with long white hair heaped together under a dark silver crown, she wore a pale blue dress.

‘Your highnesses,’ he said as he straightened and turned towards the main audience. He raised his hands and began.

The words merged into a dull drone, Kaoldan poked the side of his mouth with his tongue. They were familiar words, words that Kaoldan had heard Kubrean use before. Using defiant language, calls

for patriotism, to work together for the good of themselves and the people. Blah, blah. It was surprising how often it worked. He looked at the faces in the audience slowly change from nervous and uncertain to small smiles, grins of determination, their eyes lighting up, enraptured by Kubrean's well-trodden but effective words. He shook his head slightly, suppressing a smile by looking at his feet.

'Ladies and Gentlemen, recent events have been alarming and the events of last night have brought this situation even closer into focus,' said Kubrean. 'Yet, despite this we will not yield, we must not show fear because if we do the war is lost. We owe it to our people, to ourselves and to this kingdom to be better than to cower away from this evil,' he pointed to the main doors.

'Last night was another example that despite whatever deluded plans Ul'Thadra may have, we can resist it. The corpses in the fields outside this city lay testament to this. They tried and failed and if they try again, they will fail, again. Be in no doubts that the road we are taking will be difficult, but we will succeed.'

He beamed, looking at all within the Royal Court straight in the eye and then continued. By the time Kaoldan was required to recount the highlights of his journey and the skirmish, the audience had already been won over. Nova concluded, proceeding with defiant tones to rousing applause and as the audience left buoyed by the words they had heard. Feet shuffled noisily as Kubrean and Kaoldan received warm words, comments of support, pats on the back and the shaking of many hands as the audience slowly filtered out. Kaoldan felt like he was being treated like a hero, when in fact he felt like anything but.

The oak doors groaned heavily as they closed. The five people left within the room were alone.

'If I might be excused, I have some matters to attend to,' said Duchess Li sharply. She immediately rose, nodded to her husband and left the room without waiting for permission. Duke Lomman then turned to the three men and slowly made his way down the steps from his throne, boots echoing on the stone steps.

‘I am very pleased with what I have heard gentlemen,’ he said raising an eyebrow, ‘Now, would you mind telling me the truth...’

Chapter 3 – From Bad To Worse

Silence echoed around the throne room.

‘Your highness...’ attempted Nova, taking a step forward.

‘Please...don’t...’ said Duke Lomman, waving his hand wearily. ‘We all know that what has just happened was for appearance. Order must be maintained, but please don’t insult my intelligence. Tell me *exactly* how bad the situation is. Now if you’d please...’ he gestured towards seats at the edge of the auditorium, removed the golden circlet from the top of his head, massaging his temples, before slumping into a cushioned chair.

‘So how bad is it?’ he said, looking up and refocusing his attention onto Kaoldan.

‘It’s bad,’ said Kaoldan, a little more quickly than he intended.

Nova winced.

They followed the Duke’s lead and Kaoldan settled himself down into a chair, looking the old man in the eye.

‘At the moment why Ul’Thadra would want to take such action is something of a mystery,’ ventured Kubrean.

Nova winced again.

Kubrean glanced at him and licked his lips.

‘The war does not go well,’ he said. ‘Athosian forces are trying their best, but ground is being lost. Towns and cities have fallen, exactly how many we do not know.’

‘But surely, you see the threat posed by Ul’Thadra?’ said Duke Lomman, leaning forward in his seat.

‘We do, but members of the Grey Council and the Paragon Walker will not allow us to get involved; it goes against the Way of the Walker,’

‘Don’t use technicalities to get out of this,’ spat Duke Lomman, voice rising.

‘We are not,’ said Kubrean calmly. ‘Walkers are and always have been peacekeepers, not soldiers. There used to be thousands of us, but now because of conflict, the passage of time and dwindling

bloodlines there are perhaps,' he shrugged, 'four to five hundred of us in the entire circle of the world. We cannot stop it.'

Duke Lomman shook his head and sighed.

'Then what was that last night?' he growled.

'We suspect it may be a simple demonstration of his reach or perhaps a test of our capabilities; but we can't be certain either way. What we do need is time to establish some facts, but given the current situation, time may not be our ally,' Kubrean continued. 'The city itself is not in danger,' he caught Nova's eye. 'For the moment at least. The surrounding towns and villages may be another matter entirely.'

'The important things now are not to let this uncertainty seep into the general population. Goodness knows it will take enough effort and resources to keep a lid on it,' said Kubrean, easing back into his seat as Duke Lomman nodded in agreement.

'What we need is to gather information quickly, but without alerting or startling citizens,' he continued. 'Perhaps a small group of Walkers, mixed in with others would work. It could disguise our efforts to gather information?' he suggested.

'I was thinking the same thing; speed is of the essence,' said Nova. 'A small party could leave unnoticed, gather information and return without arousing too much suspicion.'

'Sounds like a plan to me,' said Duke Lomman, 'how long do you think you'll need?'

'A week or two, perhaps,' shrugged Kaoldan. 'The smaller the group, the more quickly we can gather and establish what is really going on. All being well, we could leave tomorrow and be back in no time at all.'

'Thinking about it, if we are going to do this then let's do it properly; so I insist on adding conditions,' mused Duke Lomman.

Kubrean nodded, face wary.

'First, I want you to visit Grihr, it is a small town, but I want to be made fully aware of what is happening out there. Which leads me to my second condition, I want independent corroboration of what is

happening, which is why you will be accompanied by my daughter.'

Kaoldan tried to interrupt.

'Don't...' waved away Duke Lomman, 'please just do as I ask. She has been itching to get out and away from Thura, and in many respects, you'd be doing me a favour,' he smiled weakly. 'She is of considerable potential, so I'm told, and she is a newly anointed Green Walker, a Guardian. So, having her away from here in some small way makes me more at ease with our arrangement. If you'd be so kind.' There was no room for negotiation, judging by the expression on the Duke's face. It seemed very much to Kaoldan that the decision had already been made, and he slowly nodded in agreement.

'As you request,' he smiled through clenched teeth.

'Now if you will excuse me, gentlemen,' said Duke Lomman, rising wearily to his feet and replacing the golden circlet on his head. 'I have a very protective wife to update on the current situation and some difficult news to break to her, and in all honesty, I think I'd prefer your task to my own.'

The three slightly confused men stood, then bowed deeply as he left them. Lightly chuckling, the Duke climbed the stone steps toward the same wooden door his wife had used minutes before.

'Seems we have some work to do,' mused Kubrean.

Kaoldan and Nova glanced at the Duke as he walked out of earshot. He left the room with a creaking thud of a door.

'She is quite a handful,' said Nova, letting the comments hover in the air. 'Stubborn, smart and talented, just like her parents. I am certain you will be able to deal with her Master Kubrean,' said Nova with a wry smile, rocking on his toes, before turning towards the main entrance, his shoulders quivering as he walked.

Kubrean and Kaoldan exchanged puzzled glances as they followed Nova out of the room, the tapping of his staff echoing as they left.

The conversation between Kubrean and Nova did not register in Kaoldan's head as they walked. Bright, soft light and the airy atmosphere of the halls providing somewhat tranquil surrounding for the return journey to the main entrance. Duke Lomman had proved himself worthy of his reputation; straight talking and with no patience for games.

Kaoldan had heard about the Duke's daughter, he was fiercely protective of her and it was unusual for a member of a Royal family to possess the gifts of Fajin needed to become a Walker. It was especially unusual, given that there was no apparent evidence within the bloodline of their family. Perhaps given the King's willingness to be unrestrained in his approach in ruling Thura, he had taken it upon himself to release a family secret of sorts. Either way, the addition to the scouting party should not and could not be too much of a burden, could it? He glimpsed Nova mischievously looking at him over his shoulder. This unsettled Kaoldan even more as he pursed his lips.

The walk back to the main castle entrance appeared to take no time at all, and Kaoldan was brought back to reality by a shout as they exited the main building into the courtyard.

'Masters?' a definite and confident voice rang out from behind him. He turned to see a tall, dark-haired young woman dressed the same as he and Kubrean. Dark grey and black armour covering forearms, knees, torso and silver shoulder pauldron. Lightweight, but effective armour.

She stepped forwards, dark green cloak flapping slightly in the wind, nervously nursing a Walkerblade between her hands. She possessed a strong nose and mouth, with long, thick, curly, walnut hair, lightly pulled into a loose ponytail. She moved in a measured and precise way as she stepped forward, graceful and with purpose. She was in her early twenties, taller than most women, broad shouldered and full features, her eyes bright with excitement and curiosity.

'Masters,' she began earnestly, 'I've been instructed by my father

to meet with you and to make myself known, I am...'

'Yasmina,' said Nova and Kubrean in unison.

A smile flashed across her face, partly of satisfaction, before she pursed her lips and bowed deeply.

'My father, The Duke, says it is a matter of some urgency. He did not divulge any details I am afraid. Please forgive my lack of knowledge. I was only made aware a few moments ago, I like to have time to prepare,' she shrugged and smiled sheepishly.

'We will have plenty of time to update you on the way,' said Kaoldan. 'We will leave shortly. I assume that you have everything that you will need close at hand, as any good Walker should,' he added stiffly.

Yasmina looked slightly taken aback.

'My apologies Master, I had only just heard about my Father's plans and you have me at a disadvantage.'

Kaoldan was about to speak when Kubrean stepped between them. 'Not to worry, Yasmina,' he said. 'As Master Kaoldan has just said, we can provide you with all the details you could want on the way,' he looked her in the eyes and smiled, lightening the mood.

Yasmina turn towards him and her face beamed.

'I only have need of a small amount of time to prepare myself. My panthera is nearby, and...' Yasmina began.

Kubrean raised a hand. 'Patience,' he said, voice calm.

She grinned and nodded, her eyes sparkling.

Kubrean presented the way. She fell into step beside him. As Kubrean turned, he looked sternly at Kaoldan and shook his head.

'Don't treat her so harshly,' whispered Nova as he moved to the side of Kaoldan. 'She is just carrying out her father's instructions, as we are. She is young and keen to impress; I am sure that even you can remember what that is like?' asked Nova gently.

'Perhaps,' said Kaoldan, suddenly embarrassed by the old man's questioning stare. 'The more people we take with us, the harder it will be,' he said to Nova. 'Our chances of success increase by being small and nimble. I just hate having to expose more people to what

we encountered out there last night,' he gestured to the battleground outside the castle. 'It's experience and speed we need, not youth and curiosity,' He turned and looked up at the sky. 'Our losses have been too great, Nova, not just now, but for far too long,' he glanced back at the old man.

'Perhaps,' nodded Nova, 'but is one extra Walker really going to make that much difference?'

After briefly considering the question, Kaoldan reluctantly inclined his head.

'I suppose not, but if Duke Lomman had not insisted it would not have been my preferred choice,' he conceded.

'You must have greater faith, my friend,' said Nova, taking a step towards Kaoldan. 'We cannot control what we cannot control. This is one such occasion. Go with it, don't fight it. The girl already feels like an outsider, the worst thing you can do as a Master and as a leader is to make her feel more uncomfortable. You are better than that, and I believe perhaps this is something you need. After all, what one may want, and one may need, are often two entirely different things.'

'As you wish,' Kaoldan bowed, and that was the end of that. He knew better than to argue, but this did not stop the familiar knot of worry from growing in his stomach. He breathed out, regathered his thoughts and smiled at Nova weakly.

'How is Tokel?' asked Kaoldan, keen to change the subject.

A grin appeared on Nova's face.

'She is well, as always. 40 years,' he mused to no-one in particular. '40 years we have been together now. Seems like only yesterday,' his face softened.

The partnership that was Nova and Tokel was a permanent immovable part of Kaoldan's life. They had been his adoptive grandparents in many ways.

'Is she around? I'd like to say hello,' said Kaoldan eagerly.

'She is away at the moment,' replied Nova.

The small bubble of excitement burst in Kaoldan's chest and he

chewed his tongue.

‘She is with friends; other Walkers so is quite safe,’ said Nova.

Although Kaoldan wondered whom exactly he was trying to reassure. Nova nodded and turned to walk towards the exit, Kaoldan followed.

The castle seemed to have come alive since they had been in the meeting. The hustle and bustle of daily life was everywhere. People busily going about their business, paying little attention to Kaoldan as he made his way back to Tren. Brightly coloured merchants arguing noisily over a food order to his left, gestures and shouting with white-clad members of the kitchen staff who stood defiantly with their arms folded or hands on their hips.

The Royal Guards marching over the large grassed square near the main entrance; spears and shield rattling as they went by. The sun had risen and most of the clouds had disappeared, leaving the day with a warm and soft feel. Kaoldan’s boots crunched on the gravel path as he re-joined his colleagues, who had gathered in a group by the main entrance. He ground the balls of his feet into the gravel as he walked. It lightly loosened the knot within his stomach and gave him some sense of grounding. He made a line straight for Yasmina, who glanced in his direction as he approached. He nodded to his left, and she moved to the side of the group.

‘I am sorry,’ he began with open hands and a meek smile. ‘I am perfectly capable of being tired and grumpy, and I fear that we may have got off on the wrong foot.’ He bowed his head slightly and his eyes flitted about, avoiding too much contact with her brown eyes. ‘Can we start again?’ he asked.

She pondered a *little* too long, and then silently nodded her head. A small smile grew on her face.

‘May I speak freely?’ she asked.

‘Of course,’ said Kaoldan. ‘I prefer it, saves miscommunication and an awful lot of hassle.’

‘I know why you don’t want me here and I *will* do everything I can to prove my worth.’ She said, appearing to grow as she spoke. ‘A

spoilt rich girl, protected by her family, shielded from the world by her parents. But I can do this, and I can do it well. I have trained hard and waited for this opportunity. There is no need to worry about me, I can take care of myself.' She declared her head held high.

'As you wish,' said Kaoldan, 'but you are mistaken if you think you know why I don't really want you to come with us.'

'Really...' she responded, raising an eyebrow in challenge. 'Would you care to enlighten me?'

'Another time,' said Kaoldan, shaking his head wearily. 'And just to avoid any further miscommunication, please do not mistake this apology and my willingness for free speaking to be misinterpreted as an opportunity for people to get too full of themselves.' He said raising an eyebrow. 'I know why you are here, and I trust your father's judgement and it is not for the reasons you believe. Information entering the city is fractured and untrustworthy. Your father wants some sort of clarity and if this must come from me, with your endorsement, then so be it. Besides, we have a way to travel in a short period and I would prefer that we started again,' he said, forcing a smile. 'I'm Kaoldan, grumpy old Master,' he extended his hand towards her.

'And I'm Yasmina, *spoilt little rich girl*.' She replied with almost a straight face as she shook his hand. 'What do you wish of me?'

'Join the others and we will prepare for our little expedition.' He gestured towards the group.

She nodded and turned to walk towards them, missing the smile that quickly melted from Kaoldan's face as he looked to the sky.

Kaoldan hugged Nova tightly as they left the castle. Seeing the old man had felt good. He stood and watched as they left, hugging his cane for support; a statue while the busy castle bustled with life behind him. In years gone by Nova and Tokel had often accompanied Kaoldan on expeditions and they were good company for the many weary days of travel they had undertaken. Full of stories and knowledge of the world, they were the perfect travel companions; able to sense when talking and distraction was needed,

but also perfectly aware of when it was not. Those days were in the past, and Kaoldan felt a pang of regret that his friends were now too old to join them.

The journey back to the chapter house was event free. They retraced their steps through the sandstone walled streets. Few now paying attention to the travellers as they rode by. Groups of grey clothed workers joked and cheered while being watched from the other side of the road by smaller groups of young girls in colourful dresses whispering and sharing secrets.

The cries of market sellers pierced the general hum of activity around the streets. Flowers, fruit, vegetables, tools and livestock. All available and all for a very reasonable price. Or so they would have you believe. Ahead, Kubrean and Yasmina happily chattered away with Kaoldan following not far behind. Kubrean's booming voice and gestures keeping his young Walker colleague entertained on the way back.

Kaoldan's mind was a mixture of emotions on the journey back. He was glad of Kubrean's ability and willingness to take centre stage. He had resigned himself to the fact that she was to accompany them, but this did not stop familiar feelings from returning. If it must be this way, then let it be quick. The sooner they left, the sooner they would be back and Yasmina could return to her family.

They arrived back at the chapter house through the large imposing gates of the outer wall to the sight of vegetable gardens on either side of the sandy path leading to the main house. Endless rows of potatoes, onion, cabbages, corn eventually leading to an outer perimeter of fruit trees, which seemed to wilt under the weight of their bounteous gifts. There was a lot of work that needed to be done and accordingly the garden and grounds staff were giving it their full attention. Green and brown garbed individuals to-ing and fro-ing with all manner of tools, some carrying baskets or wheeling barrows of produce - all without a care in the world; Kaoldan envied them.

The front door of the chapter house creaked in resistance as it was pushed opened by Kaoldan. He took off his burgundy traveller's

cloak when a deep familiar voice echoed from a room to his left.

‘Do you have any idea how long I have been waiting?’ it accused.

The voice was seated in a high-backed leather chair in front of the enormous stone fireplace. Its legs comfortably raised on to a small stool warming its feet, arms folded and with the look of a very disgruntled bear. A very dishevelled bear, granted, but a bear, nonetheless.

‘Off you go to see Duke Lomman without so much as a *hello, how are you?*’ The bear flicked its hands out to show its annoyance, brushing aside the insults that not saying hello had made.

A smile crept on to Kaoldan’s face as he turned and stepped through the arch into a high ceilinged room. He slightly bowed as he walked.

‘I meant no offence, but Duke Lomman wanted an update and his company is often more pleasant than yours,’ he said with mock sincerity.

‘Really?’ replied the bear, looking slightly hurt. ‘I thought I was charming company?’ he asked, looking even more disgruntled than before.

‘You are, or so you would like to think,’ smiled Kaoldan before straightening up and breaking character.

‘Well, it could be I am right,’ pondered the bear with a shrug. He heaved his feet from the stool and stood up. He was no longer a bear, but a wolf of a man. Dark, hairy and slowly moving towards Kaoldan. They hugged each other in a rough embrace. Dalon wore heavy boots, brown leggings with a short-sleeved earth coloured tunic, held together by a large crimson sash wrapped several times around his middle, decorated with gold symbols. A leather belt with a large dagger hung slightly down to his left. Crimson hand wraps completed the exterior of the man. His long dark shoulder length hair merging seamlessly with a heavy, proud beard.

‘Have much fun last night?’ asked Kaoldan as he offered his friend back towards the chairs by the fireplace.

‘Nothing we couldn’t handle,’ pondered Dalon. ‘Although they

took a bit of a pasting, we won through in the end. The worst of it was how close they came to Thura. Seems they are getting bolder and closer to us. And that was from the mouth of Zalen, an eternal optimist. These are worrying times, my friend.'

He settled himself back into his seat, taking particular care to place his feet back on the stool in front of the fire. Dalon was always cold. It was a constant coldness that had followed him from his home of Citko, a place more famous for its heat and sand than anything else.

Kaoldan moved towards the kettle which hung above the fire. He gestured to Dalon, who nodded his approval.

'Duke Lomman wants answers,' he said as he made tea, 'and quickly,'

'Don't we all,' replied Dalon. 'I doubt Ul'Thadra will pop up to tell us anything anytime soon though. They just keep coming, growing, gathering more land, people, and places. I heard from a merchant that Zunorb has fallen. He seemed more annoyed by the loss of fish and supplies, and the trade route than anything else. They have a peculiar sense of perspective, an overexposure to gold and silver perhaps? All that glittering must do strange things to their minds,' said Dalon, wiggling his fingers.

'You may be right,' considered Kaoldan as he handed over a steaming clay cup of tea.

Dalon nodded his thanks, before settling back into his chair.

'Are you busy for the next week or so?' queried Kaoldan as he took a seat opposite.

'Nothing that can't wait,' said Dalon, 'what did you have in mind?'

'A small trip' said Kaoldan cryptically, blowing the steam from the top of his cup.

'Something dangerous with an element of the unknown and a high possibility that we may never return?' queried Dalon.

'Something like that,' replied Kaoldan, amused.

'Count me in,' nodded Dalon, raising his tea to toast his friend, and with the clank of clay cups it was agreed.

Preparing for an expedition was a laborious task that Kaoldan had never really enjoyed. Walkers did not have squires or extra help provided to knights of the land or even the King's Army. They had hired help for the domestic arrangements needed to run a chapter house and relied on each other for everything else. What was extremely helpful was the fact that pantheras could carry a lot of weight.

The big lynx like cats originally came from the north of Essealar, particularly around the basin of the Midnight Sea. Dense, deep forests, perfect terrain for packs of panthera. There were negligible differences between males and females, they both grew to the same size and seemed content to share responsibility for leading their pack.

Their size and tendency to stare had a rather unnerving effect on any admirers and was often enough to drive away any would be curiosity. They had been the trusted companions of Walkers for hundreds of years and had significantly helped in developing the Walkers fearsome reputation.

Pantheras were matched to their Walker at the age of nine, and the bond developed between them was incredibly special. They could live to almost sixty and were still raised and trained at the main Walker academy in Vanguard, and Tren had been no exception. Presented to Kaoldan on his ninth birthday as a rather fluffy grey ball. They had grown up together, both in search of adventures and fun, looking after each other as they went.

Each had been responsible for saving the other on more than one occasion; a large venomous snake being mistaken for a playmate by Tren and some rather deep water too much of an invitation to Kaoldan. They had survived relatively unscathed, barring a significant cold that had stayed with Kaoldan for weeks. Pantheras were not easily unnerved, and the use of Fajin seemed to be

something they were acutely aware of and comfortable with. Many Walkers had suggested theories about why this was the case, but none had been proved definitively; it was just accepted as a matter of fact.

A single panthera could carry the same amount of supplies and equipment as 2 or 3 horses, meaning that Walkers often had little need of extra panthera. They were self-sufficient and this would be an advantage over the next week - quickly out and back.

The preparation of supplies and equipment passed quickly, with Kaoldan in a world of his own as others hustled and bustled around him. After completing his own arrangements, Kubrean then, with some delicacy, took time and reasoned consideration to help Yasmina prepare. She seemed intent on taking every item she owned with her, taking the matter seriously.

Perhaps Nova had been correct, thought Kaoldan. She seemed very level-headed, if rather spirited. She cared about what she did, was desperate to be taken seriously, and wanted to contribute and help in any way she could. She also had a lightness to her that Kaoldan liked.

It was only upon presenting her fully loaded packs to Kubrean that he pointed out that perhaps having your Walkerblade at the bottom of your bag was not the most practical of arrangements. She had taken the suggestion well, shook with laughter and a sheepish nod.

After a dinner of tender meats and buttered vegetables, lovingly prepared by Kubrean, they all retired to their beds earlier than normal. The sun had set, and an evening coolness settled on the chapter house. Kaoldan lay in darkness and silence, barring the loud snoring of Dref, his head swamped with the usual nerves he had always had before any expedition. Pre-travel nerves had affected him since he was a small boy, but now the nervous were less of excitement and anticipation of seeing the world and more of a practical nature - selection of a route, finding shelter from bad weather, food and water, etc.

As he slowly drifted to sleep, Kaoldan also recognised a feeling he

had not felt for a long time – fear.

Chapter 4 – Old Friends

Kaoldan awoke with a jolt.

Heaving in deep breaths and cloaked in cold sweat. Blinking rapidly, shivering as he sat on the side of his bed. He then stopped and held his breath, fighting to compose himself as warm silent tears slowly crept down his face. Sensing his master's distress, Dref appeared and laid his head on Kaoldan's lap, soft dark eyes searching upwards to reassure and comfort.

This was not a regular occurrence and when it happened Dref was both disturbed and concerned to see such raw emotion. Kaoldan slowly breathed again, quick shallow breaths as he calmed himself. He had not slept well, and what sleep he had been afforded had been punctuated with fractures of dreams and faceless images that dissolved as he stood up.

Dref looked up at Kaoldan with a puzzled expression before settling back down, although keeping one eye on his master, big black eyebrows animated by such a start to the day.

Kaoldan took a deep breath, held it and let it explode outwards. He walked over to the window and surveyed the view, partly to steady himself and partly to see what challenges were to be thrown in his direction by the weather of the day.

Brightly coloured clouds pierced by shards of light that had broken through, bathing the terracotta-coloured roofs of Thura and tall trees, trying their best to grow here and there, in light as far as the eye could see. Flocks of seagulls swooped and swayed in the distance, screeching at each other. A small sad smile appeared on Kaoldan's face, another day.

He washed in cold water; the shock helping to jolt his system awake to the present and away from his dreams. He dressed, somewhat reluctantly, in part of his Walker uniform. Grey undershirt, dark grey leggings and his favourite fur lined black boots before heading downstairs to break his fast.

The chapter house had a noticeable buzz of activity that greeted him as he descended the stairs. Muffled voices and laughter could be heard from within the kitchen. He entered through a large plain wooden door with hefty metal hinges; they screamed slightly in protest as he opened the door. The occupants of the room were deep in conversation as he walked in, the familiar smell of bacon, bread and cheese a soft accompaniment.

A familiar hand reassuringly grasped his shoulder.

‘Awake?’ asked Kubrean, looking intensely at his friend.

Kaoldan nodded.

‘Given how I know you can be before any expedition, I thought you could use a little extra rest.’ Kubrean explained.

He gestured towards a seat at the table, Kaoldan smiled and took his place.

‘Nice of you to join us,’ said Zalen in jest, although his eyes were filled with concern. ‘Looking forward to our little adventure? Lovely weather for it, and we have the delightful pleasure of some new company.’

He gestured towards Yasmina who laughed, stood and mockingly bowed towards the group around the table before taking her seat again, slightly embarrassed at herself.

Kaoldan smiled. Never underestimate the ability of others to change an atmosphere.

‘It will be good to get out of here and see the world again,’ announced a deep voice from behind Kaoldan. The owner of the voice was a dreadlocked, shaggy-haired black man. Slightly bearded, with an angular face and an inability to hold any sort of eye contact for too long, almost too embarrassed to look at people.

‘I’ve grown tired of these surroundings,’ he declared, twirling his hand around. ‘And I feel that you might well need some help,’ he raised an eyebrow.

Kaoldan smiled and moved forward to the man who closed the door behind him, and they roughly embraced each other.

Some good news at last.

‘Damn it’s good to see you,’ Kaoldan said.

Their faces both wide with smiles, Kaoldan led the big man towards the table, his arm still around his shoulder.

‘Let me introduce you all to Kryst,’ he announced. The slightly embarrassed man nodded towards Kubrean.

‘Master,’ he acknowledged, and then to the rest of the table.

‘Hello,’ he said with a smile.

He was slightly smaller than Kaoldan and a few years younger. Dressed in the black and grey Walker uniform, he was broad chested and fidgeted at the attention from the room. He paused when he saw Yasmina and appeared to blush slightly, coughing nervously. She hid a small laugh and smiled in return, but didn’t remove her gaze from him.

‘Where did you come from?’ asked Yasmina without breaking her trance.

‘I arrived from Bay Forest about a week ago and I returned from a small errand with Tokel late last night,’ he replied, composing himself to meet her stare and turned towards Kubrean.

‘Your messenger was lucky to reach us in time, another day or so, and my chapter would have left for Weeping Cove. Thank you for the invitation.’

‘And how are things at Bay Forest?’ asked Kubrean, pouring some tea into two wooden cups from a large blackened copper kettle hanging over the fire, before taking a seat and gesturing to Kryst and Kaoldan who both sat down.

As soon as Kryst took his seat, Dref charged over and plonked his head on his lap. Kryst responded by ruffling his ears. This seemed to be satisfactory, judging by the grin on the dog’s face.

‘Bay Forest is as Bay Forest always is, full of trees and traders,’ said Kryst, looking over at Kubrean while still paying attention to Dref.

‘The people change, but the place still stays the same. Traders from all over Essealar coming to seek their fortune or to hide. It’s

taken me three days to get used to being back in the sun. Those trees don't half darken things. So why am I here, Master?' he asked.

'I thought you might help with some things that need our attention,' replied Kubrean cryptically. 'I'll explain as we go. The key thing is we are all here,' he said with a crocodile smile.

'Excellent,' he added with a nod of satisfaction. He crossed his arms and settled back into his chair, surveying the group around the table. 'The six of us will go to Grihr; myself, Kaoldan, Yasmina, Kryst, Dalon and Zalen. The trip will take about two weeks and I want everything to run smoothly and without a hitch. Quickly and quietly, in and out. No fuss or detours. All Duke Lomman wants are answers, and that is exactly what we are going to get him.'

He looked around the table at the mixture of excitement, nonchalance, and fear.

'Questions?' He asked, taking a sip of his tea, the smell of honey slowly wafting across the table.

All around the table heads were shaking.

He grinned. 'No less than I expected. We leave in an hour.' He stood, chair screeching on the stone floor as he did so, and made his way toward the door. 'Excellent,' he muttered to himself as the door closed behind him.

Yasmina slowly stood, as if slightly unsure what to do.

'I'd better give everything a last check,' she said. 'May has been prowling around since the early hours, it's her first time outside of Thura for months and I think she's a little nervous. If you'll excuse me, Masters,' she bowed.

Zalen and Dalon both exchanged a look. Zalen then rose from his seat, stretching his arms theatrically.

'I'll join you,' he declared. 'Salah is often the same before we go anywhere. Who knew pantheras could get nervous?' he mused with a shrug, draining the last of his drink, before clattering the cup down onto the wooden table.

'Come on Dalon, worth a check on Dys'n as well,' Zalen added.

Dalon grunted, nodded his shaggy head and stood, tearing off a

piece of brown bread which he messily covered in butter and honey with a knife.

‘Come along then, let’s get to it,’ he said, offering the way to Yasmina taking a hefty bite out of this breakfast.

She stood firmly, ‘After you,’ she offered with a wry smile.

Dalon paused, ‘You have nothing to worry about from me,’ he said. ‘Him on the other hand,’ he nodded towards Zalen, taking another bite.

Zalen exploded with laughter and shook his head. ‘I don’t think so,’ he protested.

‘After you,’ Yasmina repeated, her eyes fixed on Dalon.

He looked to the heavens with a mouthful of bread, muttered something inaudible and strode off towards the door followed by Yasmina and Zalen. The clatter of the door signalled their exit, the room silent apart from the crackle of the fire.

Kaoldan leaned forward, his seat creaking, resting his elbows on the table.

‘So, how are you?’ he asked Kryst intently before taking a drink of sweet tea.

‘Oh, you know,’ replied the big man, shrugging his shoulders, ‘Good days and bad.’

‘Come on’ encouraged Kaoldan. ‘Really, how are you?’ his voice softened as he looked at his friend.

They had known each other for over 25 years, first meeting at the Walker training house in Vanguard, before being stationed together at Vers when Zalen had been posted to Slywind further up the coast.

Kaoldan had taken an immediate liking to the hairy giant. They shared a similar background - mothers both Walkers - and both only children. The chilly surroundings overlooking the Grey Sea; snow and ice as far as the eye could see and the long, bitter winters had held little in the way of entertainment and their friendship had blossomed.

They had both trained hard, showing natural skills in the ways of Fajin, with the Walkerblade and excelled academically. Although

Kryst had shown more interest and patience than Kaoldan; gathering greater knowledge in academic and Fajin matters.

It was while they were both in the last year at Vers that Kryst had met a female Walker named Leise.

Straight talking, clever, and not the kind of person to take nonsense from anyone. An exotic, small powerhouse of a woman from the small desert town of Byant at the edges of the Freth Expanse.

Her long-braided honey hair and dark skin, making her stand out amidst the snowy surroundings of Vers and its predominantly blonde inhabitants. She had immediately fallen for Kryst, although it had taken him a while to realise this for himself.

Kaoldan was happy to let things develop naturally, after all who was he to interfere in the course of true love? Although the prospect of having to answer to Leise had helped him to form his stance on the matter. Leise and Kryst had eventually got together; after much deliberation and late-night conversations between Kryst and Kaoldan regarding the consequences of it not working and creating a difficult last year for them both. Kryst had not wanted to create any potential problems in the last year for any of them.

However, his reluctance had slowly been whittled away by Leise's persistent and highly effective campaign of persuasion. She knew what she wanted, and it was Kryst, whatever the cost.

Kaoldan had admired from a safe distance the way his friend had been completely powerless to her advances and the way she had worked her way through Kryst's most admirable attempts to deflect or defend himself.

Ultimately, he had no chance, and she got her man. Their friendship had been the basis of their relationship and at the end of their final year, they had both been posted to Emn, a large trade city deep in the endless deserts of the Infinite Steps, while Kaoldan had been posted back with Zalen to Prava.

Time passed, and some years later Leise and Kryst formed The Link and became partners for life. They had chosen not to have

children; the reason never really made clear, nor something that Kaoldan had felt comfortable or proper raising with his friend.

It was a decision that Kryst would regret, thought Kaoldan.

Their postings throughout Essealar meant that considerable time passed between them meeting up. However, the natural friendship: Kaoldan, Kryst and Leise that had developed meant that things never felt like an effort whenever they met. Each was happy with their life, comfortable with the choices they had made.

Everything had changed forever eight years ago, when travelling between Emn and Rok as members of a party of a dozen or so Walkers. They had paused on their journey and chosen to stay the night in a small tavern off the main trade route.

An argument had grown and developed over nothing, a trade of pigs between two landowners. Unable to help herself, Leise had sort to resolve the matter and return the tavern to peace. She had waved away Kryst's offer of help with a smile; she had seen everything that she needed to see to calm the situation; except the knife in the hand of the young son of one landowner.

A mix of drink, arrogance and fear had given him more bravery than he should rightly have had. The son had been aiming for somebody else, and Leise had simply got in the way as a small brawl had broken out. The knife had sunk deeply into her back, piercing her heart just as Kryst had been making his way over to lend a hand.

She had died, senselessly and silently in his arms - a blue ghostly figure rising from her body to become an orb which rose upwards through the ceiling of the tavern disappearing towards the Abyss. Kryst and the lifeless Leise statues of silent pain, as the tavern had erupted into chaos.

It had shattered Kryst and destroyed his world beyond all comprehension. The son had protested his innocence, claiming it to be an accident, but this had fallen on deaf ears and he had hung for his crime the next day. Leise had been buried in a small, simple grave beneath a large tree outside the city of Emn. Kryst arguing that this was the most fitting location, nobody had sort to persuade him

otherwise.

Leise's death had affected Kryst in ways that Kaoldan hadn't been able to comprehend. Gone was his fun and philosophical friend, and in his place was a man exposed, a man without reason and devoid of emotion.

Duty had been the one thing to save him.

He had been moved from posting to posting. Kubrean had helped to ensure that Kryst was kept busy and time had played its part in the healing process.

Kryst had become hardened and occasionally had been near to breaking; one particularly dark occasion, albeit drink induced, had almost ended in another death as Kryst had seen no way out of his pain. Duty the one thing keeping his head in a safe space, that and the counsel of others deep into the small hours.

As the years had passed, he had slowly but surely returned to a changed but familiar version of himself.

A new Kryst emerged.

More philosophical, but hardened to the harsh realities of the world. He had found that by helping others he was healing himself. It had been several months since they had last met, and Kaoldan surveyed his friend with cautious optimism. Despite a fresh and savage looking scar on his cheek, he appeared in good spirits.

Kryst took a sip of tea after blowing away the steam. He nestled the cup in his hand, as if cradling a small bird, settled back into the high-backed chair and shrugged.

'Good days and bad days,' he repeated. 'I can say only that, I still miss her constantly. A part of me is still missing that I will never get back. Yet I endure, this endures,' he gestured to the world. 'Some things I think I can never comprehend, like the attentions of your new female friend. I'm almost old enough to be her father too. Almost,' he added, glancing shyly at Kaoldan, then almost immediately into the fire.

He smiled and snorted a laugh.

'Why are you here?' asked Kaoldan, slightly confused by the

exchange between Kryst and Kubrean earlier.

‘Who knows? Since when does Kubrean ever tell us anything more than he wants?’ he said, ‘He might just have wanted some familiar faces around him given recent activity in this area. From what I have been able to find out, there has been a noticeable increase in activity by the Krund and nobody seems to know why. Perhaps this little expedition will provide some answers? And to get back on topic, how are you?’ asked Kryst, looking at his friend uncrossing his legs to lean forward.

Kaoldan stared at his drink, avoiding the look.

‘You seem tired, worn out,’ said Kryst critically. ‘Not sure you should come with us, old man,’

‘You’re almost as old as I am,’ countered Kaoldan.

‘Almost...’ said Kryst with a raised eyebrow.

Realising this was a point he would never win, ‘I am okay, despite my advancing years,’ Kaoldan replied.

‘Good,’ replied Kryst. ‘And the girls, how are they?’

Kaoldan shuffled uncomfortably in his seat.

‘They are well, last I heard,’ he said shortly. ‘They are doing well at Vanguard and seem to keep their noses out of trouble,’

He paused before continuing.

‘In fact, I have been told that they are proving to be quite the students in Fajin, Walkerblade and academically.’ He said with a small beam of pride. ‘Not as good as us of course.’ He added.

‘Of course,’ nodded Kryst with all sincerity. ‘Although I’d heard they were considered, by some, to be better...’

‘And who told you that?’ flashed Kaoldan, semi accusingly, leaning forward out of his chair. Hot anger flooding through his body from nowhere.

Kryst sensed the change in his friend.

‘Just people,’ he said, deflecting the query, glancing at Kaoldan. ‘People talk, there are not so many of us around these days, and Walkers tend not to make many friends other than our own kind,’ he reassured.

Kaoldan realised he was holding his breath. He breathed out steadily through his nose. His jaw felt tight. He blinked, then he swallowed down a sip of tea and tried to settle back into his seat.

‘I guess we should get ready ourselves,’ said Kryst reluctantly before downing the last of his tea and standing. ‘I’ll check on Sadida. She also seemed eager to be going. Strange how they all seem to sense it. Perhaps Zalen is smarter than he looks.’

‘Doubtful...’ said Kaoldan with a weak smile. ‘I’ll join you outside, after I’ve had something to eat. Can’t leave on just a breakfast of tea, good though it is,’ he said, raising his cup.

Kryst nodded, silently turned on his heels and headed towards the door, helping himself to a handful of brown bread and honey as he left.

The bang of the closing door made the smile on Kaoldan’s face disappear. He gazed into the fire; familiar images and dreams danced in the flames.

Chapter 5 - Watching

He raised his hand to shield his face from streams of sunlight to survey his surroundings. Trees at the end of the garden nearest to the wall swayed lightly in the wind and seagulls could be heard calling out in the distance as the smell of salt and the sea wafted in. The gardens were a hive of activity, with staff busily scuttling around with tasks to complete; tending to crops, carrying supplies, preparing for another day.

All clad in honestly coloured clothes; browns, greens and greys, some wearing floppy hats to afford themselves some shade as they worked. Bees and birds fluttered throughout the gardens, and no-one raised their head as Kaoldan noisily trod his way to the stables along the gravel paths at the rear of the building. He was eager to get going now. Turning the corner, he was greeted by the sight of six large and rather impatient pantheras.

Tren raised his head and looked nonplussed at Kaoldan, he arched his back, stretched and yawned wide mouthed showing an impressive set of teeth and large pink tongue before settling back down on the ground, which crunched under his padded feet, large black claws digging into the stones.

The sight of a pack of panthera had always been impressive, thought Kaoldan to himself. Tren; large, grey and aloof at the front of the pack, all grey shaggy mane braided to keep the fur out of his eyes, powerful front muscles slowly sloping towards his grey and black dashed body and long tail, which twitched side to side absently. The other pantheras also all looked equally magnificent but wore it with apparent disdain, a nonchalance that they all seemed to wear. All the Walkers were standing by their pantheras checking and double checking, straps, buckles, bags and saddles.

Kubrean was busy checking a side bag as Max, his lion-like panthera, took little interest in the activity. Dalon was sitting down leisurely beneath a tree, shading himself from the sun while slowly

eating one of the apples that were scattered around him. He was deep in conversation with Yasmina, who also sat listening attentively as he spoke in between big bites.

She laughed and flicked her hair as he spoke, waving his hands to illustrate the point. By his side Dys'n, his black panthera flicked his ears, having apparently heard this story before. To the right of Yasmina stood a tall and stern looking panthera, white with black spots, observing all around her, clearly taking the current situation far more seriously than her Walker.

Zalen was busy in conversation with Kryst, as his white panthera - Salah – appeared to be struggling to control herself as she looked with some menace at the small group of birds in the apple tree who seemed quite happy chirping their torment at the big cat - his tail twitching in frustration.

Stood proudly at the side of Kryst was Sadida, the rarest of all panthera; she absently surveyed her surroundings, her ginger and black stripes rippling as she turned. She turned to her right and immediately changed from panthera to kitten as she saw Kaoldan approaching. She bounded forward, the equipment on her back banging and clanging. Stones skittered in all directions as she ground to a halt in front of Kaoldan. Having a kitten thrust its head playfully towards you is fine, but when a two metre tall panthera does the same, the effect is a little more difficult to deal with. She nuzzled into Kaoldan with her head, knocking him back several steps.

'Whoa,' he exclaimed. 'It's good to see you too.' Stroking her furry head and tickling her white chin.

She was about to lie down and roll over, but a sharp shout from her Walker stopped that idea dead in its tracks. Although playful at heart, she always did as she was told, unlike some panthera. Kaoldan glanced at Tren, who sensed the slight, snorted, and looked the other way.

Sadida quickly glanced at Kryst, then Kaoldan, then back at Kryst checking the coast was clear, then continued playing with Kaoldan.

Kryst looked up, then began marching over with a serious

expression on his face, as Kaoldan continued to be almost bowled over by the enthusiastic panthera. He halted at the side of the panthera, who was enjoying herself far too much to notice his arrival. He cleared his throat loudly, the play continued. He cleared his throat again, louder this time.

Sadida jerked her head around, saw the game was up, then slumped to the ground dramatically, tilted her head and slowly opening her blue eyes and looked cutely at her Walker - well as cutely as a four metre long battle prepared panthera can look. It had the desired effect, and a small smile appeared on the corner of Kryst's mouth.

'Get up and get over there,' he gestured, Sadida half rose and skulked over to where she had come from. 'You can say hello properly later,' he promised. A small spring appeared in her step and her tail rose as she glanced back. It was hard to tell who had really won that contest, thought Kaoldan.

'Still a little cat in a big cat's body isn't she,' half-joked Kaoldan. Kryst nodded.

'I am sorry for before,' said Kaoldan, glancing at his friend then at his boots. 'It's just, you know,' he shrugged, 'still difficult.'

'I know,' replied Kryst with a slow nod. 'We can talk later, when you're ready.'

Kaoldan nodded, the knot in his stomach dissolving.

'When I'm ready,' he repeated.

'About time we were going, wouldn't you say?' interrupted Kubrean, his face beaming with excitement.

'Yes,' said Kaoldan, relieved by the change of subject.

He stood straight and glanced around. Everyone was looking at him expectantly, even though Kubrean was really in charge.

'Let's go,' he gestured, 'The weather is good, so let's make the most of it.'

Kubrean smiled back and swung up onto Max. Although he was already a giant of a man, he looked positively enormous on top of his sandy coloured mount. Max shook his huge mane and looked around

expectantly. His big blue eyes serving as a roll call to the other members of the group. They moved towards their mounts and swung up into the saddles.

Kaoldan took a second to survey the group. He decided he was happy. Happy with the size of the group, happy with the weather and happy with the company. Although Yasmina appeared slightly nervous, her eyes darting around, she stood up in her saddle closed her eyes before settling herself back down, her face now different; composed, focused, determined.

Although only a small thing, it gave Kaoldan a small feeling of reassurance and he would gratefully take it. He approached Tren. The grey panthera stood nobly, surveyed his Walker with sapphire eyes. Long grey legs, which gradually turned a dirty black at his paws, twitched.

‘I know,’ whispered Kaoldan. ‘Too soon to be heading off again. Let’s get going and get back, then we can have a break. Duke Lomman wants answers, and it’s up to us to help,’ he explained.

The panthera flicked his ears and then appeared to grow with pride.

He tilted his body towards Kaoldan. The Walker took a deep breath and climbed up. He shuffled with a leathery rustle to get comfortable, then looked left and right, surveying his companions.

‘Let’s go,’ he said.

The crunch of the gravel was the only noise that accompanied them out of the chapter house, through the sandstone pillared gates and onto the dusty street. The sight of six Walkers on battle ready pantheras was not an everyday occurrence for the population of Thura.

The streets were already busy with people going about their daily business, and the sight of the six Walkers only slowed the human traffic. Many just gawped, slack jawed and absent minded as the panthera and their riders made their way through the crowds. The attention was something that Kaoldan had grown accustomed to, but the novelty was clearly new to Yasmina who drew up proudly in her

saddle, Kaoldan stifled a smile and shook his head.

She caught his glance and smiled back sheepishly, shrugging her shoulders. *What can you do*, her face said, and so she continued to sit proudly for all to see.

The group rode comfortably and silently against the noise of the market, haggling and bartering, echoing across the wide tree-lined streets. Seagulls called and swooped down, trying to scavenge food from weary looking stall owners waving their arms to defend their produce. Cursing and looking angrily towards the winged thieves.

They made excellent progress through the main market area, then through the tall rows of houses and flats. White fronts and walls, most windows containing glass and terracotta roofs. The buildings gradually lost both their height and majesty as they entered the poorer edges of the city. The dress of the residents was noticeably shabbier, more beggars and shiftily hooded figures glanced their way.

Small children playing with coloured stones at the end of a row of dirty-coloured houses smiled and waved as they went by.

Yasmina smiled and waved back. Even Kubrean bowed extravagantly in his saddle.

Tren let out a loud yowl which reduced several younger children to quivering wrecks, as the older ones yowled back carefully creeping forwards as they did so. Tren glanced back as they passed by, a look of satisfaction on his face, if such a thing were possible for a panthera.

The residential areas slowly melted away as they reached the large sandstone city wall, the last point before they left the city limits. The Royal Guards at the main gates eyed them suspiciously, standing motionless in blue and grey uniforms tightly gripping their spears. The heavy wooden gates creaked as they were opened by several puffing guards, the metal frames catching the sunlight which streamed straight into the city, as they swung outwards.

Kaoldan and the other Walkers nodded their thanks to the guards as they left and surveyed the flat, shrubby land that lay before them.

Now clear of the cocoon of the city they could see the sun directly in front of them and there were no clouds on the horizon. Looks good, thought Kaoldan; pleasant weather will help speed things up.

‘Shall we stretch their legs a little?’ called Zalen from the back of the group, his eyes gazing around, challenging his comrades. ‘Just to make the most of the good weather,’ he said, attempting to sound convincing.

‘We could,’ agreed Kubrean, with similar mischief in his eyes. ‘It makes sense. Time is of the essence after all.’

Grins grew on faces, Yasmina looked around missing the joke but smiled anyway.

‘After you, Master,’ offered Dalon with a grin.

Kubrean snorted and clicked Max with his heels. The sandy panthera was the oldest of the group, but you would not have thought it by the way he bounded forwards and charged off in the direction of the forest in the distance.

This jolted the others to action and one by one within seconds they were away, pursuing Kubrean and his panthera. The wind whistled passed Kaoldan as Tren eventually got into his stride. The prospect of losing to an older panthera seemed to spur Tren along with added purpose. The group powered along as the race progressed and they slowly separated out.

Although he should have been concentrating on the race, Kaoldan couldn’t help but look at the remains of the treemen that now stood silent and sombre in the distance to his left. They appeared smaller today, grey now, mottled weather worn, with sections broken off rather dilapidated, as if they had been there for years, not days. It served as a sober reminder that danger still lurked. Kaoldan pushed the fear that was in danger of rising back down into his stomach. He scanned around at the five other riders, each caught in their efforts to win the race.

Zalen was trailing at the rear. The rush of the wind made it difficult to hear what he was shouting, but it certainly wasn’t poetry.

Kaoldan turned back one last time to see the tree-men disappear

behind them. He fought to put the thoughts that came with them to the back of his mind as he pushed on with Tren. The race ended a moment or two later with a beaming Dalon and Yasmina, and very foulmouthed Zalen bringing up the rear.

'You cheated,' accused the blonde Walker, pushing hair out of his face. 'I wasn't frakking ready.' he said, shuffling in his saddle.

'It was your idea,' countered Kryst innocently, 'how can you suggest it and then blame not being ready for such a poor ride.'

'Seemed a perfectly fair race to me,' said Yasmina, shrugging indifferently before giving her panthera a friendly rub. 'Well done, May,' she congratulated. May's ears flicked and her tailed swished in quiet satisfaction.

'It also seemed like a fair race to me too,' said Kubrean, looking around at the others when he caught sight of Kaoldan's face, he stopped and immediately understood. 'But that will do for now, we have a long way to go and not much time to do it in' he said. 'Let's go...'

'You still cheated,' muttered Zalen as he trotted passed, shaking his head.

Kaoldan turned to look first at the city of Thura and then at the distant shape of the treemen, then he turned Tren and followed his companions.

Zalen's complaints about the race; the start, the middle and the end continued for most of that day. The sunshine helped with their moods as the day past. As night fell, they set up camp in a wide cave at the corner of a sheer rock face. A slight gully that existed in the forest meant it was well hidden, and the width of the cave offered protection in case rain fell in the night. It creased in the corner, which also meant they could light a small fire, allowing Kubrean to cook a thick broth of mutton and earthy vegetables; how he could create such wonderful food in wild surroundings had always amazed

Kaoldan. But it was not a question he ever wanted answering if it meant not being able to eat like this again. Conversation was light and friendly before they settled down to sleep. Kaoldan had offered to take first watch, and he headed out of the cave to give his eyes chance to adjust to the darkness before the others went to sleep.

As he moved outside into the cool evening air, Kaoldan reflected, the day had gone well. He couldn't deny that. They had covered twenty miles in difficult forest conditions as well as having to find their way along non-existent paths, up and down the hills. The surroundings worked both to their advantage; harder to be spotted by those they would rather not have to meet, and to their detriment; harder going for the group and less distance covered in the time they had available.

He crept away from the entrance of the cave towards the dense throng of trees and vines, dead leaves and scattered twigs snapping under foot. He looked around. A clear sky littered with stars and two full moons hung overhead, one momentous, grey and looming, the other half its size, red, subtle and half hidden. He chose a stout oak tree and climbed slowly, silently moving up its branches with patience and purpose. Making sure he had a good foot and hand hold, feeling and remembering each one as he rose. He climbed to a height of about twenty feet, choosing a thick ledge of three branches to make his vantage point. He sat crossed legged and looked, clocking entry points and assessing the landscape. The evening was crisp and clear, but it carried a chill and Kaoldan pulled his dark crimson cloak closer around his neck, the soft grey fur lining of its hood a comfortable contrast to the cold of the branches.

Being able to set up camp effectively in the corner of a rock face made keeping watch much easier, half the job was done for him. Nothing was coming at them from that direction unless it could survive a 200-foot drop and do so quietly. Perched in his little nest, Kaoldan thought it had been good to see Kryst again, and his presence had settled nerves that had gripped him the previous night. The group had blended well, not surprising in some respects since

they had done this before. Including Yasmina had been easier than he had thought and had gone much better than he had hoped. Yet a fear nagged at him, and it was a feeling that he could not shake. It lingered like a familiar, unwelcome friend, always there but varying in its presence.

A twig snapped.

Kaoldan's eyes jerked towards the noise, searching in the darkness, ears sharp.

He waited.

Silence.

Slowly he let out a silent breath, and he turned his head away.

Another twig snapped.

His head sprang back, combing the space below for movement.

Nothing.

Then something, hiding in the shadows of a larger, crooked tree. Slowly it moved, like dark liquid, smoothly and silently. It was large given the distance, Kaoldan guessed; he stayed perfectly still. It began moving again, sticking to the shadows, avoiding the moonlight. Slowly and definitely heading towards the mouth of the cave.

Kaoldan moved into a crouch. He reached for his Walkerblade, metal cold to the touch. He worked it into his hand, gripping the handle. He waited, transfixed on the dark shape below. It kept moving, a bear he wondered. Either way, it had to be stopped. Nerves rose from his stomach, but he pushed them back down as he slowly exhaled. Gritting his teeth. He prepared to jump down, hoping the shock would scare it off. He took a deep breath and jumped.

He crashed to the floor with a dull thud, rolling to his feet Walkerblade in hand; it shimmered green and morphed into a broadsword.

The shadow froze but did not run.

A pink tongue poked out from behind the shade of the tree.

'Dref?!' Kaoldan exploded out with a sigh of relief.

The dog rather meekly emerged from the darkness.

‘What the hell are you doing here?’ he asked raising his arms in frustration and turned away, cursing under his breath.

Dref sat down on the floor, surrounded by silver and grey leaves, his eyes smiling and his tail wagging.

Since no answer was forthcoming from the big black dog, Kaoldan turned and collapsed into a silent fit of giggles.

Figuring that this was a good thing, and that all was forgiven, Dref stood and padded over to his master. Kaoldan ruffled the dog’s ears.

‘What are you like?’ he asked, shaking his head.

Dref simply sat and absorbed the apparent praise, particularly enjoying his ears being tickled.

‘Well,’ pondered Kaoldan, ‘what are we going to do with you?’

Dref softly whimpered.

‘No way we can go back the way we came just to take you home,’ said Kaoldan. ‘Looks like we’re stuck with you.’

Dref’s ears perked up, and he stifled a bark. Mission accomplished.

Kaoldan shook his head. ‘Do you mind keeping me company for a while?’ he asked. The dog tilted his head, puzzled. Kaoldan rose and retreated into the shadows of the rock face. Pulling his cloak tighter around him, Dref stood and happily followed.

‘I missed you,’ whispered Kaoldan, ruffling the dog’s big ears. They settled into a crevice and sat down - both silent, both alert. Not a word was said, nor needed saying.

The next few hours passed without incident. The cool night air kept the forest clear of mist. They moved vantage point to both help stay awake and make sure that each approach was regularly checked.

At the change of watch, Kryst quietly emerged from the cave. He frowned looking at Dref, confusion etched on his face. ‘Where the hell did he come from?’ he whispered, perplexed.

‘We’ve already had that conversation,’ explained Kaoldan. ‘Seems we needed another companion and we are lucky that Dref was available and in the area,’ he waved his hands dismissively while Dref

sat smugly by Kryst's feet. Kaoldan shook his head as he headed towards the cave and sleep. He patted Kryst on the shoulder, leaving the confused Walker with his new night watch companion.

Chapter 6 – Trouble

The forest was finally thinning, much to Kaoldan's relief. The last five days had felt like an eternity, dense thick forest is fine, but a change of scenery can do wonders for the human spirit.

They had made good progress heading first north, then followed the trail west towards Grihr. Towering trees and rolling hills had gradually given way to smaller, thinner scatterings of trees and the land had flattened out into oceans of swaying grasslands, yellows, greens and soft reds, with smaller islands of trees scattered here and there.

Scouting on ahead of the group, Kaoldan surveyed to the left and right, nothing. Good.

A familiar black head popped up from the grassland. Dref had been a constant shadow since he had arrived so unexpectedly on their first night away from Thura. His appearance had become the subject of a continuous joke to the group, mainly led by Zalen. His eyes sparkled wickedly with the opportunity to jest and tease about 'the magic dog' that had appeared from nowhere.

Dalon had been his main partner in crime, the two taking great pleasure in acting with shock and awe when Dref appeared in their company. The joke was wearing a little thin, but Dref was enjoying the attention.

In truth, the dog had been something of a blessing. His happy-go-lucky demeanour had immediately made him part of the group and his newest friend, Yasmina, had taken something of a shine to him. Although May had looked rather unhappy at the affection lavished upon the dog. He had taken his new role within the group rather seriously and accompanied each member of the group as they had taken turns to scout ahead. Today it was Kaoldan's turn to be joined by their unofficial chief scout. He had helped them avoid unnecessary contact with people twice.

The first a group of royal guards moving between locations,

noisily it had to be said, even without Dref's excellent hearing Kryst had detected them some distance away and the group had circled around unnoticed.

The second encounter had been with a small caravan of traders heading towards Bay Forest. On this occasion Kubrean had met with the traders, chatting away with them, laughing and joking like long-lost friends while the group had taken a slightly wider path deeper in the forest out of sight. He had purchased supplies, replenishing meat, bread and cheese.

'Never underestimate the power of trading with merchants and their willingness to share their gossip and stories with you,' he had said.

And it had been true, trade was good apparently, and there had been limited reports or sightings out of the ordinary. No sign of the Krund - more good news.

A strong wind blew in from their left, making the grass sway and swirl like a rough sea. Dref's nose rose into the air and he sniffed deeply, shaking his head in confusion, then inhaled again. His head darted to the left, looking into the distance.

He let out a low gurgling growl. This had the desired effect, and Kaoldan looked at the big dog. Dref bounded through the grass towards Kaoldan, who dismounted from Tren. The ground underfoot was soft, and the grass popped as he knelt. Dref approach a mournful and concerned look on his face breaking through the grass that threatened to swallow him whole.

'What is it?' asked Kaoldan.

Dref cocked his head, then looked to the left into the distance and sniffed. Kaoldan semi understood, his face creased with concern. There was something and it was not good.

'Wait,' he commanded, before vaulting back up onto Tren. He turned and rode off back towards the group, Dref remained a black statue in the sea of grasses.

Zalen was regaling the group with yet another story when Kaoldan finally found them still immersed in the forest.

‘And I ended up winning the hand, 150 gold marks,’ he said triumphantly. ‘Hello Kaoldan,’ he continued. ‘How are you? No magic dog? Or has he vanished and not reappeared yet?’

‘We have a problem,’ announced Kaoldan as he stopped.

Zalen changed, growing slightly in his saddle.

‘It seems the magic dog has caught a scent he doesn’t like,’ said Kaoldan.

‘Bad sausages?’ queried Dalon, face a picture of innocence.

Kaoldan gave him a withering look.

‘I doubt it very much,’ said Zalen reluctantly, loosening his round silver shield from its sling. ‘That dog has the unfortunate ability to smell trouble from a distance away, even accounting for bad sausages.’

‘Was that a compliment?’ asked Kaoldan with a grin.

‘Yes, but don’t tell him,’ replied Zalen with a sigh. ‘His head’s big enough as it is.’

‘Are we finished?’ asked Kubrean, looking at the three.

They nodded.

‘The smell seems to come from the north west. There is nothing to see and I certainly couldn’t smell anything,’ said Kaoldan.

Kubrean looked thoughtful. ‘That’s the direction of Grihr,’ he said grimly, ‘We are still several miles away though. Okay, we take no chances. When we get out of this forest it opens out onto a plain?’ he said.

Kaoldan nodded.

‘Then we split up, presenting less of a target, reducing our profile and widening out our viewpoint; keeping each other in sight at all times,’ he emphasised.

They all nodded, loosening shields and weapons; faces grim.

Yasmina hesitated slightly and visibly turned pale.

‘Don’t worry,’ said Dalon with a wink. ‘I’m sure it’s nothing.’

She nodded, a semi-smile appearing on her face, which had regained some colour, her Walkerblade shimmered green morphing into a longsword.

‘Not yet.’ offered Kaoldan.

She looked at him, slightly disappointed.

‘Let’s see what we find first,’ he said reassuringly. ‘Besides, you can see that thing a mile off,’ he gestured to the glowing sword.

She looked at the blade in her hand, rippling with green electricity, and then changed it back into a dull black rod.

She turned May and followed Kubrean.

Dalon's smile evaporated as she looked the other way.

Kaoldan mouthed ‘watch her’ and Dalon nodded, hefting his emerald warhammer. Test swinging the glittering weapon in vast circles, helping to loosen out his right arm, a serious expression on his shaggy face now.

‘Let’s go,’ Kaoldan whispered to Tren. The panthera responded just as he had a hundred times before, tensing and seeming to grow.

They turned and followed the others out of the forest. Twisted shaded trees eventually giving way to grassland. They separated out around 100 metres between them, a wave of eyes and ears.

Kaoldan checked left and right, alert for signs of trouble.

After a short while Dref came into view, twisting his muscular neck as Kaoldan approached before falling into step alongside Tren.

As they made their way through waving grass, winds continued to blow in from the northwest. Worries that had been gnawing at Kaoldan gradually subsided, his legs feeling less like water felt whole again.

Dref growled again.

He glanced to his left. In the distance he saw Kubrean waving, beckoning them over.

Kaoldan swallowed hard. This did not bode well.

He signalled Zalen to his right. The blonde Walker saw the sign and passed it along. Kaoldan turned and approached Kubrean, the grass rustling as Tren sped up to a jog. As he approached, he noticed faint white smoke rising in the distance in front of them; it was light and blended well with the patches of pale clouds on the horizon, Kaoldan swore under his breath.

‘Trouble,’ said Kubrean, gazing into the distance, standing in his saddle.

The others arrived a few minutes later. The realisation of what the smoke meant captured on each of their faces.

‘We approach together. Quietly, no fuss, no heroics. We find out what has happened and then we leave together,’ Kubrean said, hefting his shield. ‘Let’s go.’

They entered the village of Grihr cautiously.

Dalon and Kaoldan led, shields out and weapons at the ready, followed by a grim-faced Kubrean and Yasmina. Being the most reliable archers, Zalen and Kryst held the rear, bows out and arrows notched. Padded paws allowed the panthera to approach quietly, but the silence felt almost deafening, the rush of the wind through trees and fields the only sound, no birds singing or noise of any other kind, just utter stillness. It felt eerie, making the hairs stand up on the back of Kaoldan’s neck.

As they got closer, the village slowly came into view, appearing through partings in the trees. Simple wooden homes at the edge of the town, white structures with smoke damage to doors and windows which were broken, smeared with black. Pens for livestock were smashed, jagged angles of wood pointing in all directions.

Kaoldan knew a smell had gradually been building as they approached, it was the unmistakable smell of death.

The first time Kaoldan had smelt it was almost twenty years ago, a small farm on the edges of Khawen on the shores of the Midnight Sea. Wild and windy surroundings had blown the smell into a million pieces until he entered the property.

A small farmhouse had contained three bodies, an adult and two small children. The stench had made Kaoldan physically sick and had lingered in his hair and clothes for weeks. He had washed several times, even in freezing waters, to remove the smell, but it had

endured along with the images vivid in his mind.

They were images that had never left him. Young and idealistic, they served as proof to him that Walkers were needed to stop such things happening again. They had never found who had committed the crime; it was the first time Kaoldan's sense of justice had been punctured. As the years had passed, he had concluded that even Walkers could not stop this from happening everywhere, and today was another example of how cruel the world could be.

Charcoaled fatty pork was the sickly sweet smell that signalled death and judging by the wave that hit him, a lot. Ripe and thick, it stuck in his nose and throat. Yasmina covered her mouth with her elbow, trying hard to ward off the smell with her sword hand.

'Breathe through your mouth,' said Kubrean, 'It helps.'

She smiled at him, face grateful, and snorted a heavy breath out, as if trying to clear her system of a cold, shaking her head and setting her shoulders.

'Head back to Zalen and Kryst,' offered Kubrean.

'No,' she replied firmly, 'I'll be alright.' She gazed on ahead, surveying the blackened houses intently.

The deeper they ventured into the village the worse it became, charred bodies littered the streets, in long grass, the road, flopped over windows and the entrances to doors. Nothing had been spared. Between simple houses were a few streets that scattered off in many directions. Some houses remained unburnt but where there had been no fire there was blood splashed on outer walls, handprints dragged along the pale exterior.

Some corpses had been armed, evidently trying to fight, but with savage cuts, quivers of arrows protruding from their bodies, some seemed to have just run. But all had fallen as they had tried to escape.

There were blackened remains of men, women and children causing Kaoldan's stomach to heave. He swallowed the sensation down, closing his eyes as he did so, taking a deep breath.

The strangest thing was there was nothing left, not people, not animals, dogs, cats, chickens, nothing.

Just a thick, overwhelming smell of slaughter.

Kaoldan felt a swell of emotion inside. Gone was the water in his legs, the gnawing in his stomach, the doubt. He was filled with coldness, a coldness that rose through him in a wave. He clenched his jaw. Eyes darting this way and that, looking for any sign of life, anything that might provide answers, not mattering how horrific. He realised he was not breathing. The fingerless gloves of his sword hand showed white stiff fingers.

He stopped. Exploded a breath outward, and he tried to regain some composure.

Focus or they too could end up dead.

The feeling washed over him in waves, as they progressed through the town, wave after wave of coldness, but he was aware of both his revulsion and a growing need to hurt someone.

The sound of muffled paws on the hard-baked street was their only companion as they entered what appeared to be the main square. It had been market day judging by the scattered, torn and discarded stalls. Shredded canopies flapped absently in the wind, folding around tables. Wicker baskets rolled back and forth absently in the breeze strewn on the floor, apples and green vegetable scattered across the stone-paved square. Pottery and plates smashed; pieces littered the floor like autumn leaves.

Kaoldan's eyes searched the two-storey properties that surrounded the square, stone structures, painted yellow and white, terracotta roof tiles matching the splashes of colour showing the struggle on the floor and walls.

It was quiet, too quiet.

Entering the square, they spread out to cover each corner. Kaoldan looked to Kubrean, sadness swamped his face, he looked older somehow.

Movement behind a low wall caught Zalen's attention. His hand gripping his bow tightly as he pulled back the string.

Again movement.

A dirty blue scarf popped up from behind a wall and then

disappeared.

A scuffle of feet on sand signalled another glance, longer this time.

Then a wail pierced the silence, ricocheting around the square.

A scramble of feet as the blue mess sprinted from behind the wall towards Zalen, soiled leggings and blood-soaked arms whirling as it covered the ground. Zalen almost loosened an arrow, but the scarf came loose and fluttered to the ground, ignored by its owner, ragged haired and terrified, continuing her run. Zalen dismounted as she leapt at him and collapsed into his arms, sobbing deeply, babbling inanely.

Everyone else moved towards Zalen, all dismounting, checking the perimeter; round shields set and Walkerblades in hand.

'Help,' begged the woman. 'We must go,' her face blackened, eyes wide and tearful, searching around her as she cradled in his arms.

Zalen looked slightly shocked as he held her.

'What happened?' he asked.

'What do you think happened!' she snapped breathlessly.

Zalen realised the stupidity of his question. 'Who?' he asked calmly. Looking into her eyes.

'Don't know and don't care,' she replied, still looking around wildly. 'We must leave this place,'

'Is there anyone else?' asked Zalen slowly. She caught his eye, and he asked again. 'Is there anyone else left?'

'No,' she said, twitching, but her ragged breath slowed. 'Just me. I've been alone for days. If there were others, I would have seen them.'

Zalen looked to Kubrean, who nodded; they had seen enough.

'Come with me,' said Zalen, attempting to stand with the poor woman still clinging to his arm.

She looked at Zalen and then Kubrean, unsure.

He nodded.

Zalen found his feet, picked up his bow and slowly led the shivering woman towards Salah.

'No-one left' she muttered, 'all gone. Just me,' she said, almost

apologising. 'I hid,' she explained, nodding vigorously at Zalen, cowering as she walked, hidden in his arms. 'I hid.'

Salah knelt to let the woman, still wild-eyed, climb on him. She gripped the pommel tightly, shrinking into a ball of dirt and blood as he rose.

Salah's ears pricked up.

There was a slight whistle and a dull thud. The woman slowly groaned and slumped first forwards, then off Salah, a short dark quiver of feathers sticking out of her back as she lay motionless on the ground. A green ghostly orb rose from her body.

The group raised their shields and looked in the direction the arrow had come from. Kaoldan felt the familiar tingle of Fajin energy building as Kryst narrowed his eyes. He loosened an arrow into the distance, then swiftly another. They sailed through the air into the ruins of a semi-collapsed building about 50 metres away. A dark body on the second floor cried out as the arrows hit spinning him backwards into the wall, plaster exploded outward, he then fell limply to the ground with a crash, dust clouding around the body, a blue orb slowly emerged and rose into the sky. Kryst notched another arrow and waited, eyes alert.

There was a roar from the far side of the square; Walkers and pantheras alike turned towards it. Twenty robed figures streamed into the square through a half-demolished wall by a shop.

Tall and graceful in flowing black robes, with red armour, it resembled lobster shells, well fitted and overlapping. They were armed with mottled black and red weapons - long daggers, single blade axes and swords. Their long robes flapped as they charged forwards, half helmets covered their human faces.

Given the numbers, Kaoldan and Kubrean automatically made a decision that they had made dozens of times before. They placed round shields on their backs with a metallic clang, their Walkerblades shimmered green and morphed into double bladed glaive, the traditional weapon of the Walker.

Six feet long; a three-foot middle handle with two wide blades at

either end of about a foot and a half; enabling them to keep enemies at a distance, but also allowing them to engage multiple opponents at one time. Graceful yet devastating weapons in the right hands, and these weapons were in the right hands.

The buzz of Fajin building made the hairs on the back of Kaoldan's neck stand up as they both focused and pulled the energy inside them.

Dalon hefted his emerald warhammer in his right hand, semi crouching, fixing his shield arm in place, a savage grin spreading over his face.

'Come on, you sons of bitches,' he yelled.

Yasmina's face was like stone as she morphed her Walkerblade into a wide-bladed longsword, shield at the ready, her brown eyes fixed firmly on the robed figures.

Kryst and Zalen stayed at the rear, bows raised. The air rippled as they unleashed a volley of arrows at the robed figures. Some cried out, poleaxed or whipped around somersaulting and twisting in the air by the force within the arrows. Orbs emerged and rose upwards. Others ducked or stumbled but continued their advance.

Kubrean and Kaoldan met the advance head on, blades whirling in wide arcs, attempted parries by the soldiers were of little consequence. Walkerblades shattered the swords of the enemy on impact, exploding in showers of glittering steel. The Walkerblades cleaved through the red armour, removing arms, hands and cutting deep into shoulders and heads. High overhead cuts separated limbs from bodies and blood flowed, spraying and splattering onto the stones of the square - indistinguishable from the blood spilt in the slaughter of the villagers.

Orbs of every colour rose around them, ascending into the sky. The pantheras were making quick work of a group of soldiers that had attempted to sneak up on them from the opposite side. Growls and roars were accompanied by screams of pain and terror. Dref was wrestling with a dark-robed warrior. Kaoldan was going to help, but the familiar grey shape of Tren swiped at the warrior's head with one

of his huge paws. There was a sickening crack and a red orb emerged from the corpse.

The coldness that Kaoldan felt was replaced by a rage, a fury, a fire that rippled throughout his body, but his mind was clear and focused. Striking this way and that, almost without thinking, training and instinct taking over.

He ducked a savage sword thrust towards his face, thrusting his open hand forwards, the owner of the sword was catapulted backwards crashing into a wall twenty feet away, a splatter of blood decorating the side of the shop, before slumping down into a motionless heap, a purple orb rose.

The clang of metal on metal rang around the square, echoing from the walls and windows; grunts, cries and screams the accompaniment. The initial advance of the robed figures faltered, Dalon charged forwards around the outside of Kubrean, warhammer in hand, swinging the weapon into swords and the robed bodies. There was a sickening crunch as the hammer hit its mark, blood sprayed onto the rich green crystal, a human head twisted to an unnatural angle before the body collapsed twitching. Seconds later, more orbs rose around Dalon.

Yasmina followed around the opposite side as Kubrean and Kaoldan slowly moved forward in the centre of the conflict, stepping over the bodies of the fallen. Blades swirling and arcing as the enemy line split in two. Arrows whistled passed, fizzing with Fajin energy, bodies doubled up, a head taken clean off with a rattle and a clang, before the torso slumped on the floor, blood oozing out in steady gushes. More orbs emerged and rose upwards.

Kaoldan saw that nine robed figures remained; no others were now entering the square. He pushed ahead, the fire inside him urged him on. He paused for a second to morph his Walkerblade into two swords. Green light shimmered as the battle rage around him.

He parried an axe cut to his left with his sword then thrust with his right sword into the face of the unfortunate axe owner, it almost cleaved the skull in two, blood, teeth and bone splintered as he

savagely twisted the blade, making a strange gurgling noise as the body fell, an orb rose.

He advanced further forwards.

Zalen and Kryst's arrows continued to fly, batting two enemy soldiers backwards with astonishing force. Pink and orange orbs rose; victory was near.

Kaoldan turned to his left and time seemed to slow.

He saw Yasmina parrying a blow with her shield before delivering an overhand cut which bit into the unprotected head of the sword bearer. What she did not see was the long silver spear and its bearer behind her. Kaoldan did not even have time to shout a warning.

With one simple thrust the spear exploded into the small of her back upwards through the front of her black uniform, stuck within the armour of her breastplate, blood spraying outward from her mouth like a blossoming flower. An incredulous and confused look appeared on her face as she looked down to see no metal blade protruding from her chest. She dropped her sword which clattered to the floor, her body then her head sagged. Kaoldan shouted and charged forwards, Kubrean turned and his face fell with horror.

Kaoldan approached as the spear man pulled his weapon free of her body, nonchalantly kicking her away. She flopped to the floor with a clatter, motionless. He attempted to jab at Kaoldan with the now free spear, but the move was parried upwards by Kaoldan's left hand as he slid underneath, burying his right sword in the swordsman's belly. With a flick of his wrist, Fajin energy tore the spear man in two. His torso careered off to the side squelching as it hit the floor, the legs staggered then fell forward, spilling guts and blood onto the ground. Two yellow orbs rose from the body parts, merging into one that then rose upwards.

The grunts and clangs of metal subsided as Kaoldan reached Yasmina. He grabbed her body, seeing the wreckage that had been her back, twisting her around. Nothing moved. She was silent, eyes vacant, gazing into the sky as a purple image of her face and body shimmered then floated upwards.

Her head slumped backwards, and she was gone.

The silence that echoed around the square was deafening. It was thick and all consuming; it had descended like a velvet blanket where minutes earlier there had been chaos.

Kubrean's hand rested lightly on Kaoldan's shoulder. His boots crunched midst the debris.

'It's time we left,' he said.

Approaching footprints, slightly muffled compared to the sharpness of Kubrean's boots, caught Kaoldan's attention.

He looked up to see the large grey leopard-like panthera May approaching cautiously. Her head was low, and she hesitated as she approached, eyes transfixed on Yasmina's body. May sniffed the ground before the body and then moved closer. She nudged Kaoldan softly in the chest then pushed her nose into the body of her Walker, softly at first then harder as no response came.

She looked confused, staring at Kaoldan for an explanation; none came. Kaoldan ruffled the head of the big cat who then slumped to the floor in front of him. Her eyes looking at Kaoldan, up and down, then the body of her Walker. A low yowl gurgled in her throat as she closed her eyes.

A shout tore through the silence.

'Here!' shouted Dalon, striding forwards before roughly shoving a robed figure to the floor in front of Kaoldan.

The figure was hooded, but cowered and clutched its arm. The hood twitched around wearily, taking in its surroundings. Kubrean moved forwards and yanked the hood backwards. It revealed a shaggy mop of black hair. The owner's head shrank back into the rest of his robe like a tortoise.

Kubrean was having none of it and grabbed a big handful of hair, drawing the head up; a pale face, dirty, but clean shaven, shied away from him, trying to turn away, but Kubrean twisted the hair upwards, causing the man to cry out.

'Why have you done this?' roared Kubrean, spittle spraying over the man's face.

He chuckled lightly to himself, amused by the question.

‘Told to,’ he replied, satisfied by his own answer.

Kubrean was not.

Gripping the hair tighter, he asked again.

‘Why...?’ he said.

A sly smile appeared on the man’s face.

Kubrean pulled the man’s head up before smashing his heavy fist down on the exposed chin. He bore down on the man.

The man cowered, raising his hands to protect himself as if sensing another blow. He slowly, uncertainly, looked up, blinking rapidly. The blow did not come, and he slowly raised his chin. A long, narrow smile grew, blood smeared across his face from his now split lip.

‘He told us to,’ he replied before spitting blood onto the floor, the gob disappearing into the dust of the ground. ‘He told us to and he will do again,’ his head twitched slightly as he spoke. ‘No escape, no mercy,’ he continued, face creased with cruelty.

‘All unworthy. Filth,’ he said, looking upwards. ‘We listen to him and he is coming, getting stronger, waiting until the time is right. Then...’ he let the words hang in the air, a distant smile on his face.

‘Then what...’ raged Dalon, surging forwards.

He was intercepted by Kryst and Zalen, who held him back.

‘Then... what...?’ he repeated, struggling forwards.

‘Then what,’ asked Kubrean, twisting the man’s head firmly to face him. The sound of tearing hair made the man’s face grimace in pain.

‘Reng returns...’ he said.

Kubrean stopped. ‘Reng...?’ he said, his face creased as he puzzled at the man’s answer. ‘Reng has been dead for a thousand years,’ he said, shaking his head in disbelief. ‘He’s a myth, a tale told by parents to scare their children to sleep... his soul has been claimed by the Abyss...’

‘Really...?’ challenged the man, chin rising, he cackled to himself knowingly.

‘Really...!’ said Kubrean, punching him full in the face again.

He yelped, cowering down beneath his hands.

‘Utter nonsense...’ Kubrean muttered, flexing his gloved hand and shaking his head.

The man raised his head again, cackling.

‘You will see...’ he said, twitching behind hands, trying to protect himself, as if sensing another punch. It never came.

A deep throaty growl behind Kubrean stopped the laughter. The man peered through his trembling hands.

May approached, teeth bared, her eyes fixed upon the cowering man. Panthera never bare their teeth without good reason.

She slowly, deliberately approached, her eyes fixed, her paws scratching on the sandy ground.

She paused and looked at Kubrean.

He looked back and then up at the group.

‘Time, we left,’ he said. He looked sadly to towards Yasmina’s body, his head dropped. ‘She comes back with us,’ he said, looking at the solemn faces around him. Zalen and Kryst approached her body.

‘If I might carry her?’ came a deep voice from behind them. Dalon stepped forwards hands raised, his eyes moist and glasslike.

Zalen and Kryst nodded silently.

Dalon moved, undoing the clasp from his shoulders, removing his deep blue cloak as he knelt down and placed it over her body. He looked at her face.

‘From the stars we came, to the stars we rise,’ he said as he closed her eyes. She looked at peace.

‘From the stars we came, to the stars we rise,’ the group repeated as Dalon slowly covered her face with his cloak.

As a father might cradle a small child, the big man carefully and tenderly scooped the blue cloak containing her body into his vast arms. He turned and moved towards the other panthera at the entrance to the square. Everyone turned and followed, except May and Kubrean, who remained, eyes locked on each other.

As the group left the square, May glanced at the cowering man on the floor. He looked back, terrified, eyes searching this way and that for an escape.

He scrambled to his feet, boots scraping on the floor.

May looked back at Kubrean. He reluctantly nodded.

She turned, tracking the man as he lumbered across the square, half falling as he did so, breathing heavily. May looked back at Kubrean and charged.

Kubrean dusted his hands together, then flexed his fingers as Yasmina's Walkerblade shot through the air into his waiting hand.

He paused for a moment and looked at the blood splatter weapon, his face grim. A simple black rod, now lifeless and ordinary.

He turned, sniffed and then set off toward the others, as a short horrendous scream echoed around the square.

They met no resistance, or anything on their way out of Grihr. Decay and death were everywhere. If anything Kaoldan noticed it more on the way out of the square and back down the dusty silent streets: bodies and carnage littered in grass verges, the entrances to houses, shops and buildings - all silent. It was a sobering experience. It had been a long time since he had seen such a sight and on such a scale.

Death had always been part of the job, something that was just expected and to be dealt with as part of being a Walker. Yet this time it seemed to hit him somewhere else, some place deeper. It was hard to say for certain where – his mind felt shattered - and this concerned him. Perhaps it was the scale; the absolute slaughter and absence of anything left in its wake, but it could also have been because it was so close to Thura. Whatever the cause of the anxiety, he knew that there would be consequences, as there already had been.

He glanced back at May, slowly moving forward with a blue cloak carefully attached to her saddle. It had been turned into a shroud

containing Yasmina's body. The pride that emanated from May as she made her way along the long sandy, stone littered path while surrounded by grasslands was striking to Kaoldan. Beauty and loss all at the same time.

A whine brought him back to his senses. He glanced at Dref, who trotted alongside him. He faced forward again, his mind swirling - trying to comprehend what had happened over the last few hours, losing his colleague, the loss of the villagers, mentions of Reng and the news that they would now have to share with Duke Lomman.

That was a task he did not envy Kubrean. Losing a loved one was earth shattering. He knew this all too well, but losing an only child. He set such thoughts to the back of his mind, clenched his teeth and set off to swap places with Zalen, scouting ahead. His burgundy cloak splayed out in the wind as Tren charged off, Dref in hot pursuit.

'It's no good,' said Kubrean, shouting to be heard above the noise of the rain. 'We must replenish our supplies and this weather is doing no-one any good.'

Kaoldan scowled, his mood like the weather had worsened over the last few days. Still two full days from Thura and despite their best efforts, they were all soaked. One day after leaving Grihr the heavens had opened, and they had not stopped since. Ceaseless rain, greyer days. Conversation had been sparse and Kubrean was right, it was doing none of them any good.

He looked at the large tavern in the distance. Candles flickered in the windows and the sign rattled around violently in the wind. The greyness of the evening and the surrounding trees did little to diminish the prospect of a good dry bed and perhaps some hot food too. His trousers stuck to his legs and water trickled down his back.

Kaoldan had wanted to press on, but judging by the surrounding faces such a move would prove unpopular and given the weather what progress could they make? Better to rest up, hope for more

favourable weather and press on at first light.

‘You’re the Master,’ he said to Kubrean, shrugging his shoulders.

The old man grinned back.

‘Excellent choice,’ he replied.

Kubrean was the Master, the Grey Master of Walkers in Thura; a noble and ancient title he had been appointed to over a decade before. Their friendship had blossomed and although Kubrean was his Master, Kaoldan had always followed the old man out of respect and duty, as much as for his position. Leadership was something Kaoldan had seldom liked, Kubrean’s ability to do it so effortlessly was a blessing for them both. And upon reflection was a night in a tavern such a bad suggestion, Kaoldan thought not.

As they approached, the rattling sign calmed slightly, the rain easing to show in golden lettering ‘The Topsy Monkey.’

Kaoldan smirked, at least the owner had a sense of humour.

Kubrean dismounted and approached the main entrance, a green glass-panelled door set against a double-fronted entrance with lead-lined windows, three storeys high. Not too much noise escaped as Kubrean passed through the door.

‘Hope they’ve got some decent beer,’ said Zalen, shivering in his saddle.

‘Something dark and rich would be nice,’ mused Dalon.

‘Nah. Pale, golden and sweet,’ announced Kryst.

‘Wine?’ ventured Kaoldan.

The others all turned and looked at him accusingly.

Salah shook his shaggy mane, and rain sprayed everywhere.

‘Thanks,’ said Zalen dryly. ‘You’re not having any beer,’ he said to the sandy-coloured panthera, who snorted and looked in the opposite direction.

Merriment and warm light spilt out of the door as Kubrean emerged. ‘They have space for us,’ he said happily. ‘Kaoldan, would you and Dalon take care of the pantheras?’ He nodded to the rear of the building. ‘Apparently, they have a large stable, more than enough room for us without unsettling the horses.’

‘At last, civilisation,’ said Zalen as he dismounted and splashed through the puddles of the muddy street over to Kaoldan leading Salah by his reins.

‘Off you go, stable boy,’ he said with a straight face, patting Kaoldan firmly on the shoulder. ‘Right’ he announced, turning towards the tavern and rubbing his hands together and running them through his wet hair.

‘First round is on you, Kryst,’ he said with a wink.

The big man winced at the prospect.

The sound of music echoed out onto the street as the others dismounted and entered the tavern. A fiddle began playing as the door closed behind them.

Kaoldan and Dalon exchanged a look, shrugged their shoulders, and led the panthera around the back of the tavern.

The structure to the rear of the tavern was indeed large. Sloping roof and walls were made of perfunctory wood. A golden orange glow emitted from between the wooden slats, the sound of the rain their only accompaniment.

Entering through a large open door at the front, they found a large vaulted room, separated to the left into individual stables. They led the pantheras to the right into one large open section which seemed to have been created to hold several horses at any one time and began unsaddling their mounts.

‘What shall we do with her?’ asked Dalon softly as he stood in front of May, who stood still as a statue.

May turned her head and looked at the heavily bearded man.

‘I think May will be quite capable of looking after her,’ said Kaoldan gently as he walked over to help.

It was true. Since the terrible incident in Grihr, May had not let the body of Yasmina out of her sight. The body still wrapped in Dalon’s heavy blue travelling cloak.

‘You go,’ said Kaoldan to his big friend, placing a hand on his shoulder.

‘Go have a drink and something to eat with the others, I’ll finish

up; won't take long.'

Dalon looked once at the body and then at Kaoldan, a grateful smile appeared on his face.

'Thank you,' he said simply before glancing back at May and turning to leave the stable, hay rustling underfoot as he left, the door banging as he exited the building.

'Come over here,' said Kaoldan to May, 'it's about time you had some rest,' He ruffled the head of the big grey and black cat. She raised her neck, enjoying the attention. Kaoldan moved to her side and lifted Yasmina's body from the saddle on May's back.

As he did so, a slender pale arm flopped out of the blue cloak and a blood speckled hand landed in his own.

Kaoldan shivered, then froze.

An anger rose within him.

He had been right.

She should never have come with them.

A needless loss of life.

A father desperate to please his daughter's need to prove herself had ultimately cost her life.

He closed his eyes and shook his head, stopping himself from thinking about it more. Slowly the anger subsided, but only slowly. Kaoldan looked away as he picked up the icy hand and gently placed the arm back inside the blue cloak, tucking the heavy fabric inside itself to secure the limb.

He hefted the body and placed it carefully by May's side as she observed.

He finished the remainder of the tasks and moved towards the exit. As the door opened with a creak, he glanced at the blue cloak on the floor. May had settled herself down and appeared content. He looked towards Tren and the big cat blinked at him, then turned towards May and settled his head down. Kaoldan let out a slow sigh, before grimacing as he ducked outside.

The rain was now lashing down as he jogged through the pools of

mud, around the side of the tavern to the main entrance. He entered through the main door and pulled his hood down. The warmth of the room hit him like a wave. Stale air scented with a hint of burning peat.

The main lounge area was spacious and split equally to the left and right of the main bar. A fire to the left roared within a stout stone fireplace, grey mottled with black soot. By its side, a young man and woman gently played fiddles, to a small crowd of enthusiastic onlookers who clapped in time to the tune.

A shout to his right drew his attention, Kryst was half stood, beckoning his friend over with a wave. They had secured a square table with chairs in the far corner, sat on top were dishes and tall tankards of frothing beer.

‘Here,’ said Dalon, thrusting an overfull tankard into Kaoldan’s hand, ‘This might help.’

Kaoldan took a long deep drink. The beer was surprisingly good; deep, thick and dark with a slightly bitter and earthy taste. A taste he could easily slip into without too much thought. He placed the drink down and surveyed the food in front of him, dark bread, cheeses and a selection of meats. The main thing that caught his attention was a large wooden bowl of thick white broth. Creamy and filled with vegetables and white meat, the taste was wonderful. The first spoonful of warmth expanded through him from his middle to the tips of his fingers. He grabbed a chunk of bread and eagerly set to work.

‘Not bad,’ pondered Kubrean sitting back in his chair nursing his tankard. ‘Not as good as my cooking, of course,’ he said, a grin spreading across his face. ‘But most definitely what we needed.’

‘And what we need more of now is this,’ said Zalen, tapping his tankard in Kaoldan’s direction. He winked and then nodded at the bar. ‘I would get this round, but I’m hemmed in here, damned window seats,’ he said, pretending to rise from his seat, spreading his arms in defence while pulling a sad face.

‘Alright then’ said Kaoldan reluctantly getting to his feet, sucking

his fingers clean.

‘Same again,’ said Zalen ‘please,’ he winked.

Turning towards the bar, Kaoldan hefted his purse in his hand as he walked. Kubrean had been right, he thought, a calmness settling over his shoulders, as he walked counting out silver and copper coins as he went.

The coins exploded out of his hands and into the air, followed by a loud shout. A large heavy-set man turned around somewhat flustered.

‘What are you playing at?’ he accused, his eyes settling on Kaoldan. The pig like man looked him up and down.

‘Why don’t you watch where you’re going?’ he said, sweat visibly dripping down his bald, shiny head.

‘My apologies,’ offered Kaoldan, not wanting to continue the discussion. ‘Let me buy you a drink,’ he offered towards the bar. The offer of a fresh tankard of beer seemed to appease the man. His face lightened but still eyed Kaoldan suspiciously.

Kaoldan ignored the look and bent down to gather the spilt coins from the dusty, hay covered floor. Although still missing a few, Kaoldan thought better of it and stood up straight. The hog man was still watching him intently. Kaoldan smiled politely before moving towards the bar, his new companion in tow.

‘You’re one of them Walkers, ain’t ya?’ asked the man, wiping his nose on the sleeves of his thick arm with a loud sniff.

‘Something like that,’ offered Kaoldan, trying to get the attention of the young dark-haired girl at the other end of the bar.

‘Heard lots of things about you, I have,’ the hog man confirmed importantly. ‘Magic and stuff like that,’ he continued.

‘Really,’ answered Kaoldan, finally able to get the young barmaid’s attention.

She approached with a gentle smile on her face. Then she saw the hog man and slowed her pace, the smile falling from her face.

‘What’ll it be?’ she asked curtly.

‘Same as before’ said Kaoldan, nodding towards the table in the

corner, 'And one of whatever he wants,' he inclined his head to the hog-man.

Hearing the cue, the pig man turned, saw the girl and smiled. His lips curling up at the corners of his mouth, beady eyes looked her up and down like a main course.

'Well, I think I'll have a drink and then see what else is on offer,' he laughed loudly to himself, clearly having told the funniest joke in the world.

'Just food and drink,' said the girl shortly. She turned to the row of barrels behind her. Taking fresh tankards from the table to the side, she drove them deep into the barrels with a deep splosh. She placed the first drink on the side of the bar in front of the hog-man.

He tried to grab her hand, but she deftly moved it out of the way before he could catch hold.

Kaoldan noticed the attempt, and the half smile disappeared from his face.

The girl plunged another tankard into the barrel, before twisting around to place the frothy drink on the bar.

This time the hog man was quicker and tried to use both hands to grab her arm, and he would have succeeded if Kaoldan hadn't deflected the attempt with a slap of his hand.

The hog-man bristled.

'What you do that for?' he yelled, spittle spraying everywhere.

'Don't,' said Kaoldan coldly, 'Take your drink and leave it at that.'

'None of your business this,' said the hog-man, gesturing towards the girl. 'We've had fun before, ain't we Naween?' he declared pompously.

Naween smiled nervously, still trying to complete the drink order.

'Your dad don't mind,' continued the hog-man shouting down the bar to a meek-looking man with grey hair, a stoop and another nervous smile, who seemed very interested in a stain on a table.

He, like his daughter, was plainly dressed in dark leggings, a dirty white shirt, and a brown leather apron to complete the tavern owner look. He glanced quickly at Kaoldan and seemed to shake his head

a little, pleading.

‘I think it might be best to just have a drink tonight’ said Kaoldan turning to face the hog-man who stood half a head taller than him.

‘And what if I decide otherwise?’ eyed the man toying with his drink. ‘I’ve got me friends here,’ he declared, nodding towards a crowd of five dirty looking farm types to his left. They looked over suspiciously.

‘Besides, I think you might owe me another drink,’ he said, downing a huge gulp of beer from his tankard, before slamming it down, slopping half its contents onto the bar. The farm workers smiled to themselves.

‘And I definitely think me and Naweene will see each other later,’ he said leaning into Kaoldan slightly turning eyeing the young girl up and down. She tensed as he said the words. And that was it.

Kaoldan smiled lightly and in one swift motion drew his head backwards before unleashing a savage head-butt onto the nose of the hog-man. The impact sounded like the snapping of a branch; blood exploded everywhere. The hog-man crumbled into a semi heap. The commotion alerted the hog-man’s friends, who turned and lunged at Kaoldan.

He felt a fiery anger rising within him. Kaoldan turned and swiftly punched the first straw haired, long-limbed man full in the throat. He choked violently as he folded up on the floor.

Parrying a clumsy punch to his left, he twisted and kneed the man straight in the groin. Air exploded out of the man with a whoosh.

Kaoldan felt the rage within him flooding throughout his body, he felt light, limber and strong of body, and cold of mind as he buried his elbow in the back of the man’s neck, there was another crack and the wounded man flopped to the floor.

Tankards flew, chairs, and table scraped on the floor. Kaoldan didn’t think, he just reacted.

A movement to his right was met with a swirling backwards elbow, a figure oomph’d and staggered backwards.

Kaoldan struck again with the back of his fist, and it hit something

thick and wet. He moved, avoiding the grab of dirty hands. He grabbed the equally dirty arms and flipped them downward in a circle. The owner of the dirty hands and arms somersaulted in the air and crashed to the floor as another pair of dirty hands grabbed Kaoldan from behind. He threw his head back, cracking the nose of the man behind him; the hands loosened and slipped away. Kaoldan grab the slower of the arms and pulled downward, hard. The resulting crack made the man cry out as the injured arm bent completely the wrong way.

‘Enough!’ came a shout from behind Kaoldan, but he ignored it, ducking under a wild swing of a punch. Kaoldan rose to uppercut the man on the jaw. There was a crunch as the man’s head ricocheted backwards, teeth and blood spraying.

‘ENOUGH!’ came the shout again, this time accompanied by two sets of powerful hands that restrained each of Kaoldan’s arms. He was about to struggle lose, when he looked to each side and saw it was Kryst and Zalen who were pinning his arms. He struggled to be free, but their grip was too tight. Kaoldan trembled and shook his head in rage; unleashing a savage roar.

‘E-nou-gh!’ said Kubrean for a third time. ‘Take him outside.’ he ordered. Zalen and Kryst with rehearsed precision moved together to face the doorway as Kaoldan continued to yell.

The hog-man rose to the right of Kubrean, blood streaming from his broken nose and a look of rage in his eyes. He was about to charge towards Kubrean, who didn’t even turn to face him. He raised his right hand. There was a fizz of Fajin and with a flick of his wrist the hog-man flew backwards ten feet, crashed against a wall before collapsing into a silent heap. Kubrean let out a sharp sigh, then followed his restrained but raging friend out into the midnight air.

It had stopped raining, much to Kubrean’s relief as they left the tavern. The glow of torches on either side of the main door provided

an orange glow which was absorbed by the thick brown mud of the road. Zalen and Kryst still had Kaoldan's arms firmly pinned by his side, and mostly he had stopped struggling and yelling. His face was contorted with rage and he looked at Kubrean intensely.

'Enough!' roared Kubrean, growing tired of the fighting. 'What is the matter with you?' he asked Kaoldan.

'I didn't start it,' began Kaoldan trying to shrug, 'Do you mind?' he asked the two Walkers by his side.

They looked at Kubrean, who nodded. They released their grip, and Kaoldan stretched his arms, bending and shaking them. He rolled his shoulders to work out the kinks.

'I didn't start it and I've done the world a favour whilst doing so,' said Kaoldan defiantly.

'Really? You think knocking seven shades of shit out of some local bully is going to change the world?' asked Kubrean, exasperated. 'What has got into you?'

Then it all became clear.

'It's about her isn't it,' said Kubrean, gesturing towards the stables. Kaoldan said nothing.

'Would you mind leaving us?' Kubrean asked Zalen and Kryst.

They looked at him, then at Kaoldan, and quietly left. The noise which escaped from the door as they re-entered the tavern seemed to show the ruckus was over and the pleasantries had resumed.

'Admit it,' challenged Kubrean.

Kaoldan's head sank, his jaw trembled. 'She should be alive,' he said.

Kubrean looked lost. 'How?'

'She should never have come with us,' said Kaoldan, looking up at his friend and Master. 'I told you it was too risky, I told you she wasn't ready. This could all have been avoided if you had simply said no.'

'Say no to Duke Lomman?' said Kubrean, taking a step forward.

'Yes,' said Kaoldan shortly. 'Or even if you hadn't said no, you could have sorted something else out. It wouldn't be the first time

you've bent the rules.'

'And I remember what happened the last time I did!' thundered Kubrean, anger rising within him. 'As do you.'

'This is different,' yelled Kaoldan, kicking a puddle in frustration. 'He was ready, she wasn't,'

'No,' said Kubrean, taking a step forward. 'I don't think so. I think your memories are slightly wrong, my friend. She was as good as him, if not better. She was prepared, she fought well, she was just unlucky.'

'As was he,' said Kaoldan, quieter this time. 'As was he,' he looked into the distance as if trying to gain some perspective and then looked back at Kubrean.

'You think I wanted any of this?' Kubrean asked, spreading his arms.

'No, but it still happened.'

'There are less of us than there have ever been, we can't keep them hidden in the background while we sort the world out.'

'We can, until they are ready,' Kaoldan snapped, looking at Kubrean.

'None of us are getting any younger,' said Kubrean with a sigh.

'Perhaps,' conceded Kaoldan with a nod. 'but this could have been avoided. This is not what I wanted.'

'Me either, but sometimes what we want and what we need are two entirely different things and rarely do we have as much of a say as we would really like. So, it seems we have much to deal with and much to discuss.'

'No, no we don't,' said Kaoldan, shaking his head.

Kubrean frowned.

'Save it,' waved away Kaoldan. He had suddenly realised how tired he felt. The combination of the fight, the drink and the travelling had sucked the energy from his body. He turned and slowly moved towards the stable.

'The world will not end tonight...' he said, sloping off.

Kubrean was about to say something, but he hesitated, and the

words never came. He bit his lip as he watched his friend, shoulders hunched, disappear into the darkness.

‘Tomorrow it might...’ he muttered to himself.

Chapter 7 - Suspicions

Being raised in the country, Kaoldan had developed a fondness for sleeping in stables. So when he awoke for the briefest moment he felt safe, secure and at peace.

The simplicity, the warmth of the hay and straw, that familiar smell always helped him to sleep. He stretched his arms and sat up. Dust swirled in the sunlight breaking through the wooden slats. At least the weather had improved, Kubrean had been right about two things. The weariness that had consumed his body the previous evening had left him, and he could not recollect any dreams. He felt refreshed and the prospect of better travelling weather raised his spirits further still.

A black head popped up from under a heap of hay to his left. Dref seemed almost as at home in the stables, twigs of stray straw clumped on his head as he looked around and popped his tongue out.

‘Morning,’ said Kaoldan, stifling a yawn. ‘I trust the accommodation meets with your approval?’

Dref sneezed, making the straw on his head vanish. He blinked, then looked around.

‘Suit yourself,’ muttered Kaoldan.

A gurgle from his stomach brought his attention to food. He rose, unwrapping himself from within his cloak. The wool and fur mix had more than kept him warm, and his muscles were not too sore. Stretching before leaving the stables, closely followed by Dref. He took in their surroundings, thick trees covered with leaves, daylight popping through here and there. The muddy path had mostly dried out, and the tavern seemed smaller today and slightly less regal than it had appeared last night.

White paint was peeling off the outer wood and stone walls, and the sign above the entrance creaked in the breeze as they made their way in. Still smelling heavily of burning peat, sweet beer and stale

sweat, the windows allowed a good deal of light in which illuminated pictures on the walls and the straw on the dusty floor.

‘I hoped you’d be back,’ said a thin wheedling voice from behind the bar.

It belonged to the apparent father of Naweene, who was stooped behind the bar, cleaning a tankard before placing it on the table at his side.

‘Seems you owe me some money after all the trouble you caused last night,’ he flicked his dishcloth toward the crushed plaster wall and cracked window.

‘Cost me valuable custom that would have, but your friend has sorted things out. More money than sense that man,’ he laughed with a nasally wheeze, twitching his head as he did so.

‘I am sorry for the trouble,’ said Kaoldan flatly.

The father missed the edge in Kaoldan’s voice, absently nodded and then carried on cleaning his tankards.

A call from the far corner of the room caught Kaoldan’s ear. Kryst, Zalen and Dalon were sitting around the same table as the previous evening. On the table were bread, cheese, meats, eggs, a bowl of fruit and a large clay jug of creamy milk. He approached, shaking his head.

‘Did you even move or go to bed last night?’ Kaoldan asked.

‘I think so,’ pondered Zalen. ‘Lost track of time after your little scrap. Feeling better, are you?’

Kaoldan smiled sarcastically at his friend.

‘Nice of you to help me,’ he quipped back.

‘No point really, you seemed quite happy fighting the world by yourself and by the time we knew what was going on you’d sorted it out,’ shrugged Zalen. ‘Kubreen is none too happy with you.’

‘What’s new,’ sulked Kaoldan.

‘Don’t talk rubbish,’ scolded Zalen. ‘You went too far, and you know it,’

‘Maybe...’ said Kaoldan, avoiding eye contact before reaching for an apple from the bowl on the table, inspecting it before taking a

large bite.

‘Definitely...’ said Dalon with cool eyes. ‘Much as that man needed teaching a lesson, what you did was over the top. What on earth got into you?’

‘Nothing, just got carried away. There were a lot of them and they seemed to want to hurt me. You might have noticed?’ said Kaoldan defensively, nibbling at his apple before eating the core as well in two big bites.

‘Alright, if you must know what happened,’ he said, unfolding his arms and leaning forward on the table. He then told them the full story about Naween and the hog man while eating some hard-boiled eggs, covered in black pepper, and helping himself to cheese and a half a loaf of not altogether bad brown bread, which tasted of honey and seeds.

Zalen and Dalon hummed, nodding their approval in the right places.

‘Kubrean has smoothed things over with the owner,’ said Zalen.

Kaoldan nodded.

‘You could have just walked away, and we could have sorted it out together and saved all this hassle,’ insisted Zalen twirling his spoon to show the damage from the previous night.

‘I just... snapped,’ shrugged Kaoldan, looking at the others, almost as confused as they seemed. ‘The way she reacted to what he said. I had to do something,’ he said helplessly.

‘Not sure I understand why, but you must control that temper of yours. It’ll get you into all sorts of trouble and besides, since when do you go off having fights without at least letting us join in,’ said Zalen leaning forwards and pointing his spoon at Kaoldan.

At this point Dref’s head slowly appeared at Zalen’s side from under the table and quietly grabbed several slices of meat from the plate in front of him before disappearing under the table again.

‘Point taken,’ said Kaoldan, shrugging his shoulders, trying not to look at the dog’s eyes which had reappeared eyeing more breakfast. He was about to try again when Zalen exclaimed in delight.

‘Here he is. Good morning, fleabag,’ he said roughly, rubbing the big dog’s head.

Dref had no idea what a fleabag was, but it seemed to be a good thing.

‘So well behaved you are, yes you are.’ He continued to make a fuss of the dog. ‘Bet your starving. Have some of this,’ he said, dropping the rest of the meat onto the floor. Dref’s eyes smiled before he dived under the table to claim his reward for being such a good fleabag.

‘Love that dog,’ said Zalen.

Kryst had said nothing so far. He sat back, silently chewing on his breakfast. He was about to speak when heavy footsteps and a familiar voice spoke.

‘About time you were up,’ Kubrean appeared behind Kaoldan. ‘Thought we could all use some extra rest,’ he continued. ‘I want to make progress today and the weather seems to be in our favour for a change,’ he gestured outside.

The seated Walkers nodded in agreement.

‘About time we left?’ he said. ‘And feed that dog before we leave would you?’ he looked at Kaoldan and then pointed at an innocent looking Dref, who whined.

Kaoldan gave the dog a withering look before throwing him some cheese.

As they finished their breakfast and prepared to leave. Kaoldan noticed the young girl, Naween, moving chairs and a table around near the front of the tavern. Wearing identical clothes to the previous night, her long brown hair was trussed up into a loose untidy ponytail.

She saw him, stopped what she was doing, smiled, mouthed *Thank you*, and nodded.

He nodded back. A small wave of satisfaction washed over him.

As he turned towards the door, he saw Kubrean stood silently watching, a broad grin on his face.

‘Come on,’ said Kaoldan, waving his hands towards the door, suddenly embarrassed. ‘Let’s go... Master,’ he added mockingly.

Kubrean’s grin widened, his nostrils flaring.

Kaoldan shook his head, muttered something under his breath and went through the door.

The old man bowed towards Naween, who curtsied back, then got back to her work, scraping chairs on the floor as she did so.

The air outside was crisp. Re-saddling the pantheras and re-securing Yasmina’s body took almost no time at all, and before they knew it they were surrounded by trees and birdsong.

Dalon had gone on ahead with Dref to scout.

Zalen and Kryst argued quietly amongst themselves about something nobody knew about or wanted to know.

Kaoldan’s mind wandered as they rode along, the soft breeze tugging at the emerging beard on his face.

Perhaps Kubrean had been right. He had confused himself with his own action the previous night. He had a temper, that much was true, but the careless disregard he had shown and the lack of any feeling he had experienced as he fought the hog-man and his cronies had been an entirely new experience and not a welcome one either.

Something about the way the hog-man had eyed up the young girl had rattled him, made something fragile snap. Zalen was also correct, it could have been dealt with much more discreetly and professionally.

Seeing her as they had left had not helped his mind either. Her gratitude was muted, but entirely sincere.

It had embarrassed Kaoldan, making him feel even more foolish for his actions the previous night, and although she did not seem to disapprove of what had happened, Kaoldan took no pride in it. It made it sit even more uncomfortably with him. He was not naturally a violent man, but something had snapped within him; the question was what.

He had meant what he had said to Kubrean. Yasmina should not

have come, Kubrean had the power and the cunning to have changed that, but he hadn't and now she was dead.

Her death seemed to have got to him in a way he had not expected, on a deeper, more personal level. Above all else, he wanted to protect people. Maybe that explained his actions in the tavern last night. They had wanted to protect the young Walker, but collectively they had failed, and the terrible news now had to be broken to a father and mother that their only child was no more.

Taking her body back home was unusual, but it was the right thing to do. Helping the parents to grieve and to bring her back home. His mind began heading towards ghosts of the past when Kubrean shouted him from up ahead.

Kaoldan kicked Tren into a jog and the great panthera bounded forwards.

'Listen,' said Kubrean awkwardly, looking his friend in the eye as he licked his lips.

'Our talk last night,' he began, 'I meant what I said. I need to know what got into you. You can take care of yourself, that I know from experience,' he laughed nervously, shifting in his saddle. 'But that was another level of cruelty. Some of those men knew no better, they were probably as scared of that giant as half the people in the tavern were. Some won't be able to work again. Or at least not to the same level. I put things right. Two of them have families to support, you know, responsibilities,' he impressed on Kaoldan.

'People make their own decisions, regardless of who you are and your circumstances. Everybody has a choice and you've got to live with the consequences of the choices you make,' said Kaoldan blankly.

He said it but didn't really seem to believe it. The argument seemed pathetically hollow.

'Anyway, I think you may have been right,' offered Kaoldan, sensing the awkwardness and was as keen to be rid of it as was his friend.

'Losing her has got to me more than I thought, brought back

feelings I hoped I'd left behind.' He looked mournfully back at May, carrying the blue shroud containing Yasmina's body. 'She was talented and capable. And if you felt it best to bring her, then that is your decision and although I disagree with it, I respect it. I spoke out of turn and I am sorry for that,' he said sincerely.

'Thank you,' said Kubrean, clasping his friend on the left shoulder by the pauldron. 'That means a lot to me.'

He settled back in his seat, but there seemed to be something else nagging at him. He glanced at Kaoldan, who sensed a half-told story.

He hesitated, but Kubrean remained silent. He smiled weakly, averting his gaze, but still no words came.

A silence grew in the space between them.

'What do you think of the claim?' asked Kaoldan, eager to change the subject and move the conversation along.

Kubrean looked at him blankly.

'Reng? Back at Grihr. The soldier babbling about the return of Reng. You think there is anything to it?' Kaoldan said, squinting away from the sunshine.

Kubrean shrugged. 'I doubt it. The ramblings of a madman, if you really want to know. Reng has been dead a thousand years. He's ancient history. A myth of darker times. Him and his magic army.'

'But surely if the Krund want to re-establish the old ways, that has to be a cause of concern? It's not as if they are not already giving us enough to worry about,' said Kaoldan. The images of carnage and death in Grihr made him shiver. Senseless, remorseless, and no mercy shown.

'It would not be a good development and it will be hard to keep quiet, once the secret is out. We may be fortunate that Grihr is, or should I say was, not a real centre of commerce or anything for that matter,' said Kubrean, taking in the scenery.

'Then why the interest in it?' asked Kaoldan.

'Duke Lomman grew up there, spent most of his childhood there in fact. It must hold an emotional attachment for him, unfortunately now it will hold another,' said Kubrean, glancing back at May.

‘Was there something else you wanted to discuss?’ asked Kaoldan, sensing something still wasn’t quite right.

Kubrean hesitated. He licked his lips, looked back at May again, then at Kaoldan. A small, uncomfortable grin grew on his face. He sighed. ‘Nothing that can’t wait.’

Kaoldan didn’t believe it for a second.

‘You sure?’ he pushed his friend.

Again, Kubrean hesitated. ‘It is nothing really, just another decision I made some time ago that will be fulfilled soon.’

Nerves washed over Kaoldan.

‘What decision?’ he asked. Not really wanting to know the answer.

Kubrean laughed, ‘Nothing bad, I assure you. The right thing, given the circumstances, really. It can wait. Honestly,’ he said finally, and the discussion was over. ‘I’d better swap places with Dalon or I’ll never hear the end of it,’ without waiting for a response, he clicked his heels and Max charged into the forest.

Kaoldan was left with a sense he was ill at ease with. Kubrean kept secrets, this he knew. But this was different. How he couldn’t figure out, but whatever the decision was, it had been a difficult one.

They saw the tall tulip like towers of Thura a full half day before they arrived back at the sandstone city wall. They paused at the south east of the city an hour after sunset.

‘Keep tight,’ said Kubrean, as he delicately laid a large grey blanket over the top of the blue cloak containing Yasmina’s body. ‘No-one must know what has happened before we speak to the Duke,’ he insisted.

They entered the city via big imposing reinforced iron-studded gates just after dusk. The city streets were quiet and although they were forced to take cobbled streets back to the chapter house, the padding of the pantheras paws made very little noise.

‘Thank goodness we aren’t on horses, with all that clip-clopping,’

said Zalen, his words bouncing off the walls.

‘Too many things to worry about with horses,’ agreed Dalon.

A sharp shush alerted them to Kubrean, looking most disapprovingly at them.

‘Sorry,’ yelled Zalen. Raising a hand in acknowledgement.

Kubrean buried his head in his hands.

‘Sorry...’ whispered Zalen again, partially covering his mouth with his hand.

Kubrean groaned.

Dalon chuckled silently in the darkness.

Tall houses bathed in moonlight gradually melted away to reveal open green spaces with trees transformed into grey and silver by the evening gloom. They arrived back to a quiet chapter house. Given the hour, the plan had worked perfectly, no hired help or staff around. Lauden saw them approach and walked out to meet them. His short black cropped hair matching his black loose clothes and slippered feet.

‘Welcome back,’ he said with a smile, crunching sand and stones underfoot. ‘Find out much?’ he asked cheerfully. ‘What’s that panthera doing with you?’ he nodded towards May.

‘Carrying something for Duke Lomman,’ answered Kubrean quickly.

‘A precious cargo,’ explained Dalon. ‘I’ll take care of it; you get off to bed,’ he reassured the young Walker.

Lauden took the explanation and nodded. ‘Need any help let me know,’ he called as he turned and wandered back to the house.

‘Thank you,’ said Kubrean to Dalon.

‘I meant it,’ said the big man. ‘I’ll take care of everything,’ He dismounted and walked over to May, who knelt down in front of the house. He picked up the shroud in his arms and took her inside.

‘Shouldn’t we tell Duke Lomman tonight?’ asked Zalen.

Kubrean shook his head.

‘No,’ he said definitely. ‘Let him sleep. Nothing will change between now and the morning. Besides, he will need to be fully rested for the news and the issues to be discussed tomorrow. Another night of not knowing will not hurt him. Speaking of tomorrow, Kaoldan I want you to come with me, the others can stay here,’ he concluded.

‘Good night, gentlemen,’ he said. Without waiting for a reply, he turned and moved towards the door; a man with the weight of the world on his shoulders.

Kaoldan slept fitfully that night. He replayed the death of Yasmina in his head again and again. The shock on her face was the thing he kept coming back to; a face filled with disbelief and confusion.

He gave up attempting to sleep an hour or two before dawn and dressed in loose fitting black clothes and thick spongy slippers. This was one of those rare occasions that Kaoldan needed to do something he rarely did these days, run.

Dref silently followed his master downstairs to the kitchen. They both slipped out of the house into the dark, cool morning.

The deep hue of the sky showed a gradient of blue across the skyline. Deeper velvet blue with stars still visible towards the coast and docklands which overlooked the Grohm Sea, the east was a paler ice blue, the approaching sunshine giving it an orange tinge against the two moons which hung directly overhead. He headed towards the dark side and set off towards the docks.

The truth was Kaoldan had become lazy over the last 12 months. He began at a slow pace, as Dref charged on ahead.

‘Thanks...’ he said dryly to the dog as he disappeared into the distance with effortless abandon.

Once he had got going, Kaoldan remembered why he hated running so much. It wasn’t really the exercise that he despised; it was

the boredom. Left with nothing but his own thoughts, the activity was monotonous and quickly became tedious.

Not today, however. His head brimmed with thoughts, feelings and fears.

The surrounding streets were mainly cobbled, with high houses on either side. It felt like they enveloped him. The sound of feet muffled by the thick comfort of his shoes, the friction of the shoes on the ground along with his own breathing were the only sounds around and Kaoldan relaxed. Almost enjoying the solitude and the pumping of blood around his body. He got lost in the surrounding images, Thura was a busy seaport and the appeal of the docks and its waters spurred him on.

He picked up pace, turning one corner after another, almost losing his way, but the smell of the salt and the fisheries was getting stronger. He looked on ahead and outside a shadowy shop Dref was stood waiting for him; he bounced with excitement as he saw Kaoldan approach. The two began running side by side.

Kaoldan had to dodge out of the way of a slow shambling drunk, dressed in dark ragged clothes who stumbled out of an alleyway to his left. The black dog's enormous pink tongue lolloping at the side of this mouth as he ran. A pale light at the end of the street invited them on. They both sprinted for the finish, Dref bounded ahead. Four legs must make you quicker than just having two, thought Kaoldan.

The sight that greeted him as he burst out of the terraced street into the docks was beautiful. He stopped and bent over, breathing heavily, resting his hands on his knees. Legs and chest burning.

He saw Dref standing by the quayside play-bowing, ready for the next race. Kaoldan waved the idea away with a weary hand. He stood up straight to remove the pinching pain in his stomach and to slow the pounding of his heart. He slowly stretched out, enjoying the pain within his muscles and the fizzing in his head.

The quayside stretched out as far as the eye could see. A perfect horseshoe shape surrounded by three and four-storey houses with shops at the bottom, grey in the early morning. The entrance to the

harbour was about half a mile away and topped with a huge red stone arch which was the supporting structure for a large bridge which stretched out about 200 metres linking both sides together like a stone rainbow. Below in the harbour's bowl were a dozen wharfs with row after row of masts, standing to attention, slowly bobbing and rocking in the swell of the water. In the distance he could see torches lighting up figures busily preparing the boats of the most enthusiastic, or perhaps the most desperate crews.

Kaoldan wandered along the quayside for a while, lost in his own thoughts, ignoring the unfriendly glances aimed at him by fishermen and women preparing their boats for another voyage. When the sunshine had hit the top of the stone bridge, he decided it was time to head back. The journey back seemed to take no time at all.

The world was waking up and businesses prepared for the day ahead, brightly coloured merchants and traders appeared in increasing numbers as Kaoldan wound his way back through the lightening streets following Dref back to the chapter house. If the dog had not been with him, it could have taken him days, trying to navigate the labyrinthine layout of the streets. Terraced and tightly packed houses thinned out and were replaced by smaller, more colourful buildings; red, blue, yellow, cream, pink, all manner of colours sprinkled throughout the streets.

The sight of the chapter house wall was a welcome one as Kaoldan walked back through the main gates, passing under the tower of the main entrance manned by a watching guard.

He turned and nodded to the young Walker, who nodded back politely, before she turned and continued her duties.

After a quick wash, he changed into his Walker uniform and armour. Taking in the clothing that represented his life and his life's work.

A base layer of tunic and trousers made of dark grey moleskin. Grey to symbolise the neutrality of the Walker Order. Covered over by a thin black armoured breastplate made of specially hardened jet lignite. Cold to the touch yet light, but hard as rock, able to withstand

a blow from a sword or arrow, but not seemingly a spear to the back.

Kaoldan felt a lump growing in his throat. He swallowed it back down. He buffed the silver pauldron used to cover his none Walkerblade carrying shoulder and upper arm. Glossed black vambraces of jet to cover each forearm, laced to the arm by leather string; curved and fitted. The same material was used for the two tasset at each side of his hips and as part of the cuisse covering his legs first from hip to knee, with separate attachment to the front of his boots forming semi greaves from knee to foot.

The last item of clothing was his burgundy cloak, a symbol of his position within the Walker Order as a Red Augur, midrange within the hierarchy. Upon completion of their studies, all new Walkers worked to earn their first green cloak, making them a Guardian. Next came Blue or Protectors, then red or Augurs, then Grey or Master Walkers and finally the one black Paragon Master.

Zalen, Kryst and Kaoldan were all red Augurs, Dalon a blue Protector, and Kubrean, Tokel and Nova all grey Masters. Yasmina had been a green Walker, he remembered biting his lip. He placed his hand on the cold black breastplate, which showed another Kaoldan doing the same. They both slowly breathed out and then turned to get dressed.

He was undisturbed at breakfast, Dref didn't care too much for fruit and milked oats, so he left his master to it, going in search of easier and more suitable food. The creak of a door made Kaoldan raise his head. Kubrean stood at the door, grim faced. 'Time to deliver some bad news...' he said.

Chapter 8 – Secrets

The entrance to the Royal palace was quiet, barring the usual guards at the gates. Trees fluttered in the wind and birds chattered, announcing another day.

The courtyard was square, and a yellow stone wall rose around thirty metres, hemming out the sunlight. All that was visible as Kaoldan gazed upwards was a square of blue sapphire sky. Stood within the courtyard looking the very definition of irritation and impatience was Nova.

His cane tapping as he paced forward. The old man looked even more nervous than usual, a white tunic overlaid by a blue hooded robe, thick brown leather belt around his belt, pouches and small bottles attached here and there. His grey hair unkempt and sticking out at every angle, it looked like he had not slept for days.

‘About time you got here,’ he snapped. ‘Follow me...’ he said turning towards a blue wooden side door muttering to himself as he went.

Kaoldan and Kubrean exchanged a look, dismounted from Tren and Max. Kaoldan handing their reins to a stringy royal guard garbed in blue and grey, carrying a long pointed halberd - in effect a long spear with an axe head.

‘Don’t worry, they won’t bite,’ said Kaoldan to the youth. ‘Behave,’ he said to Tren who sniffed indifferently, looked around, stretched and then settled down on the floor. Max did likewise.

‘Move,’ said the guard, half hefting his halberd pulling on the reins.

‘I wouldn’t if I were you,’ advised Kaoldan.

The guard hesitated, scratching his head.

‘Let them enjoy the sun. They’ll cause you no trouble,’ said Kaoldan gently. He turned to join Kubrean, who was waiting with a small grin on his face. They set off at pace, to catch Nova, who had already made considerable progress, despite his years, along the wood panel corridor, red carpet running the length of the stone floor.

He stopped and turned.

‘In there,’ he pointed, nodding toward a doorway. His eyes twitched as he looked at the two big men.

‘Come along, come along,’ he rattled. ‘We haven’t got all day,’ cane now pointing the way.

Neither Kubrean nor Kaoldan said a word as they entered the room. the air dry and cool. The room was comfortable with only one leaded window, stone walls, armchairs at the side and a thick blue carpet underfoot. A table and four chairs sat waiting for them, a jug of water and four wooden cups sat on top.

At the table, looking composed and calm, the very opposite of her husband sat Tokel. She looked up at the three men as they entered, a warm smile spread across her face. She rose, delicately placing her book on the table. Kaoldan immediately felt better as Nova firmly closed the door behind him, then tapped his way across the room, taking a seat and pouring himself some water.

‘My boys,’ said Tokel, moving around the table before embracing the two Walkers. Unable to help himself, Kaoldan grinned as he hugged her. She smelt warm and floral.

‘My boys...?’ said Kubrean with a frown.

‘Yes,’ she said. ‘You ARE my boys,’ she fixed a disarming gaze upon Kubrean.

‘You’re only a few years older than me,’ said Kubrean.

‘Minor details,’ she waved away the comment.

‘If you say so,’ said Kubrean, taking a seat.

‘It’s a compliment,’ she explained. ‘Accept it.’

Kubrean continued to frown.

Nova moved a seat back for his wife and she smiled, placing a hand on top of his. His face softened as he looked at her. The irritation melting away.

Kaoldan had never met a couple so completely and utterly in love with each other. Their kindness to each other was a sight to behold. So easy, so natural.

All you needed to know about them, and the relationship, was

made clear by watching them together. It was a simple, constant lesson in love, and above all else kindness.

Her face radiated warmth, a small nod and smile as she took her seat. Nova grinning back like a love-struck teenager as if seeing her for the first time.

Tokel was the same age as Nova, or so Kaoldan had guessed - quite rightly - never asking a woman her age. She appeared to be 20 years younger and the very opposite of her husband when you saw them together. Nova; old, grumpy and grey. Tokel; light, kind and gentle.

She wore a simple grey dress, which she folded beneath her as she took her seat. Wavy, white hair heavily streaked with black falling like a curtain to her shoulders, at odds with her dark brown skin.

Nova looked at her, took a long sip of water, paused taking a long deep breath. He turned towards the boys and exploded.

‘Why have you waited so long before coming here?’ he glared. ‘I know you arrived last night. Why wait until this morning to come and see us?’

‘How did you know?’ Kaoldan asked.

‘Oh please. Do you really think we don’t know everything that is going on in this city?’ he asked, spinning his cane in his hand.

‘We have people who report directly to us posted throughout the city. We know you arrived last night. My question is, why?’ he asked accusingly. He paused and took another breath.

‘Do we have a problem?’ asked Tokel, blue watery eyes searching their faces for answers.

‘Yes,’ said Kaoldan. ‘Two considerable ones, actually,’

Nova’s eyes closed, and he lent on his cane. ‘Yasmina?’ he asked.

‘Gone,’ replied Kubrean.

Nova’s face wrinkled up as he heard the words, bowing his head.

‘She is with us,’ said Kubrean softly.

‘It was bad luck, not her fault,’ lied Kaoldan.

‘Bad luck,’ echoed Kubrean, he looked at Kaoldan straight faced,

their eyes met, and the lie was complete. 'I thought it best to wait until morning before saying anything,' he continued. 'No point waking people in the middle of the night. We have much to discuss besides her.'

Nova slowly opened his eyes.

'Such as?' Tokel asked.

'Grihr is gone,' said Kaoldan flatly.

'Gone?' exclaimed Nova.

'Everyone, everything; dead.'

Nova looked aghast, Tokel looked towards Nova, her face serious, then she turned to Kubrean, who nodded.

'We were lucky to make it out ourselves. Krund forces caught us as we were investigating. We dealt with them, but lost Yasmina,' said Kubrean. 'We were able to interrogate one of the Krund, he said *Reng is returning*.'

'Reng?' Nova snorted. 'I hope you were able to bring this Krund back for more questioning. A few days with some of my more talented staff will soon have him talking.'

'He died,' said Kubrean coolly. 'His injuries were severe and there was nothing we could do.'

'Shame,' pondered Nova, his face now less twitchy. 'Right, we'd better pass on the news. I will tell Duke Lomman.'

'No,' said Kubrean firmly. 'We will tell him.'

Tokel looked at him, then towards Kaoldan, her eyes questioning.

'Are you sure?' she asked.

'Yes,' replied Kubrean.

Kaoldan nodded in agreement. 'It's better coming from us.'

'Speaking of which,' said Kubrean, rising from his chair. 'It's time we spoke with the Duke and his wife,' he straightened his uniform and turned towards the doorway.

Kaoldan nodded solemnly, looking towards Tokel. Nerves gnawing at his stomach. Nothing more needed to be said.

'Follow me,' said Nova after Kubrean's lead and walked towards the door.

Kaoldan paused at the door, glancing back at Tokel. They nodded silently towards each other. Her face said everything, a look of reluctant acceptance.

It had to be done, and now. Delays only made this already horrible task worse. Kaoldan attempted a weak smile, then turned and exited the room.

The three men walked in silence along several wooden panelled corridors twisting this way and that until they finally reached a large arched doorway with two Royal Guards stood to attention with pikes by their sides. They stiffened as Nova approached.

Kaoldan felt hot, uncomfortable, his guts like water.

Kubrean looked pale.

Nova hesitated. Took a breath, then pushed at the right-hand door, hinges squeaking as he did so. The two Walkers followed him inside.

The room was large; the walls made of stone. To the right stood a stout stone fireplace, the fire busy at work licking around the ample logs carefully placed within, its crackle the only noise within the room. Two arched windows faced them as they entered, heavily leaded in a diamond pattern containing yellow and blue pieces; in no discernible pattern, just scattered and mixed in with the clear glass, long purple velvet curtains hung by each window.

To their left was a large circular table surrounded by eight high-back chairs. Sat like a statue looking the very picture of royal sophistication was Duke Lomman's wife.

She stirred a large glass cup of steaming tea with a long thin spoon. Her eyes slowly rose to meet the three men.

'Please,' she said in a thick, rich voice, 'take a seat,' offering seats to the slightly confused men.

Nova was the first to react. He tapped his way across the room and took a seat with a slight grunt.

Kaoldan and Kubrean followed suit.

‘Tea?’ she asked, looking around the table at her guests.

They all nodded, and she began pouring the green translucent liquid into four smaller glass cups.

‘Honey?’ she offered, ‘I would advise it. This blend is rather potent.’

Again, the three men silently nodded, and she delicately added a small teaspoon of honey to each cup from a jar to her left. The golden liquid dissolving instantly as she stirred. She slid the glasses across the table, each man reaching across before cradling the drink in his hands.

Silence.

Kaoldan took a sip from the glass. The tea was bitter tasting, malty, although the honey took the edge off.

The Duchess sat back in her chair with a creak. Her golden hair streaked with delicate lines of silver complimented her strong face and blue-green eyes. She had the look of a swan, posed, elegant and at ease. She must have been beautiful in her youth, thought Kaoldan, the only evidence of her age the silver in her hair and slight wrinkles around her eyes. She waited, looking at her guests calmly and straight in the eye.

The silence seemed to last an age. Kubrean sat silently. Say something, Kaoldan thought, anything, please.

The Duchess slowly, gently leaned forwards and said simply. ‘I know.’

Kubrean darted a look at her, then at Nova and Kaoldan, concern etched across his face.

‘I have known for days,’ she said with a weary sigh. ‘I don’t know how, and I don’t know why, but I know my daughter did not return here as she left. I had a feeling about eight days ago, something was not right, an anguish, a sense of loss enveloped me and through a process of elimination I have come to this conclusion. I have not told my husband yet, but I wanted to hear it from you first. She is her father’s daughter in many ways, but I am the one with the Fajin inside

of me. I kept it a secret, I am no fighter,' she explained. 'I can serve a greater cause within this role, and that is how it will be. He must not know her powers came from me, agreed?'

'Agreed,' the men replied in unison. There seemed to be no choice about it to Kaoldan.

It was not so unusual for Walkers to emerge from none Walker parents, either one or both. It had been known for two Walkers to have children with no abilities at all, but this was the exception rather than the rule.

But to keep it a secret was rare. Clearly, she had her reasons, and that was the way it had to be, but it still left Kaoldan uncertain of her intentions.

'How did it happen?' she asked, stirring her tea, eyes fixed on the spoon.

Kubrean looked at her and told the Duchess what had happened; the carnage in the village of Grihr, the sole survivor, the battle that had claimed her daughter's life. He left out much of the graphic detail, as Kaoldan would have, but the story was fair and accurate.

'So, she died well?' asked the Duchess, finally looking up, her eyes moist. It seemed important to her.

'Yes,' replied Kaoldan. 'It was simply bad luck.'

'And the one who...' she paused.

'Killed,' said Kubrean.

'Good,' she said simply. 'Bring her to me, will you. And say nothing of this to my husband. It will hurt him, more than he will know, and I should be the one to tell him.'

It was at that moment that the doors creaked open, announcing the arrival of Duke Lomman. He turned and saw the four at the table, closed the door behind him and then bounded over to them.

'Excellent,' he exclaimed, 'tea how thoughtful of you, my dear.' He took a seat by Kaoldan as his wife quickly wiped a tear from her eye, a movement that he missed.

'Yes, I thought it would be a good idea,' she said smiling at her husband, pouring him a drink adding a larger spoonful of honey to

the brew. 'We were just getting started,' she added, handing him the steaming cup. 'Kubrean was just about to say what they found at Grihr...' her eyes fixed upon him.

Kubrean cleared his throat. 'Things are bad,' he began.

'Bad?' echoed the Duke looking around the table, a worried expression growing on his face.

Kubrean repeated his story, omitting the fate of the Duke's daughter.

The Duke stood and paced the room, nodding as each detail was revealed. He stopped pacing at the mention of Reng, head looking to the ceiling as if the answers lay in the plaster. He frowned, deep in thought. Kubrean paused, allowing Lomman to process the information.

'I know that name,' he pondered, stroking his chin, scratching against the bristles on his face. 'These developments are indeed worrying. I must speak with others regarding this, and the King must be informed. The mention of Reng cannot be taken seriously though, can it?' he turned, his face a picture of concern towards the table.

'Doubtful,' offered Kubrean.

'I am inclined to agree,' said Nova. 'His name is nothing more than theatre, a tactic to scare the population and perhaps to act as a banner which the supporters of the Krund can rally behind.'

The Duke hummed his agreement and continued to pace.

'I do not share all of your belief, Nova,' he stopped and turned. 'I would like it investigating further.'

'Might I make a suggestion?' said Kubrean, glancing at Kaoldan, then Nova, who's face tightened. The look made Kaoldan's guts twinge.

'Yes, of course,' said the Duke.

'The university at Prava, perhaps...' Kubrean let the words hang in the air.

The Duke pondered, then nodded. 'An excellent suggestion. Please could you make the necessary arrangements to research Reng. I would very much doubt that we would hold any reliable

information regarding him here. We are rather a new city and our libraries are rather more self-reflective than outward looking.' He waved his hands around dismissively. 'Perhaps best to go to Prava and seek some proper authority and expertise. They have books, scrolls and records going back thousands of years and with it I am sure that you will find many academics willing to share their thoughts on the subject. I would ask that we get this done as quickly as possible, to close off that line of enquiry and put any potential nonsense back in its rightful place.'

He looked at Kubrean expectantly.

'No need to take Yasmina this time,' he laughed.

'No, of course not,' Kubrean replied, stone-faced, and Nova swallowed.

'Perhaps a good time to make your arrangements.' Rang out the Duchess's voice. 'Besides, I have things to discuss with my husband, I'm sure you understand gentlemen,' she asked with a polite smile.

Kaoldan, Kubrean and Nova stood stiffly, taking the hint.

'I will report to you upon our return,' assured Kubrean with a slight bow before turning and heading towards the door.

Kaoldan glanced at the face of the Duchess; poised and calm. He wondered how she could remain so, given what she had to say. Their eyes met, and she tightened her lips, giving the slightest of nods. Kaoldan turned away, acid rising in his throat. He fixed his jaw, swallowing it down before making his way towards the door.

Kubrean closed it firmly with a thud after Kaoldan and Nova had walked through.

'Follow me,' said Nova, leading the way through the corridors. The two Walkers followed as instructed.

A few moments later they had returned to the room they had spoken in on the way into the castle. Tokel sat in the room just as they had left her. She greeted them with a wide smile.

Nova semi-collapsed into a plush velvet armchair, leaning against a wall with a grunt. Kaoldan looked at his friend with concern. Nova saw the look and waved a hand angrily.

‘I’m old, not dead,’ he snapped.

‘None of this is getting any easier,’ observed Kubrean as he took a seat pouring water into a cup.

‘Not really,’ shrugged Kaoldan. ‘Prava to chase down some lecturers at the university. A proper use of our time,’ he said sarcastically as he also took a seat.

Tokel looked confused.

‘The Duke wants us to travel to Prava to look into Reng,’ said Kaoldan wearily. ‘His idea,’ he nodded towards Kubrean.

The black man avoided Kaoldan’s glance.

Tokel pursed her lips, ‘I am not so sure that it is as much of a waste of time as you might think,’ she said. ‘Duke Lomman’s history might be a little hazy, but he is correct to want more information and Prava is the best place to look. The records within this city are rather...’ she let the words hang.

‘Commercial?’ offered Kubrean.

‘Something like that,’ agreed Nova, blinking heavily as he answered. ‘Prava attracts the most curious of minds and the university’s records are the most comprehensive in Essealar, no better place to gather more information of this Reng. Who knows you might even enjoy it,’ he laughed.

‘Although I know the name, I must confess to knowing very little about Reng,’ said Kaoldan.

‘Should have studied harder,’ said Kubrean flatly.

Kaoldan smiled back sarcastically.

‘Reng, as I recall,’ began Nova, ‘Was a warlord and something of a tyrant. He was obsessed with power and the accumulation of it. Mercilessly killed his enemies by the score.’

‘Nice to see we have evolved beyond that,’ smiled Kubrean.

Nova ignored the comment. ‘It was said that he reigned for over a hundred years and although he was killed several times, his soul was never claimed by the Abyss.’

‘How?’ asked Kaoldan, shaking his head.

‘I don’t really know,’ Nova said, pulling a face and scratching the

top of his head.

‘And what happened to him?’ Kaoldan said.

‘I don’t know that either...’ frowned the old man.

‘So, we travel,’ said Kubrean, resting his hand on his chest. ‘And we speak to some clever people and get proof that this Reng suggestion is nothing more than a madman’s babbling.’

‘Sounds like a plan,’ said Kaoldan, preparing to stand.

‘Just before you go,’ interrupted Tokel.

Kubrean looked over to the old woman, who licked her lips and glanced at Kaoldan.

‘The request you made,’ she looked to Kubrean.

Kaoldan’s stomach tightened for some reason.

‘It’s erm... waiting for you at Prava,’

‘Really?’ exclaimed Kubrean. ‘So soon?’

‘Yes,’ nodded Tokel. ‘Seems that it could arrive quicker than we expected.’

‘Ah,’ said Kubrean thoughtfully. ‘Raises some issues then doesn’t it.’

‘Quite,’ said Tokel. ‘Your idea though,’ reminded the old woman.

‘Thanks,’ said Kubrean dryly.

‘What are you two talking about?’ asked Kaoldan, leaning forwards in his chair which creaked as he did so.

‘Ah yes, I’ve been meaning to speak to you about this,’ began Kubrean, his eyes avoiding contact with Kaoldan’s querying looks. ‘I have asked for help, what with all the recent developments here, and the help is waiting for us at Prava,’

‘Go on...,’ said Kaoldan, his eyes narrowed, sensing something was wrong.

‘Well, the help is mainly other Walkers,’ replied Kubrean.

‘Oh,’ said Kaoldan, relieved, sitting back in his chair. ‘Who are we meeting?’ he asked.

‘Two others,’ said Kubrean.

‘Which two?’ said Kaoldan, his suspicion returning.

‘You know them very well, in fact,’ replied Kubrean.

‘Your daughters - Romina and Zahara.’

Chapter 9 – It Is Not Time

‘What?’ exploded Kaoldan, lurching out of his chair. ‘Absolutely not. Why would you do this?’ he asked Kubrean, his face filled with disgust.

Kubrean sat calm and still.

‘And you knew and said nothing?’ Kaoldan accused Tokel and Nova, his jaw tight. The old man shrugged.

‘Why in hell have you made such a request?’ he returned his fury to Kubrean.

‘Because I thought it the right thing to do,’ said Kubrean.

Kaoldan turned away, breath shuddering as he did so. Clenching and unclenching his fists as he raised his hands to his head. He ran his fingers through his hair slowly, deliberately, trying to rationalise the words he had heard.

‘It is time,’ said Kubrean.

‘No, no. It is not,’ shot Kaoldan through clenched teeth, pointing his finger at Kubrean. ‘This is not your decision to make,’ he swore under his breath.

‘It is, actually,’ said Kubrean, face like stone.

‘If it makes any difference, I agree with Master Kubrean,’ offered Tokel calmly, her eyes cool.

‘Don’t throw titles into this,’ spat Kaoldan.

‘Why not?’ asked Kubrean, standing up. ‘I can make such a decision regarding any Walkers, anywhere in Essealar. You forget your place, Kaoldan.’

‘And you forget yours,’ said Kaoldan. ‘I am their father...’

‘Really...?’ asked Kubrean softly.

Kaoldan’s head snapped up, his eyes locked with Kubrean, his face raging, and reacted instantly, punching Kubrean square in the jaw with a wild left hook.

He regretted it as soon as he had swung his arm. It was a petulant and stupid thing to do. A punch born out of fear and frustration more

than an intention to cause harm.

Kubrean reeled back, more in shock than pain instinctively clutching his face.

Kaoldan stood still, shocked by his reaction as much as Kubrean by the act of violence. He felt his arms straightened, pinned to his sides by looming invisible arms and was then dragged, boots scratching on the floor, unceremoniously towards the wall.

He looked to his left and saw Tokel's face, twisted in immense effort and concentration, covered in sweat. Her hand slowly pushing, compressing a glowing blue ball of electricity. The ball hissed and chattered as she forced her outstretched fingers together, gasping with relief as her fingers touched and the ball disappeared into the palms of her hands.

Kaoldan tried to struggle, but could not move. He stood rigidly upright, like a statue against the grey stone wall.

'That's enough of that,' gasped Tokel the effort disappeared from her face as she pulled her hands apart. She moved over to attend to Kubrean, who had already risen to his feet with the help of a leather back chair.

Kubrean shot a look at Kaoldan - like a wounded animal - before wiping a small dribble of blood from the side of his mouth. He checked his hand, saw the blood. He paused as if considering something then looked again. He laughed as he straightened himself up, arching his neck and back with a grunt.

'I'll give you that one for free,' he nodded, flexing his jaw. 'This has clearly come as something of a shock to you, so I'll excuse it. But it changes nothing,' he turned, rising to his full height, eyes fixed on Kaoldan. 'Your daughters are coming back and that is the end of it. Let him down,' Kubrean nodded towards Tokel.

The old woman hesitated, looking at the restrained Kaoldan, then back at Kubrean, who nodded reassuringly. She lightly sniffed, then brought her hands together. The blue ball reappeared, Tokel threw her hands apart as if releasing a bird into flight. The ball flashed outwards, then disintegrated as it expanded into nothingness.

Kaoldan felt the pressure on his arms fade and he rolled his shoulders, easing out the ache.

‘You have not seen them in, what is it now?’ queried Kubrean, taking a seat at the table.

‘Six years,’ added Nova.

Kaoldan walked towards the window and paused. ‘It is the best thing to keep them where they are,’ he said.

‘Best for whom?’ asked Kubrean.

‘For them...!’ thundered Kaoldan, banging his fist on the windowsill.

Nova jumped at the noise, but did nothing, his eyes still locked on Kaoldan.

‘Or for you?’ accused Kubrean.

‘No,’ said Kaoldan firmly, ‘They are barely teenagers. They need to stay in Vanguard to complete their training.’

‘They already have.’ said Tokel.

Kaoldan turned around, his face softer, and looked at the old woman. ‘When?’ he asked, voice barely a whisper.

‘Four months ago,’ said Nova.

‘Why wasn’t I told?’ asked Kaoldan, searching for answers in the three faces.

‘Because I didn’t think you needed to know, and you didn’t ask,’ said Kubrean with a shrug.

Kaoldan bit his lip and slowly shook his head.

‘Spare me,’ he said.

‘You didn’t,’ said Kubrean matter-of-factly.

‘Why would I not want to know that?’ asked Kaoldan.

‘You’ve shown precious little interest in them. One more piece of ignored news is hardly a change from the norm,’ said Kubrean.

‘I did what I believed to be in their best interests,’ said Kaoldan, his eyes fixed on Kubrean. ‘They needed a distraction and somewhere safe to grow and learn; Vanguard is that place.’

‘Just because that worked for you does not mean it is best for them,’ said Tokel softly.

‘And what would you know about what is best for my children?’ Kaoldan spat out.

‘More than you might think,’ answered Nova, glancing quickly at Kubrean, who stayed silent.

‘Answer the question,’ pressed Kaoldan.

‘Another time...’ replied Nova.

‘No, no...’ said Kaoldan shaking his head vigorously ‘I really, I really must insist,’ he pressed, his face livid.

‘Enough,’ announced Kubrean. ‘The decision is made,’

‘It is not,’ challenged Kaoldan.

‘Walker! Do not let my calm demeanour fool you,’ thundered Kubrean, rising to his feet. ‘The decision is made,’ he said, softening his voice. ‘Your daughters are waiting for us and will join us as we seek to gather more information about this Reng,’ He paused his voice and moved to place a hand on Kaoldan's shoulder. ‘It will be safe, and no harm will come to them.’

Kaoldan batted the hand away, taking a step backwards.

‘Didn't you make that promise to the Duke?’ he spat.

Without waiting, he turned and charged out of the room like a whirlwind before the dread-locked man could respond. He slammed the door behind him; it banged against the frame and shuddered back open as silence fell across the room.

Kubrean's head dropped.

Nova placed a bony hand on Kubrean's shoulder.

‘He was never going to take it well,’ whispered the old man looking towards the still vibrating door.

‘I know,’ said Kubrean, raising his head. ‘I had hoped he would have taken it better. It is the right thing to do, and the timing is right. It's just...’ he shrugged.

‘I know... Yasmina,’ offered Nova.

Kubrean nodded silently.

‘I tried to tell him during the journey to Grihr, but the timing was never good enough. And then after her death there never was a right time. Still, he had to be told, and it is the right decision.’

‘And the rest?’ asked Tokel, inspecting her cup then glancing up at the black man.

‘It can wait for another day,’ he waved his hand.

Tokel nodded and pursed her lips.

‘Or maybe never,’ said Kubrean solemnly.

Outside, the breeze was cool. But it did little to temper the heat burning in Kaoldan’s chest. He walked and staggered, his feet strangely lazy beneath him. His chest felt tight, a great weight pressing against it. His breath became ragged. He paused after a dozen paces and rested against a trestle clad wall with pink flowers climbing towards the sky; he bent over and crouched on his knees.

Breathing deeply and quickly.

A million thoughts and emotions racing around his head; why, when, how, fear, anger, frustration, swirling around.

He closed his eyes tightly to shut out the world around him.

Black, orange and yellow colours swirled and mingled like oils on water in front of his eyes, the sound of blood rushing around his body the only sound. A coldness swept over him. He forced his mind to slow and concentrated on his breathing to regain control.

Slowly he regained his composure and stood up, then opened his eyes to see Tokel stood quietly in front of him, her face serious.

‘What do you want?’ asked Kaoldan irritably.

‘To check you are ok,’ said the old woman.

‘I think you know the answer to that,’ said Kaoldan.

‘Maybe I do, but I still wanted to know for sure.’

‘He shouldn’t have done it,’ said Kaoldan, looking to the sky then at his friend.

‘Maybe not, but I am sure he wanted to tell you sooner. Not everything has gone as we hoped it would.’

Reluctantly, Kaoldan nodded slightly and slowly.

‘It is good news, really,’ offered Tokel with a weak smile.

Kaoldan stifled a small laugh. 'You think so?' he said, glancing at her.

'Yes.'

Kaoldan snorted.

'It is the right time, if not the best time. I am sure that he would have preferred to tell you at a better time and under different circumstances. But sometimes things don't go the way we hope. He hardly had control over everything, did he?'

'Maybe not, but things could have been different.'

'Something I am sure you have said to yourself occasionally,' offered the old woman, concern etched on her face.

'Perhaps,' shrugged Kaoldan

'Well then. The decision, like it or not, is out of your hands. Go with it and see where it leads. It may not be as bad as you fear,' said Tokel, moving to a stone bench and taking a seat, head raised towards the sunshine which peaked over the side of the battlements into the garden. She gestured to him, patting a space beside her.

'And for the record, like it or not, I agree with Kubrean,' she raised her hands defensively. 'This may not be what you want, but it may be what you need. They can't stay sheltered forever. Time has passed and both you and they have changed. They are not children anymore, rather highly spirited young women who need to get to know their father again.'

'How do you know this?' queried Kaoldan, moving to take a seat beside her.

'I don't have to tell you everything do I?' said Tokel, lightly tapping the side of her nose with a finger.

'It would be helpful, sometimes,' said Kaoldan, 'Might save outburst like that,' he nodded towards the room they had both left. 'And,' he turned, wiggling his finger, 'you must teach me that spell,' He stretched out his arms. 'Felt like I was clamped between two anvils.'

'Hmm...', nodded Tokel absently. 'As you wish... I have been in touch with them since they left. Letters mainly, given the distance,

only two or three a year at most. They miss you, even if they don't realise it. They need their father and you need to be a family again.'

'They need safety,' said Kaoldan stubbornly.

'Do they?' asked Tokel. 'Can they really be kept safe forever? Hidden away from the world like precious treasures. You do know the profession they have entered?' pressed the old woman sliding closer to him. 'Hardly one for the safety conscious is it,' she said with a half-smile.

'Not much any of us can do about that,' said Kaoldan 'It's just something in the blood,' he said, raising his hand and wiggling his fingers towards the sunshine.

'A nice academic post then, somewhere out of the way perhaps?' asked Tokel.

Kaoldan shrugged indifferently, his chest lighter, blood no longer racing.

'Because something like that would have worked for you at their age,' said Tokel. A smile crept onto Kaoldan's face as he conceded the point.

'So then, where are we?' asked Tokel, tilting her head to one side.

'A place no-one is happy with,' offered Kaoldan.

'Perhaps, but a place we all knew we would end up eventually,' said Tokel, looking intensely at Kaoldan, searching his face for a response. 'Do something for me, would you?' she asked.

Kaoldan's head rose, and he looked at his friend.

'Don't be too angry with him. He is only doing what he thinks is best,' said Tokel. 'Like it or not, he is a Grey Master,'

Kaoldan nodded. 'It will pass,' he assured Tokel, placing a hand on top of hers. 'We have got through far worse situations than this,' he paused and frowned. 'I think sometimes fighting is easier than talking,'

'Good to hear and to an extent I agree,' smiled Tokel rising to her feet and began walking towards the door. She paused and turned towards him.

'And do pass on my kindest regards to the girls when you see

them. I think you may be pleasantly surprised by this.’ The old woman looked at Kaoldan, her eyes kind yet wary. The stare lasted for a fraction too long before she bowed her head and turned towards the exit, shuffling on the grass.

She turned once more before opening the door, raising her hands together, then pressed the top of her fingers to her head than heart, before releasing them, as if scattering seeds, gesturing towards Kaoldan with a slight bow. ‘Good journey,’ she said, eyes watery and reflective.

‘Good journey,’ responded Kaoldan out of habit, slightly perplexed as he returned the blessing.

Tokel nodded, then briskly turned and exited through the large wooden door with a solid thud.

Using the journey blessing confused Kaoldan, it was a Walker tradition but was hardly ever used and this unsettled him. Today had been full of surprises, and this little puzzle just added to the complexities of the day. Kaoldan raised his head to the skies and closed his eyes, letting out a slow and deliberately controlled breath.

Nothing else to do now but get on with the instructions he had been given. He relaxed and set his mind, but the nerves in his guts remained.

Chapter 10 – Hello Again

Trees, trees, and more trees. As far as the eye could see. Tall, short, pointy, wide, narrow and twisty ones, every shade of green from mint to emerald and finally darkest jade.

Kaoldan shook his head. This journey had felt like a lifetime. Each day they had been surrounded by trees and hills; rolling hills for three, almost four weeks, and it was a whole new level of tedium. Kaoldan glanced over his shoulder and spied Kubrean laughing alongside Kryst, their pantheras plodding along, and he grimaced.

They had left Thura quickly after the instructions from Duke Lomman and barely a day later found themselves on the long and dull journey to Prava, and in all that time he and Kubrean had hardly spoken a word.

The group was small; Kubrean, Zalen, Dalon, Kryst and a stubborn magical dog. They had made quiet and so far uneventful progress; the grasslands changing into steeper hills which had slowly given way to the biggest forest Kaoldan had ever seen. Such was the density of the trees, the canopy thick and continuous, providing amazing protection from the rain, but he swore he hadn't seen the sun for over a week.

He had given the most simplistic and perfunctory of apologies for the punch, then followed instruction without comment or question; deliberately choosing tasks to ensure their time together was as limited as possible, night time guard duties, scouting, errands - anything to keep a distance between them.

It had been difficult to maintain, Kaoldan really wanted to speak to Kubrean about his decision; why, how, when. But the decision had driven a wedge between them, and he had yet to come to terms with it. During the time he had taken away from Kubrean, he had tried to understand and see why his mentor had decided to bring the girls back, but he could not get his head around it.

Keeping the girls at Vanguard had always been a decision that

made sense to everyone. Kubrean had even been the one to suggest it, but now with one decision he had dismantled something that had worked well for all concerned for six years.

He had to admit the prospect of seeing his daughters again filled him with equal amounts of fear and excitement. It had been a long time, too long if he was really being honest, not that he was willing to admit that to anyone - especially Kubrean. The last time he had seen them they had been young girls, barely in their teens. Dutiful and enthusiastic, they had gone along with the suggestion and the wishes of their father.

It had been an easy and straight forward decision at the time. His wish and want to keep them as safe and far away from danger and the big wide world as much as possible. But that had been before the world had changed, and Kaoldan wondered if anywhere would now be safe. He dismissed the notion. Some things do change, but some things do not.

Despite himself and his focus on his duties and support from Kubrean, Tokel and Nova, Kaoldan had wondered what would have happened if they had stayed with him.

Could he have kept them safe and away from more pain? He would never know, and even thinking through the possibilities made his head hurt. The immediate priority had been their safety, that had been all that mattered at the time and he was still convinced it was the right decision.

The girls had always been each other's best friend, thick as thieves, and they needed each other and time far more than a father in the state Kaoldan had been. He had made the right choice; he reassured himself, but part of him was now not so sure.

Maybe Tokel had been right, maybe now was the right time for a change, Kaoldan looked up between the treetops he could see streams of sunlight poking through the branches. It was not what Kaoldan wanted, but what choice did he have?

'If I never see another tree in my lifetime, it will be too soon,' said a voice snapping Kaoldan out of his own little world.

The smiling face of Zalen appeared from the shade, and he gestured to their surroundings.

‘Trees,’ he said.

‘I had been thinking the same thing,’ said Kaoldan, looking around critically. ‘Trees, apparently there is a forest here too.’

‘Really,’ replied Zalen in shocked amazement.

Kaoldan smiled and shook his head.

‘Okay, enough avoiding the obvious,’ said Zalen, his face turning stern. ‘What’s going on between you and old K back there?’

‘Nothing,’ said Kaoldan, a little too quickly.

‘Rubbish...’ laughed Zalen. ‘There is clearly a problem between you. If even I have noticed it, then it must be serious,’ he said, looking rather pleased with himself, and his new powers of deduction.

Even Kaoldan couldn’t argue against this. If it had been noticed by the most unobservant of people, he glanced at a smug Zalen, then there was no avoiding the discussion.

‘He’s brought more Walkers in to help,’ he said.

‘Really?’ questioned Zalen, looking puzzled. ‘Is that it? Sounds like a good idea to me. You can never have too much help,’ he nodded definitely.

‘It’s not what he has brought in, it is who,’ said Kaoldan.

‘Whom,’ smiled Zalen triumphantly. ‘I think you’ll find it’s whom,’ he said nodding his head enjoying being proved right for once.

Kaoldan muttered something rude under his breath. ‘The other Walkers will meet us in Prava,’ he said.

‘Good,’ said Zalen, considering the information before falling silent.

Kaoldan breathed out slowly.

‘Anyone we know?’ Zalen asked, his face lighting up with enthusiasm.

Kaoldan groaned. ‘Yes. Walkers we know,’ he replied.

‘Excellent,’ replied the big blonde Walker, turning to take in the scenery.

Kaoldan settled back into his saddle.

‘Who?’ asked Zalen after a pause. ‘Or should I say whom,’ he smiled and winked at Kaoldan, waiting expectantly for a reply.

There really was no avoiding it.

‘My girls,’ said Kaoldan reluctantly gripping Tren’s reins tighter, glancing at Zalen who stared back, curiosity etched all over his face.

‘Really?’

‘Yes, really,’

‘Blimey,’ he said, scratching his head. ‘Been a while, hasn’t it.’

‘Yes,’ replied Kaoldan sourly.

‘Still. Be nice to see them again. They’ll be what?’ Zalen began counting on his fingers.

‘Old enough to have finished their training,’ said Kaoldan, saving him the hassle. It really had been too long.

‘Really,’ said Zalen, his eyes widening. ‘They were only a short while away from undertaking their final training, last time I saw them. Funny how time flies,’ he snorted, shaking his head.

Kaoldan jutted his jaw out, muttering as he did so. He narrowed his eyes and looked at Zalen.

‘Has everyone else seen my daughters more recently than me?’ he asked sarcastically.

‘Probably,’ replied Zalen, nodding thoughtfully. ‘We’re not supposed to talk about it apparently, on account of what happened.’

His face froze.

He leaned into Kaoldan.

‘Not sure I was meant to tell you that,’ he whispered, then he relaxed slightly. ‘Instructions from you know who,’ he winked clumsily and nodded towards Kubrean, coughing indiscreetly as he did so. ‘But as we are now meeting them, everything must be alright,’ he said matter-of-factly.

Kaoldan worked the muscles in his jaw. The entire world seemed to know more than he did.

‘How long have I not been told anything?’ He asked Zalen; the cat well and truly let out of the bag.

‘Dunno,’ said Zalen, blowing out his cheeks, face creased, thinking

hard. 'Since it happened, I suppose. He said it would be best, given what happened'. He nodded and coughed towards Kubrean again.

'Would you stop that?' said Kaoldan irritably. 'I know exactly who you're talking about,' he gestured towards a distracted Kubrean.

'Oh good,' said Zalen, now relaxed, a great weight removed from his shoulders. 'For a moment I didn't think you knew who I was talking about,' he winked. 'Much easier now. Kubrean said we should not talk about the girls after they went to Vanguard. Easier for you, I think he said?' said Zalen, pondering the facts.

'Can you smell burning?' asked Kaoldan, raising his nose to the air.

'No,' said Zalen, looking around.

'Never mind,' said Kaoldan with a grin.

'So why are we meeting them?' asked Zalen, a concerned look on his face.

'I don't know,' mused Kaoldan.

'You haven't asked him about it?' said Zalen, somewhat surprised.

'Nope, I've been rather afraid to ask that question,' said Kaoldan slowly while looking thoughtfully at Kubrean.

'We'll find out soon enough,' said Zalen, nodding towards the emerging lights in the distance.

They had arrived at Prava.

For a centre of learning and academia, Prava was a curious place. At the centre of the largest forest in Essealar, it was a place unlike any other. A large town heading towards being a small city. Its spires and taller buildings gradually rose as the canopy of the forest faded away. Surrounded by a stout perimeter wall made of large black rock, towering buildings rose up behind it. At its heart was the university, but not a traditional university in any sense of the term.

It emerged slowly, looming, gigantic and monolithic as the canopy of the forest melted away. It seemed to reach towards the sky,

challenging, threatening as it did so.

It was vast, over four hundred metres wide at the base, hundreds of metres high, slowly disappearing into the sky; the biggest tree that Kaoldan had ever seen. Vast branches fanned out about two hundred metres, Kaoldan almost twinged his neck as he craned up to take in the view of the skyscraper. The tree had continued to grow over the centuries as the university had been built within and around it, something Kaoldan had always found slightly amusing - the ravaging of such a rare wonder of nature to accommodate humans seeking knowledge of the world. They had carved into the base creating level after level of rooms, lecture halls, libraries and accommodation for the teaching staff and students. It loomed like a pompous yet vast twig at the centre of the city.

This was only the second time Kaoldan had ever visited Prava. The first time had been in his youth during his studies and his training to become a Walker. He had only needed to attend for six months and had hated every minute. He found the falseness and arrogance of many of its citizens unbearable.

The principal currency within the city was knowledge, and those that had it were never reluctant to show their wealth. Kaoldan was not stupid, but within the walls of Prava were many intelligent people and having always hated being made to look foolish, and having a short temper had proved to be a terrible combination. He wondered if a place could change so very much. It had been over 20 years since his last visit, and he recounted if things had been quite as distasteful as he remembered.

The gates of Prava boomed shut as they announced Kaoldan and his companions. The city was lightly guarded - after all, who would want to attack a city with more knowledge than wealth - and they had been admitted with no hesitation. The apparent novelty of Walkers visiting had raised some muttering amongst the City Watch.

They watched from the sidelines, in stiff black uniforms holding long pointed spears polished to a high sheen, deep in conversation, eyes drinking in the presence of the new arrivals.

‘Let’s get going,’ hustled Kubrean, looking sharply at the guards at the gate. ‘I have no wish to be the subject of tittle-tattle,’ he said gruffly, leading Max by his reins up the hard-baked streets towards the university.

Prava sounded and smelt like any other large town; street traders shouting the offers of the day, the clanging of metal echoing from smithies doors, open with bulking men and hammers hard at work. The scent of bread and fruit hung in the air like a cloak, thick and unmistakable.

Occasionally Kaoldan was hit by waves of exotic spices, vegetables and earthy goods. There was as a subtle difference that it took Kaoldan sometime to recognise. The usual smells you associate with a large town or city are fairly standard, but Prava was missing one thing. The fresh smell of salt and fish. Maybe it was just something he had grown accustomed to having almost always lived by the sea, but Prava smelt thick with vegetation. At that moment Kaoldan wished, for many reasons, he was back in Thura accompanied by familiar smells and sounds.

A cry of anguish pierced the white noise to the rear of the group. There was a blur of black fur followed closely by the sound of rapid, heavy footsteps belonging to a thickset, red-faced stall holder. The black shape disappeared into the thick of the crowd, trailing behind it what appeared to be a long string of sausages. The stall owner scanning the crowd, searching in vain for the thief.

Kaoldan cursed, but a small smile crept onto his face. He hailed the stall holder, beckoning him over - who approached cautiously.

‘This should more than cover your inconvenience,’ said Kaoldan, flicking a shimmering silver coin through the air, it was caught expertly in one hand by the stall holder.

He looked into his hand and sneered. ‘If I catch that furry bastard. I’ll string him up,’ he said to no-one in particular.

'I wouldn't advice that,' said Kaoldan flatly, levelling a stare straight at the stall holder, who caught his eye - tried to match it then slowly let his eyes drop. He turned muttering and left quickly, enveloped by the crowd.

'You really must teach that dog some manners.'

Kaoldan snapped his attention to his left where Kubrean had appeared beside him, slowly trotting alongside. For a second, Kaoldan cursed himself for allowing Kubrean to sneak up on him. But the genuine concern on his face made Kaoldan curse himself even more for having thought such things.

'He's alright,' said Kaoldan, spying a guilty-looking dog some way in the distance eating the evidence.

'How are you?' asked Kubrean.

'Not so bad,' Kaoldan said, looking towards the looming shape of the university then at his friend. His heart quivering.

'I know that this is going to be hard for you,' began Kubrean.

'No,' interrupted Kaoldan somewhat sheepishly shaking his head. 'It will be ok,' he smiled weakly to offer some reassurance.

'Rubbish,' scoffed Kubrean. 'You really think you can hide this from me? Like it or not, I know you better than you realise, and this will be hard,' he said, looking deeply at Kaoldan. 'For all of you,' he emphasised.

Kaoldan inspected the floor, avoiding the gaze of his friend.

'I know,' he admitted. 'But I'm coming to think, perhaps. Just perhaps. You might be right. It will be good to see them again. I just hope that it does not bring back too many terrible memories,'

'They have changed and grown up a great deal. And you have changed too,' said Kubrean with a wry smile. 'and probably more than you think.'

'Perhaps.'

'Just trust me with this. Have I ever let you down?' asked Kubrean, tilting his head to one side.

'Well, if you're really asking. There was that one time in Khural when I was nearly killed by some sort of giant slug?'

‘That does not count,’ said Kubrean defensively, shifting in his saddle. ‘I got you out.’

‘Hardly a full and correct version of the events as I recall,’ challenged Kaoldan. ‘You had to cut me out of its stomach,’ he shot Kubrean a withering look.

Kubrean looked hurt, then he smiled. ‘You smelled for a week afterwards,’ he laughed, trying unsuccessfully to cover his mouth with his hand.

Kaoldan winced. ‘I’d almost forgotten that smell. Smelt like rotting vegetation or something,’ he shuddered.

‘Not your finest hour,’ said Kubrean. ‘Maybe that is yet to come,’ he offered, nodding towards the emerging space of a town square - a merging point of six major roads within Prava.

The convergence of the busy streets created a crush of colour and noise. Families, stall owners, travellers, people simply standing and talking.

Members of the university recognisable by their different coloured robes and soft cloth caps; gatherings of men and women in burgundy, topaz, lime green, sky blue. Kaoldan could not recall which colour represented which school within the university, but they were plentiful within the square, chatting and sharing pleasantries.

Kubrean led the way down a straight street to the left of the main road leading to the university. The street was edged by two and three-storey buildings; the crowds thinned out and shops were slowly replaced by more residential properties, families with bored looking children watched from windows as the group made steady progress. The road eventually pivoted left to reveal a large square building made of yellow stone with a red roof surrounded by a high perimeter wall.

The main entrance was surrounded by members of the City Watch, who stood stiffly in their black starched uniforms. Their heads flicked up in unison, eyeing the Walkers with stern suspicion.

A rake thin man moved a few steps forward. He turned to whisper

something to his colleagues, and they sniggered, badly disguised behind raised hands.

‘Can I help you?’ he asked disdainfully, looking at Kubrean.

Kubrean smiled politely. ‘Yes, we are here to meet two colleagues from our Order. I believe they are here,’ he enquired.

‘Yes,’ replied the lead watchman with a nasally whine. ‘They are in the guest quarters at the rear of this facility,’ he flicked his hand over his shoulder towards a small tower. ‘You should find them there, I’d think.’

‘My thanks,’ replied Kubrean as he began nudging Max towards the tower.

‘Just one more thing,’ said the watchman, lolling his head to one side and raising his hand. ‘You will have to leave them here,’ he flicked a finger towards the pantheras. ‘No livestock allowed inside the facility,’ he said, wrinkling his nose. ‘Sure you understand.’

‘Livestock?’ repeated Kryst, raising an eyebrow.

‘Or whatever they are,’ dismissed the watchman. ‘Not allowed, no matter what they are,’ he shrugged.

Kubrean sucked his teeth. ‘And where are the panthera of our colleagues?’ he enquired, a serious look growing on his face.

‘Couldn’t say,’ said the watchman, inspecting his nails.

Kubrean’s eyes narrowed. He released his hands from Max’s reins and raised his left hand slightly.

A look of shock appeared on the watchman’s face as he rose three feet in the air and hovered. He looked down, head darting like a startled chicken. Kubrean pulled his hand towards his chest and the watchman floated over like a balloon on a string. The other half dozen watchman backed away, eyes fixed on their airborne leader, who came to a halt at eye height with Kubrean.

‘Could you do me a favour?’ asked Kubrean, leaning forward slightly.

The watchman said nothing, his face baffled by his newfound ability to fly.

Kubrean coughed heavily. The watchman spluttered back into

recognition, his eyes wide as he looked at Kubrean.

‘Ah yes, hello,’ said Kubrean with a sweet smile. ‘I just wondered if you could do me a favour,’ he repeated. ‘Find them.’

‘What?’ chirped the watchman.

‘Find my two colleagues livestock. I believe that was the term,’ he consulted with Kryst.

‘I believe so,’ Kryst nodded, straight faced.

Kubrean smiled, delighted at the news. ‘Would you be so kind?’ he asked the floating watchman.

‘Yes,’ the watchman blinked rapidly as he answered.

‘There’s a good fellow,’ said Kubrean with a wink. He lowered his hand. The watchman slowly descended back to the ground. He nodded then turned barking orders at the other watchmen, who gawping retreating back to the main entrance.

‘Wait here,’ said Kubrean, nodding to the others. ‘And try not to cause any problems,’ he looked directly at Zalen and Dalon.

The pair looked at each other, then back at Kubrean, the very picture of innocence.

‘Please?’ he said.

‘I’ll watch out,’ replied Kryst gruffly, eyeing the other two who both slumped into their saddles.

Kubrean looked on, a small smile on his face.

‘Let’s go,’ he nodded to Kaoldan, who felt nerves fluttering in his stomach. He glanced at the tower, then at Kubrean. A weak smile appeared and then was gone from his face.

The inside of the facility was luxurious even by royal standards, the perimeter wall more than adequately hid a wide dusty courtyard that disappeared off to the right and left following the contours of the outer wall. A variety of yellow stone buildings scattered before them.

A young watchman led the two Walkers towards a large square stone structure. The air echoed with the ring of metal on metal in the

distance.

‘It’s our primary training facility,’ explained the young man, as if sensing the question. ‘If you’d follow me, please,’ he offered them through a wide wooden framed entrance. The inside of the building was dark and plain, scatterings of paintings came and went as they made their way through.

They walked for what seemed like hours – tension increasing in Kaoldan’s muscles - until the young watchman came to a halt at the bottom of a spiral staircase.

‘Up there,’ he said. ‘That’s where they have spent most of their time, one of them at least.’ He turned and left without waiting for a response, boots rapping on the stone floor as he disappeared around a corner.

Kaoldan felt his stomach lurch, his palms had suddenly become very clammy, and he swallowed dryly.

‘After you,’ he offered to Kubrean with a weak smile.

The old man paused, eyeing Kaoldan, then nodded, turned and began the ascent up the stairs.

Kaoldan followed slowly. His legs felt like lead. He looked up. Light broke through slits in the outer wall, plumes of dust floating carelessly in Kubrean’s wake.

It had been so long.

Why had it been so long?

He hardly knew what to expect. Hello, remember me? I’m your father who abandoned you in your hour of need. How have you been for the last six years? Tears, silence, anger, sorrow, happiness?

He breathed out slowly.

The stairs eventually ended, and they were confronted by a small landing with three doors, two of them open, leading to empty rooms both containing two beds, a small table and chairs.

A closed door beckoned to the left.

Kubrean looked steadily at Kaoldan, nodded - more to himself than anything else - turned and knocked.

A light musical voice answered, muffled by the wood.

Kubrean turned the handle with a creak and the heavy door opened, light escaping from inside the room. Kubrean entered, floorboards groaning as he did so. A squeal of delight erupted from deep within the room, followed by a stampede of feet. Kubrean let out a grunt as he was almost knocked off his feet by a blur of grey and swirling blonde hair. The squeal continued, buried in the hug, the owner of the blonde hair stamping her feet rhythmically in delight.

A bright face emerged wearing a beaming smile, eyes fixed on Kubrean, who seemed quite embarrassed by the bounding show of affection. The owner of the smile did not really seem to care, and more white teeth appeared as the smile grew wider.

Kaoldan felt hot. He turned, twisting his clothes, hands suddenly alive with untameable energy.

‘Hello,’ he croaked, his voice hoarse and cracked. He cleared his throat badly.

The smile turned and stopped, a flicker of recognition, a pause and eyes widened.

‘No,’ she whispered; her eyes danced with delight. ‘You came,’ she covered the distance between them in one leap, crushing him in a squeeze, arms tight and strong.

Burying her face in his neck. Kaoldan stood stunned, arms wide like a scarecrow, uncertain what to do. Slowly they crept in and he embraced her, a silly nervous smile slowly appearing on his face.

‘Father...’ she breathed.

Kubrean stood back, folded his arms and simply watched, a peculiar smile growing on his face.

Chapter II – Brief Encounters

She had changed. A lot.

Almost to the point that he felt he did not recognise her. Kaoldan sat awkwardly, not really knowing what to do or say as she fussed and glided around the table. He had already fumbled his cup, nearly dropping it twice. He sat rigid, not daring to move a muscle.

She was a whirlwind of activity, chattering away as she made tea for a somewhat stunned Kaoldan and a rather amused Kubrean. Smile wide on his face, arms folded as he nodded along to the chatter, whilst flicking knowing glances at Kaoldan.

Romina was tall, really tall. Much taller than Kaoldan had expected, but then he came to realise he had no idea what he had been expecting. The same gangly teenager he last remembered, all blonde curls and eagerness to please. She had been the epitome of the perfect trainee Walker. She had always done as she was told. Never stepped out of line, never asked why, carried out everything she had ever been asked diligently and quickly.

The woman, for that was what she was now, glided around the table effortlessly garbed in a dark grey top, leggings and riding boots.

She laughed to herself, hands covering her mouth as she giggled at an amusing story Kaoldan had completely not heard. He was somewhere else. Where he was, he wasn't certain. It all felt slightly surreal. How he felt he wasn't sure, but he knew it was not unpleasant.

Her hair was darker, loosely tied back in a wavy ponytail. Now more honey and mustard than the previous gold and silver, when he had last seen her. She still had slight freckles on her nose, and a willowy quality to her as she walked. Her face was bright and open, had a strong nose, and she snorted slightly as she laughed. Kaoldan smiled in recognition of a long-lost memory which flashed in and out of his mind.

‘Anyway, I said to him ‘not as long as your breath is as vile as you

are', I mean what was he thinking.' She concluded, her hands on her hips. 'What?' Romina asked, eyes darting between them.

'Nothing,' said Kaoldan softly. 'Just a lot to do. We can talk on the way.'

A small smile of relief appeared on her face and she nodded. He downed his tea as he stood; the chair screeching on the floor as he did so.

'You do remember your sister is meant to be coming with us as well, don't you?' reminded Kubrean, getting to his feet.

'Frak...' swore Romina.

That was new, thought Kaoldan.

The smile on her face grew wider.

'Do you have any idea where we can find her?' Kaoldan asked. 'Time is of the essence and I'd really like to prepare before we set out early tomorrow.'

'Not a problem,' replied Romina. 'She'll be where she always is, training and practising. Being my younger sister, she somehow feels she has a point to prove.'

They walked around the outside of the grounds and passed through a dozen imposing doors following darker wood panelled corridors into a smaller inner courtyard. It was packed with two dozen of the City Watch.

The rhythmic ring of metal on metal filled the air, accompanied by the gasps and grunts of the wielders trying their best to overcome their opponents. The arrival of the three Walkers did not register with the inhabitants of the courtyard. They walked in unnoticed and witnessed a group of perhaps eight Royal Guards laughing. The ringleader, a mountain of a man who appeared to be missing his neck, howled with laughter and slapped his knees.

'Look at that!' he pointed to a young woman garbed in grey in the yard's corner. 'She's hardly big enough to pick a sword up, let alone

fight.' He mocked and mimicked her to the delight of his audience.

She blinked, a picture of concentration and composure, ignoring his howls and jokes. Took a deep breath and charged forwards. Her charge was towards the ringleader and his group. Approaching them, she raised her arms and dived forwards, flipping and somersaulting, twisting and turning in the air with mesmerising speed and precision. The blonde, grey blur came to a sudden and measured stop a few feet from the ringleader who appeared to take great offence at the act.

He surged forward, chin up and chest rising. He shouted something unintelligible at her, stopping right in front of her face.

Kaoldan's face hardened, his hands clenched; he had seen enough and moved forward to intervene, but a hand fell lightly on his shoulder and he stopped. He turned to see Kubrean, who gently shook his head.

The ringleader was now in full flow.

'What was that?' He demanded, his shaved head darting around, attempting to gain extra attention. 'All that jumping around, and you still can't pick up a sword darling,' he shouted, roaring with laughter.

The other occupants of the yard were now stopping what they were doing, looking, listening with greater interest, and in greater numbers towards the ringleader.

The small gymnast simply looked up at him and smiled sweetly. Her lack of reaction seemed to anger him even more.

'You Walkers are nothing without your magic,' he declared, wiggling his fingers in front of her nose. 'All that poncing about scaring people because they think you can use magic and turn them into a frog or something. It doesn't scare me. You couldn't hurt me if you tried,' he spat.

His eyes narrowed, and a grin grew on his face.

'Go on, I dare you. Hit me!' he growled. 'In fact, I'll help you,' He offered, slowly sinking down to his knees. 'Go on, hit me as hard as you can, but no magic!' he wagged his finger and grinned.

She looked at him, questioning his offer.

‘Go on...’ He goaded her, raising his chin.

She set her feet and pulled her right arm back. His grin widened.

In truth, she could have hit him much harder, but such was the accuracy and speed of the punch, that it had cracked against his jaw before the grin had reached his ears.

Silence descended in the courtyard as he collapsed like a puppet with its strings cut, flopping onto the grass with a dull thud.

She attentively patted his head and walked towards the three observers; the crowd melted in her wake. A wry smile grew on her face as she stopped briefly to bow to them and nodded to her sister, who followed on. She then winked at Kaoldan and both women promptly disappeared through the main entrance out of the courtyard.

They waited patiently outside the changing rooms for a short period.

‘I think they will make an excellent addition to the group,’ mused Kubrean, perched in a window seat, gazing outside, his feet lodged upon the sill.

‘No lack of confidence in either of them and if all I have been told is true, not lacking skills with the blade or in the practice of Fajin either. I understand your reluctance in taking them with us, my old friend,’ he said, sensing doubt in Kaoldan. ‘Things have to change now and then, and it’s not such a bad thing is it?’ He swung around to face Kaoldan, who had been lost in his own thoughts, distracting himself by studying one of the many paintings on the wooden panelled wall.

‘Hmmm...’ Kaoldan answered.

‘And,’ Kubrean continued, ‘The more of us there are the greater the chances we will find out more about this Reng thing, and I am inclined to say the better our chances of making it back in one piece.’

Kaoldan pulled a face, but he knew his friend was right. Things

had to change and the more of them there were, the greater the chances in their favour, but this did not stop the nagging doubts at the back of his mind. He exhaled.

The creak of a door opening announced the two young Walkers. He turned to see Romina and her younger sister Zahara stood side by side, both in matching uniform.

The new arrival was quite the opposite of her taller sibling in many respects. Kaoldan was quite taken aback at the changes in her. Zahara had changed considerably too, but still possessed many of the same features as her sister.

She was fully half a head shorter than her sister but had wider shoulders and was slightly more powerfully build in keeping for such a gifted gymnast. She too had the same strong nose and mouth but a rounder face, her hair was a bobbed thick mass of brass blonde pulled back into a perfunctory spiky ponytail. Her grey eyes darted around, taking in all around her. She turned her gaze at Kubrean and Kaoldan, smiled and bowed to them both in turn.

‘Masters,’ she said. Her voice had a musical quality to it.

‘I apologise for the display in the courtyard. I did not intend to embarrass the Order or either of you. It was just something that I felt had to be done. The knuckle-dragging oaf has been at it for far too long, and fortunately this was the perfect opportunity to teach him a lesson or two,’ Zahara explained.

‘Zahara...’ Romina exclaimed, a look of disapproval on her face.

‘Well, he had it coming,’ she shrugged matter-of-factly. ‘We can’t let things like that be said and allowed to pass.’

‘Here, here...’ clapped Kubrean walking towards them. ‘And a good right cross it was as well’ he nodded.

‘Thank you,’ replied Zahara, looking slightly embarrassed by the praise. ‘I always try my best,’ she said as a small smile crept on her face, ‘How are you Father?’ she asked Kaoldan turning to stare at him.

‘Fine, fine...’ he spluttered, not really sure where to look.

‘I’m glad you’re here,’ she announced. A cat like grin appeared on

her face, and she cautiously moved forward, catching him in a light and perfunctory hug. Kaoldan stood again, scarecrow like. Romina hid a laugh behind her hand.

‘Come on, give me a proper hug,’ challenged Zahara looking up at him, a twinkle in her eye.

Kaoldan relented and relaxed. He folded her into his arms and breathed out slowly.

‘That’s more like it,’ she said, emerging from the embrace and cocked her head to one side. ‘Just like a new pair of boots, we’ll break you in and soften you up,’ she declared, nodding, as if the deal had been agreed.

Kaoldan wasn’t entirely sure he liked the sound of that.

‘Kubrean. It’s so good to see you again,’ she said, bouncing over to him. Their embrace was full of affection, and Kaoldan found his muscles tightening and pinching.

‘How was your journey?’ he asked.

‘Oh, you know, long, dusty and uneventful. We were able to go by ship from Vanguard to the Weeping Cove. It saved us weeks and also saved us trudging through the Infinite Steps forever.’

‘The clues in the name,’ added Romina.

Zahara smiled back sourly. ‘Anyway, Kryst insisted we remain here while he went to meet you.’

Kaoldan’s stomach lurched. Kryst knew and had helped to make this happen? Acting as chaperon to his daughters and had said nothing. Kaoldan’s fists clenched.

‘I understand we are to accompany you both on an errand?’ Zahara queried, a hint of excitement clear on her face.

‘Correct,’ replied Kubrean.

‘Making us take the endless journey from Vanguard to Prava just to say hello, would not have been the best idea you’ve ever had,’ said Zahara, her eyes semi accusing Kubrean, who winced at the suggestion.

‘May I ask where?’ she began slowly rocking on the balls of her feet.

‘We need to find more information about someone called Reng,’ said Kubrean.

‘Reng?’ said Zahara, looking thoughtful pacing away in her own little world. ‘So we need to speak to people to get this information? Bash some heads together, pull the knowledge from people who may want to keep it from us. Sounds fun,’ she said, turning dramatically, eyes bright.

Kubrean coughed. ‘Not quite,’ he said. ‘It’s a little more, erm, perfunctory than that,’

‘Oh,’ said Zahara, looking slightly crestfallen.

‘So where do we start?’ asked Romina.

‘The Library,’ said Kubrean with a smile.

To say that her face was the very definition of disappointment would be an understatement. ‘Really?’ she said, eyes dropping, searching for the joke. It never came.

‘Yup,’ replied Kubrean, grinning. ‘Figured we’d get you to hit some books before you started hitting people.’

‘Shame. I can’t say I’m not disappointed,’ she said pointedly, scrunching her mouth to one side.

‘Life’s full of little disappointments my dear,’ said Kubrean linking his arm with hers. ‘Best to start early, I say. Avoiding further disappointments in the future.’ She smiled at him sarcastically as she dropped into step beside him.

They chattered as they walked away down the corridor.

‘If you’d care to follow me,’ piped up Romina.

Kaoldan shook his head.

‘Yes, of course,’ he said with a weak smile. She gestured the direction, and they both followed on.

‘Is she always so...’ Kaoldan grasped for the right word.

‘Direct?’ suggested Romina.

‘Yes, direct,’ said Kaoldan apologetically.

‘Most of the time, yes. But you’ll get used to it. She’s not half as tough as she likes to have people think,’ said Romina, looking ahead to her sister, a small smile creeping onto her face.

‘She’s changed,’ said Kaoldan, shaking his head with a snort.

‘I have too,’ said Romina, glancing at him.

‘Yes, of course you have,’ said Kaoldan, cursing himself, avoiding her gaze. ‘How was your journey?’ he asked, keen to change the topic.

Romina then began to tell Kaoldan every detail of their journey, the communication from Kubrean delivered by Kryst, their epic sea journey and the joys of travelling across Essealar with her sister.

Kaoldan nodded in all the right places and tried to appear interested, but his head was somewhere else. Who were these two women? Stupidly he realised he had been so preoccupied with his own thoughts and avoiding Kubrean that he had taken very little time to consider how and who the girls would be. He thought about them all the time, that was true, but somehow, strangely, he had not factored in that they would have changed.

They had been apart from him for so long. Too long, Kubrean was right about that. But how they had both changed. Scared and obedient girls is what he had taken to Vanguard all those years ago, and now what did he find? They had become strong, independent women without his help.

This particular point hit Kaoldan in several places in his heart, his head, and his soul. He began thinking about the complexities of the issue but stopped and forced it from his mind.

Be present. Be present, he reminded himself.

‘So, for future reference definitely avoid taking her by ship, she’s not really got the legs for it,’ said Romina.

‘And you are ok with the sea,’ asked Kaoldan conversationally, unsure what else to say.

‘Oh yes, no problem for me,’ said Romina standing tall as she walked looking at Kaoldan then grimaced as she opened the large wooden door to the outside.

Kaoldan blinked as he emerged into the sunlight.

‘Master!’ came a voice full of urgency. ‘O, master!’

The floating City Watch captain strode forward, his face full of

delight, boots crunching on the gravel.

‘I believe I have found your, erm, steeds?’ he shrugged. Pointing towards two fully saddled panthera in the distance, shading themselves under a tree.

‘It appears we knew where they were all along,’ he shook his head and shrugged his shoulders apologetically.

‘Why thank you, Captain,’ replied Kubrean warmly. ‘So good of you to find them for us so quickly.’

‘The very least we can do,’ said the Captain with a small bow.

Zahara and Romina exchanged a puzzled look.

‘Yes, thank you,’ piped up Zahara, joining in the spirit of the conversation.

‘We are most grateful,’ said Romina, straight faced.

The captain looked slightly abashed by the praise, bowed again, turned and headed back towards the main gates. Moving much more quickly than before.

‘What did you do to him?’ accused Romina towards Kaoldan. ‘They have been nothing but rude and darn right horrible to us since we arrived.’

‘Don’t look at me,’ he said laughing, raising his hands defensively ‘Ask the Master,’ he said bowing dramatically toward a rather beaming Kubrean.

‘Ah. Yes,’ smiled the old man. ‘I merely explained to him how grateful we would be for his help in finding your steeds,’ he concluded with a shrug.

Zahara narrowed her eyes.

‘They are found. That is all that matter,’ said Kubrean straightening out his uniform and looking towards the other Walkers also shading under the trees.

‘Hello girls,’ boomed Zalen with a broad smile getting to his feet, dusting his uniform with his hands.

‘Girls?’ said Zahara sourly at the apparent offensiveness of the word as Zalen approached.

‘He definitely said, girls,’ confirmed Romina, arms folded.

Zalen stopped in his tracks, a look of worry on his face as he searched their faces.

‘It’ll do,’ said Zahara teasing.

‘Ladies is better,’ suggested Romina.

‘Oh ok,’ said Zalen, set straight on the matter.

A smile appeared on Romina’s face. ‘Uncle Zalen,’ she said, moving towards him and embracing him.

His face brightened, body straightened, and he reciprocated the hug.

Zahara approached, pretending to play fight. Zalen reacted and crouched, ready to respond.

‘I wouldn’t if I was you,’ interjected Kaoldan nervously.

‘Why not?’ said Zalen, glancing at his friend, face full of cockiness.

‘Never mind,’ said Kaoldan, deciding to leave his friend to his fate, just as Zahara cracked a hefty punch to his unprotected arm.

Zalen yelped, leapt back - like a scolded cat - rubbing his arms.

Zahara grinned, then hugged him. He smiled warily, then slowly backed away, still rubbing his arm.

Various hugs and pleasantries were then exchanged as they worked their way through the other members of the group who had wandered over, all except Dref who was lying hidden in the shade of the tree on the floor taking in the scene before him. The big black dog’s ear flicked, and his tongue lolled slowly out of his mouth.

‘Who is that?’ asked Romina, looking at the dog.

‘Oh, he’s just a friend,’ answered Kaoldan, making his way towards the dog. Dref cocked his head to one side.

‘Come,’ he said.

Dref hesitated.

‘Come,’ he said, more sternly this time.

Still the dog waited.

‘Come...’ he almost shouted.

This time the dog moved, rising and charging at great speed. Kaoldan’s face relaxed, then dropped as the dog shot straight past him towards the onlooking and beckoning ladies. He collapsed onto

his back in a heap at their feet and began wriggling as the ladies tickled him.

‘If you thought you had problems before, I think you really have problems now,’ whispered Zalen, still rubbing his arm.

‘Tell me about it,’ sighed Kaoldan. As the ladies and the dog continued to play.

Chapter 12 – Needle In A Haystack

‘So let me get this right,’ said Zahara for the seventh time, hands on her head. ‘Some crazy person says the name of some long dead - possibly fictional King - and we have to search through all the books in this place to check.’ She pointed to the university towering over them.

‘That’s pretty much it,’ nodded Kryst, the shadow of high tree branches passing over his face in the midday sun.

‘Great...’ she said sourly, face dropping. ‘Not exactly how I pictured this trip going.’

‘You’ll soon catch on,’ said Zalen joyfully, trotting along beside her. ‘Kubrean really knows how to keep things interesting and keeps all the best and most fun tasks for us.’ He winked at Kubrean, who was trotting along ahead, body turned to listen to the conversation taking place behind him. He pulled a face and turned back to the university.

‘I’m joking,’ said Zalen, covering his face with his hand. ‘He regularly makes us do really boring things.’

‘I know,’ said Zahara with a hiss.

‘You do?’ questioned Zalen. Sitting slightly more upright in his saddle.

‘Yes,’ she hissed again, ‘I do understand sarcasm.’

‘I don’t,’ said Zalen definitely. ‘Really difficult to understand with all those double ss and the pfffs... horrible language.’

‘Save me,’ said Zahara, looking to the heavens.

‘I will save you the biggest books, Master Zalen,’ shouted Kubrean without turning, ‘Given you enjoy these things so much.’

Zalen slumped in his saddle, like a sulky teenager, which in effect he was.

The university could be seen from many miles away, but it was only once Kaoldan got close to it you appreciated its magnificence. Its defining feature was its imposing height, but Kaoldan had often been struck by the beauty that was often overshadowed by the strength of the tree.

Zalen stretched out his neck and cleared his throat.

‘The Blue Oak is the rarest of trees only found in a handful of places throughout the world; there is one just between the cities of Trin and Tren, another by the city of Kriyht and apparently another within the Krund empire near to Gnokz. They all tower over the landscape hundreds of metres tall, but it is the Blue Oak in Prava that is apparently the biggest, and the added curiosity of being a university that gives it such infamy.’ Zalen concluded.

Zahara sat opened mouthed.

‘Is he listening?’ hissed Zalen, nodding towards Kubrean.

Zahara nodded.

Zalen winked at her and took a deep breath.

‘The name for the tree is easy to understand the leaves - also gigantic, the size of a small table sometimes – have a blue-green hue to them. The tree rarely sheds its leaves, despite being an oak. There was a curious case of a lecturer being killed by a particularly large leaf that landed on top of her some decades ago. Yet despite the slim chances of being killed by the university itself, it has grown over hundreds of years in terms of visitors, students and academics and is widely acknowledged as the centre of knowledge in the world,’ concluded Zalen.

‘Very informative, Master Zalen,’ said Kubrean, without turning around. ‘And a nice try, but you are still going to read the biggest books,’

Zalen’s shoulders slumped.

‘That *is* a gigantic tree,’ stated Dalon, open-mouthed and arching his neck back to take in the enormity of the sight in front of them. ‘How high does it go up?’ he mused. ‘And how on earth would you even measure it? Not a rope in the world long enough.’ He shook his

head as if trying to do the sums.

‘They gave up trying to get to the top about a hundred years ago,’ said Romina. ‘Apparently it has caused the deaths of about six people over the years, all falling before they reached the top. Seems academics are not so good at climbing trees,’ she shrugged.

‘It’s actually 829 metres tall, give or take a metre or two,’ called a voice from the back. The group turned to see Zalen head raised, gazing up to the heavens. ‘They measured it with maths or something about 5 years ago. They think it grows about one metre every 2-3 years, making the whole thing about 1500 years old,’ he continued before looking down towards the group and the collective open mouths.

‘What?’ he shrugged, looking at them suspiciously, nudging Salah to a quicker pace, eager to escape the attention he had brought upon himself.

The main road eventually merged with the compacted earth that had become the walkways into and around the university. The roots of the Blue Oak emerged; snaking and snarling up and into the ground, vast brown limbs like living rows of houses burrowing deep into the earth, supporting the vast trunk at its centre. The outer roots and limbs had creatively, Kaoldan thought, been turned into accommodation for students and lower level lecturers alike. They had coloured front doors, square windows and small tufts of flowers near to each entrance. Colourfully dressed people carrying bags and piles of papers, rushing about this way and that, busy about their work. The size of the roots increased as they approached the central trunk, and with it the number of students.

‘Am I missing something?’ asked Romina, looking around for reassurance. ‘But it is a tree.’

‘Yes,’ replied Kubrean, amused.

‘But trees are made of wood,’ she continued pointing to the university.

‘Correct again,’ he smiled.

‘Wood burns,’ she shrugged.

Kubrean nodded.

‘So...’ she spread her hands expectantly.

‘Blue Oak does not burn,’ came Zalen’s voice. ‘Strange quality in a tree, don’t you think? Something in the sap of the wood means that it can never catch fire, even when it has dried out. Which is why it makes such an excellent building material for the houses in Prava. They have even exported it elsewhere. Seems that having houses and buildings that are inflammable is a good thing,’ he mused.

Romina shook her head at the blonde Walker.

He caught sight of the look. ‘What?’ asked Zalen again.

The group kept moving, sunlight appearing intermittently as the foliage grew denser. Zalen was correct the gigantic tree had a blue tinge to it, slightly more prevalent in the shade. It was a sight to behold.

Academics continued to grow both in number and their curiosity about the Walkers, nervous eyes watching, assessing, but never lingering too long. Fearful of the big cats and their riders. As they approached, the main entrance came into view.

A large diamond shaped garden nestled between two twisting roots, the size of small hills, twisting outward before gnarling into the ground. The gardens were bordered with low well-maintained hedges, a fountain dominating the centre - a more realistic sized silver version of the blue oak Kaoldan surmised. It glittered and pulsed with a shimmer, water covering and steadily flowing down its roots and branches, until it cleared the air thick with the smell of vegetation. The noise from the fountain was accompanied by the crunch of mud-coloured gravel. The main entrance to the university, a huge three-storey archway with stout wooden doors, gilded with another silver version of the tree, branches fanning out showing different coloured rock sized gems. The colours of the gems showing the individual schools within the tree, which corresponded with colours worn by the students.

At the front Kubrean dismounted and spoke briefly with a

shuffling blue clad, black woman, who embraced him, then smiled and nodded as he spoke to her in his typically animated fashion. A final hug and she led Max away, the big panthera dwarfing her, but happy to follow.

‘We leave the cats here,’ he announced as they dismounted. ‘They will be quite ok.’ The low purr of Max echoed across the air, sat happily under a much smaller tree in the shade, appearing to enjoy the attentions of the lady, tickling under his chin - eyes closed, grinning. The other pantheras looked over, almost in jealousy, and once free of their riders all moved over, tails swishing as they did so.

Tren heavily brushed passed Kaoldan to join the others.

‘Oi,’ objected Kaoldan.

Tren flicked his tail and turned his head, looking at his master indifferently, sapphire eyes glittering. The panthera swished its tail, turning to look at joining the clowder of very large kittens being pampered by an increasing number of blue-clad students.

‘Enjoy,’ said Kaoldan, pursing his lips and with that the panthera bounded over to join the others. A terrified looking red clad student screamed as Tren shot passed her. She cowered, protecting her pile of papers with trembling hands, before quickly realising the danger was now sitting down twenty metres away, being stroked by chattering students. She stood muttering, trying to compose herself with an air of dignity, brushing straight her clothes before hurrying off, swallowed up by the throng of students in the main entrance.

‘Natural history students,’ explained Kubrean, nodding towards the blue-clad students. ‘I have an old acquaintance who runs part of the school and any chance they get to see and interact with pantheras she jumps at. She loves them, and we Walkers don’t really tend to come here that often, so this is a treat for her and the students,’

‘I hope they don’t get too used to that,’ said Kryst gruffly. ‘Not entirely sure I can give Sadida that much attention,’ He looked over at the throng of very pleased panthera, all enjoying being the centre of attention.

‘Leave them to it,’ waved Kubrean. ‘We have work to do.’

Through the doors and inside the university, the atmosphere was one of business. Boots echoed, chatter carried, bouncing off the highly polished bare warm wooden walls. The overall effect was that of being inside a very cavernous wooden mine, at its centre was yet another silver sculpture of the blue oak. Tunnels scattered out from the main hall, with a high vaulted ceiling, to the left and right coloured gems embedded above all the various entrances. Lamps flickered lazily inside nooks in the bare walls. Kubrean strode ahead a white-clad man scurried over. They talked, hands pointed, heads nodded. The expression on Kubrean’s face was one of frustration as he walked back towards them.

‘It’s as I feared,’ he said, ‘The school of history is that way.’

He pointed towards a coke coloured gem to their left.

‘Problem is that it’s on the 13th floor,’ he sucked against his teeth.

‘13th?’ said Kaoldan, looking upwards, face falling.

Kubrean nodded.

Kaoldan sighed heavily.

‘Come on then,’ said Romina, edging towards the tunnel. ‘The sooner we get going, the sooner we get there,’ Dref stood obediently at her side, looking for instruction.

‘Race you,’ she challenged. The dog’s ears pricked up.

She charged for the entrance. The dog stood still, momentarily confused before understanding and setting off in hot pursuit. As they approached the entrance, a shout echoed forward.

‘Wait!’ shouted a white-clad man marching to intercept them, finger wagging. ‘I don’t think so.’ He said tutting and shaking his head. ‘No animals allowed.’ He announced standing firmly in front of the entrance, blocking their path. His black thinning hair all out-of-place waving across his scalp, nose hawked and defiant.

Romina and Dref screeched to a halt. He stood directly in front of

them, arms folded.

‘This isn’t a farm or a zoo. It must leave.’ He pointed towards the entrance.

‘It?’ said Romina, hands on hips, offended on Dref’s behalf.

‘It,’ he confirmed, arms folding tighter.

‘He,’ she took a step forward. ‘Comes with us.’

A shake of the head.

‘I said, he comes with us,’ she said, chin rising.

Further shaking of the head.

She slapped him sharply across the face. The shock of the blow jolted him, and the surprise seemed to be more of an issue than any pain.

‘He will be coming with us,’ she said angrily, grabbing him by the shoulder, digging her gloved fingers into the soft tissue. He sank to his knees with a thump.

‘Walker.’ barked Kubrean, hurrying over. ‘Release that man, immediately.’

She turned, face shocked, then embarrassed. She let her hand drop to her side.

‘What are you doing?’ he accused.

‘I... I...’ she stammered, blinking rapidly, taking a step backwards, hands open helplessly. ‘I don’t know...’ she said, face creased with confusion, then looked at Kubrean.

‘My apologies, Learned Friend,’ said Kubrean, turning his attention to the kneeling man. Helping him to his feet, as he rubbed his shoulder, eyeing Romina suspiciously.

‘My apologies,’ she mumbled, avoiding his gaze. ‘I acted in haste.’

‘May we take him with us?’ asked Kubrean, nodding towards Dref, sat tongue lolling oblivious to the commotion he had caused. ‘You have my word he will be no trouble,’ reassured Kubrean clasping the hand of the injured man.

The man snorted, looked at Kubrean, glancing at Romina occasionally.

‘I don’t suppose it will do any harm,’ he conceded. ‘As long as he

does not cause any trouble.’ He looked at Dref accusingly. Dref just blinked back.

‘He won’t. My thanks,’ nodded Kubrean. ‘You go.’ He said turning to Romina. She did not wait and immediately moved through the entrance, followed by Dref.

‘What the hell was that?’ whispered Dalon to Kaoldan.

‘I don’t know,’ said Kaoldan, his face a picture of concern. ‘But I intend to find out.’

Climbing to reach the 13th floor felt like the equivalent of ascending a small mountain. They followed seemingly endless tunnels around and around the outer edges of the Blue Oak tree. Each floor an epicentre of academic activity composed of a central floor space, leading off to many rooms and spaces. The 13th floor was no exception. A table-sized coke coloured gem adorned the main arched entrance leading into the school of history. Brown clad academics and students milled round the central space, going about their business, although Kaoldan noticed several curious stares and glances in their direction.

‘Right, I suggest we split up and see what we can find,’ said Kubrean, looking around the space, squinting at the lettering above each entrance.

‘May I be of service?’ enquired a tall, white-clad man who marched forwards, hands clasped together. He walked with the confidence of a man completely in his element. A sincere smile on his face and a spring in his step.

‘Get a load of this guy,’ whispered Zalen with a raise of his eyebrows.

‘I am certain that I can be of any help that you might require.’ He purred, coming to a halt beside Kryst.

‘We are after information,’ explained Kubrean. ‘Mr...?’

‘Brooks.’ Nodded the man with a slight bow. ‘If you are looking

for information, you are in the right place.’ He spread his hands as if a merchant peddling his wares. ‘I am most certain that we can provide any information that you require.’ He said with an air of confidence it was hard not to be impressed by.

‘Ah, good, thank you Brooks,’ nodded Kubrean.

‘What are you searching for? We have many branches that can help.’ He spread his hands as a series of short rapid snuffles erupted from his not inconsiderable nostrils, face creasing up as he did so. He quivered slightly, enjoying his little joke.

Zalen’s eyebrows rose, then he laughed too. Jabbing his elbow into Kaoldan’s chest as he nodded towards Brooks.

‘Branches...’ he said with a wide smile.

Zahara rolled her eyes and sighed loudly.

‘A little joke I like to use now and then,’ said Brooks, rubbing his hands together as the last of the air spluttered out his nose. ‘What are you looking for?’ his face turned serious, the hilarity having apparently past.

‘Reng?’ asked Kubrean.

Brooks left eye twitched slightly.

‘We are looking for any information you might have regarding an ancient King by the name of Reng,’ continued Kubrean.

‘I see. The name is not unfamiliar to me,’ pondered Brooks, regaining his composure. He walked away deep in thought, tapping his fingers against his bearded chin.

‘I have it,’ he announced with a dramatic twirl.

Zalen held his breath.

‘We have a variety of lecturers that cover that period. They all have varying levels of knowledge. But I would strongly suggest taking that particular root.’

Zalen snorted loudly, elbowing Kaoldan in the ribs.

Brooks beamed at his new found comedic talents.

‘Ow...’ said Kaoldan, rubbing his side.

‘Sorry,’ apologised Zalen with a shrug. ‘But he is funny.’

‘If you head through that entrance there,’ He pointed in the

direction over Romina's shoulder. 'You should find what you are looking for,' he smiled smugly.

'My thanks,' said Kubrean with a bow.

'My pleasure,' responded Brooks returning the bow. His head jerked like an academic eagle seeking more prey, marching forwards and passing through the group to assist in another task that required his skills.

'I suggest we split up. We'll be able to cover things more quickly and easily,' said Kubrean, looking towards the entrance.

Kryst, Romina and Zahara paired up, along with Dalon and Kubrean. Zalen looked at Kaoldan and smiled.

'If I must,' he sighed.

'Remember we are after facts, anything that provides more information about Reng, who he was, what he did and how he did it. No fairy stories,' he pointed, nods all round.

'This will take no time at all,' said Dalon, cracking his knuckles, striding towards the entrance.

Several hours later. Kaoldan and Zalen stood in a semi-lit corridor, hands on hips, the epitome of frustration.

'How can nobody know anything about him?' said Zalen, waving his hands in the air. 'He existed, he existed,' he mimicked. 'Then nothing. Honestly, this is a waste of time.'

They had been met with a series of blank stares, slammed doors and made no notable progress. All lecturers agreed, Reng was real. Other than this startling news, nothing else had followed. Kaoldan had grown more and more annoyed, and nervous energy was building within him. He looked to his left.

'We only have one more to go,' nodded Kaoldan over to the last door on the corridor. 'I share your frustration, but let's see what they have to say.' He walked towards the door and knocked loudly.

Silence.

He knocked again, louder this time.

The sound of movement, shuffling, and a moving chair creaked through the door.

He knocked louder.

‘Go away,’ came a muffled voice.

Zalen’s head dropped.

Kaoldan hammered on the door again.

‘I said. Go away.’

‘Enough,’ muttered Zalen and in one smooth movement strode to the side of Kaoldan, turned and kicked the door with his heavy boots. The first kick partly tore it from its upper hinges. The second kick ripped the hinges clean off, and the door toppled over with a crash, dust erupting into clouds, the lower hinges twisting but holding in a final act of defiance.

‘Better...’ announced Zalen with a smile.

Kaoldan waved the dust out of his face as Zalen moved into the room, hurdling over the top of the door.

Coughing echoed from the dimly lit room and a small woman emerged waving her hands in front of her face. Her face was creased with disgust and she blinked rapidly.

‘What have you done to my door?’ she said, looking accusingly at Zalen, who smiled back the very picture of innocence.

‘Rusty hinges,’ he nodded, pointing to the twisted remains laid out on the floor.

‘Seemed perfectly fine to me,’ she mused, scratching her chin. Glancing at the defective door and then at Zalen. ‘I quite liked that door,’ she said, giving him one final quizzical look over the top of her glasses, her face straightened out.

She turned and shuffled towards a large red velvet chair positioned in the corner of the room. ‘Don’t really know much about doors though I suppose,’ she continued along, waving her hands absently, taking a seat with a grunt. Looking at the two strangers in her room, she blinked and refocused her eyes on them. ‘What do you want?’ she asked, shaking her head.

‘Shame about the poor-quality hinges,’ nodded Zalen, taking a step forward. ‘But I suppose it means we can speak to you now?’ he smiled sweetly.

A grin emerged on the old lady’s face. ‘I suppose it does,’ she replied, pulling her shabby brown cloak about her tiny frame. ‘Be a dear and pass me that drink, would you?’ she pointed towards a small cabinet to the side of Kaoldan.

He did so and handed her the glass of red liquid. She slurped at it noisily before blinking at them again.

‘We are trying to find out more information about an ancient King,’ said Kaoldan, helping himself to a seat on a large velvet sofa near to the lady, his knees clicking as he did so.

‘Ah, now that kind of thing I do know about,’ she said, smile wide and happy before taking another slurping drink. ‘Any ancient king in particular?’ she asked, smacking her lips together and raising her head slightly.

‘Reng,’ said Zalen, also taking a seat.

Her eyebrows rose in recognition. ‘Ah...Him...’ She said simply turning to place the glass down at the table by the side of her chair with a dull clonk. Kaoldan looked at Zalen and the smile that appeared on his face.

‘He is quite the mystery,’ she said, settling back into the deep seat. ‘His origins are still generally unknown to us. But what we do know is that he was responsible for one of the darkest, if not the darkest period in the history of Essealar. He was a tyrant. Pure and simple,’ she stared at them. ‘Ruled with an iron fist, ruthless, merciless and all the bad things you would expect of someone of that nature,’ she said, waving her bony hand to emphasise the point.

‘But real and long since dead?’ said Kaoldan.

‘Finally? Oh yes, nearly five hundred years ago now, I think,’ She grinned. ‘And most definitely real,’ nodding in agreement.

‘What do you mean finally?’ asked Zalen, his face confused.

‘He died on many occasions, apparently. But his soul remained,’ she nodded. ‘Not claimed by the Abyss until around the three

hundredth year of his reign.'

'Three hundred years?' exclaimed Kaoldan, moving to the edge of his seat.

She nodded sagely. 'Yes, something like that. Over three hundred years he ruled before his soul was claimed.'

'How did he live for that long?' asked Zalen.

'Ah, now that is an interesting story,' she smiled, twisting towards her drink.

The noise was a dull phut.

Almost silent, apart from the fly sized dart that appeared in her cheek.

Her face looked surprised for a second, right eye twitched, then she let out a weary groan. A pink light emerged from her body and through her shawl. She slumped deeper into the seat, and the full brightness of the pink image of her body slowly rose limply out of the seat.

Kaoldan and Zalen both flinched back in horror as the light grew brighter. Zalen turned towards the door. A dark hooded figure was kneeling to the side of the entrance. So well hidden that it almost appeared to be part of the wrecked frame. It paused, then in a blink of an eye disappeared, the sound of soft footsteps padded on the floor.

Kaoldan and Zalen sprang from the sofa and piled after it. Their footsteps echoed down the corridor. Zalen was faster, and he turned left then right and left again, chasing the sound. Kaoldan followed, looking ahead whilst reaching for his weapon. They ran, taking turn after turn, finally finding themselves back at the main hall of the 13th floor. They both looked about the room frantically, breathing in deeply as they did so.

A scream pierced the crowd and Kaoldan's head darted to the right side just quick enough to see the dark-clad figure look in their direction and then, with a crash, burst through a window.

The Walkers charged down the steps towards the window. The wind ripped through the hall, thick brown curtains bellowed out and

upwards, papers erupted into the air, more screams of both anguish and fear. As they reached the window, the wind whipped at them. Zalen removed his shield from his back with a metallic clang, raised it in front of him and darted his head out then back in doing so several times looking at different angles.

‘That way,’ he pointed right to Kaoldan who nodded and prepared his own shield on his left arm, forearm sliding through the loop and fingers finding the comfortable and familiar leather grips. He raised it to cover his upper body, nodded to Zalen.

‘Go,’ he said, swallowing and questioning his sanity, stepped through the window onto the ledge.

The sight that greeted them was dizzying. Thick branches and dense foliage; combined with the wind made for a complete assault on their senses. They paused to acclimatise. Kaoldan looked in the direction Zalen had pointed and squinted. The light was poor, and the wind made it difficult to see. He used his shield to deflect the best efforts of the wind, and he glimpsed a shadow moving along one branch.

‘That way,’ he shouted at Zalen, who nodded back. They slowly made their way out onto the branch.

The wind buffeted them with combinations of small and large blasts, all capable of knocking them both around. Their progress was slower than Kaoldan would have liked, but having grabbed a quick look down he reassured himself that slow progress sideways was much better than quick progress downwards. They steadily made the way along the branch, even though the width was that of a well sized road it still required careful steps.

Zalen paused and knelt down, the wind making his shield tremble on his arm.

‘That way,’ he shouted over the roar of the wind, nodding towards the steadily growing sunlight, away from the darker shade of the main trunk.

Kaoldan crouched, looked through and smiled.

Trapped. He looked at the figure carefully, making progress

towards the end of the branch.

It's dark clothing flapped wildly in the wind. To Kaoldan's surprise, the clothing appeared to be growing outwards. It then turned towards the crouched Walkers, waited, calmly waved and then turned and ran full pelt towards the edge of the thinning branch and leapt off the end.

Zalen and Kaoldan both stood, lowering their shields in joint disbelief at what they were seeing. The dark shadow fluttered, then gained a starched canopy shape as it caught the wind. It slowly and patiently descended towards the ground like a leaf on the breeze.

Chapter 13 – Traitor’s Scratch

‘Most definitely Traitor’s Scratch, I’m afraid,’ said Brooks, removing his glasses, looking up at Kubrean.

‘It’s the purple spiders’ web effect around the entry wound,’ he pointed carefully to the mark on the right cheek of the old lady, illuminated by the light of the candle he held.

‘She died within seconds. No pain, mercifully. One of the better poisons, if one had a choice,’ he said, struggling to his feet. ‘It is rarely used, very expensive by all accounts and a favourite when dealing with, well, traitors. Never thought I’d see it being used within these walls,’ he looked around before shuddering slightly. ‘Funny really. Studying poisons for years, one never really considers the fact they kill people.’ He smiled weakly. ‘All seems so real when you see it close up.’ He slowly moved the brown shawl to cover the face of the silent and relaxed looking old lady.

‘Her name was Eurenia. She was one of the oldest and longest serving lecturers at the university. She knew more than anyone and would have had the knowledge you sort.’

‘Thank you for your efforts,’ nodded Kubrean. ‘If we need any more help, I will let you know.’ Offering the door to Brooks, who thinly smiled and left. Kubrean waited until he had left the room before turning to Kaoldan wedged up against the wall, arms folded.

‘Somebody really wanted her dead and properly,’ he said, eyes fixed on the red velvet chair containing Eurenia’s body. ‘What could she possibly have known?’

‘We’ll never know now,’ said Kaoldan, looking out the window before turning to face Kubrean. ‘Interesting development though,’ his eyebrows raised.

‘One I would rather have avoided, given the choice,’ inclined Kubrean. ‘Let’s get the others together. I need to think, and we also need to see if anyone else found out anything else from another source.’

‘Nothing?’ asked Kubrean, resting back into his seat, looking at the blank faces and shrugging shoulders around him. ‘All these clever people and they can tell us nothing.’ He turned, resting his chin on his hand, and blew out a weary breath.

‘Nobody told us anything of note,’ shrugged Dalon. Moonlight caught half of his face and he shuffled out of its glare.

They had convened in more comfortable surroundings of a fully furnished, but very empty and dimly lit common room. It was a large round room, a circle of drably coloured chairs with a small table at its centre. It had done little to calm Kaoldan his mood anxious as he gazed out of the window into the night.

Through the ice-like glass it showed Prava in all its glory from about seven floors up. It spread out in front of them like a dark painting, veins of roads with a series of dots of light throughout and red slated roofs spread out before them cast in deep shadow.

Kaoldan glanced downwards out of the window, failing to recollect how he had ventured out onto a branch even higher to catch the assassin. He looked straight down, rising onto his tiptoes, and shuddered.

‘So, they just jumped?’ said Zahara open mouthed looking at Zalen.

‘Yup,’ he nodded. ‘Like some sort of crazy bird floating down to the ground. Nothing we could do.’

‘An arrow in the back?’ suggested Kryst.

‘No chance with that wind,’ said Zalen. ‘You should try going out there.’

Kryst shook his head. ‘Not a chance.’

‘So, we really do have nothing?’ said Romina. ‘No idea who this person was or why they would want Eurenia dead? And no clue what she knew that they did not want sharing? Brilliant,’ she said, sitting back, arms folded.

‘Wrong,’ said Kaoldan, taking quite a few steps away from the window. ‘We know Reng is real and not myth. We also know that he is dead.’

‘By a good five hundred years,’ added Zalen with a nod.

‘But also, that he lived for three hundred years or thereabouts,’ continued Kaoldan.

‘Really?’ scoffed Zahara.

‘Most definitely,’ said Zalen ‘Eurenia was most certain about that.’

‘Sure she wasn’t losing it?’ said Dalon, poking the side of his head.

‘No, she was highly regarded by everyone we spoke to,’ said Kryst, his deep voice reverberating around the room.

‘Most definitely,’ said Kubrean. ‘I’d go as far as to say she was revered around here. No mention or hint of poor memory or such. Old, but very reliable.’

‘As I was saying,’ said Kaoldan. ‘She was certain of everything that she said. I believed her,’ he shrugged. ‘We also know that whatever she was about to share with us was about Reng and his long life. She said that he had died on many occasions, but his soul had not been claimed by the Abyss,’ he narrowed his eyes in concentration.

‘Useful to know,’ said Romina, pulling a face.

‘Without a doubt,’ said Kaoldan, pacing around the circle of chairs. ‘The question is how did he lived for over three hundred years and that appears to be the key piece we are missing. We don’t know how long the assassin had been listening with the door wide open.’

‘Dodgy hinges,’ said Zalen, straight faced.

‘Open,’ continued Kaoldan. ‘But still they could have waited and acted at that point or just arrived and done it straight away. We have no way of knowing for certain. The key thing is that someone does not want us to know more about Reng and I think it’s logical to suggest his long life is the something that someone doesn’t want us to find out about.’ He turned to the group.

‘Not a bad start,’ said Kubrean. ‘But we are still guessing, more or less,’

‘I suppose so,’ said Kaoldan, looking rather crestfallen. ‘Main thing

is that we now need to get back to update Duke Lomman.'

'That we know nothing,' joked Zalen.

'Do you mind?' said Kaoldan tartly, hands on his hips.

'Sorry,' replied Zalen 'Just joining in.'

'We may know nothing, but the fact we now know nothing tells us something,' said Kaoldan.

'What?' asked Zahara, shaking her head and spreading her hands.

'That someone will go to extraordinary lengths to stop us from finding out, and that is something important,' finished Kubrean with a satisfied smile.

'It'll have to do, I suppose,' said Kryst with a frown. 'It may be worth doing one last sweep of the lecturers and maybe check through the library,' he shrugged.

'I'll help,' said Dalon.

'Well volunteered,' said Kubrean, a smile growing on his face as he turned to face him.

Kryst's mouth opened and closed, but no words came out.

'Nicely done,' said Zalen, stifling a smile badly behind his hand.

'And that makes three,' said Kubrean to the rest of the room.

Zalen sat up straight, smile gone. He looked at Kubrean and sat back in his chair, muttering something under his breath.

Kaoldan stood stone faced, eyes smiling.

'You three can stay here and check the library the rest of us can head back and speak to Duke Lomman. He wanted more information and for what it's worth, we do have something to tell him,' said Kubrean. 'Besides there is someone else I want to speak to rather urgently,' he glanced at Kaoldan and rested a reassuring hand on Romina shoulder.

'It's been a long day. I suggest that we all get some rest. We have a long journey ahead of us and you two have a lot of books to get through. Starting tomorrow,' he looked around the room at a group of slowly nodding heads.

Zalen was the first to rise from his seat. He stretched his arms theatrically, his mouth a yawning chasm. A complete ripple of yawns

followed, all except the two young girls, who looked at each other amused. The benefits of youth, Kaoldan thought to himself.

They left as a group, heading back towards the training facility on the other side of Prava. Brooks had made the arrangements for them to stay. Kaoldan was amazed at how tired his arms were. His mind felt like a rock, nothing able to get in, or out.

The journey back to the training facility progressed at a leisurely pace, affording Kaoldan time to reflect: the day had not exactly gone as he had intended. The research into Reng had taken him down unexpected avenues, the encounter with the dark assassin and losing what appeared to be their only source of information.

It was the encounter with the assassin that perplexed Kaoldan the most. There was something strangely familiar about it: had he imagined the wave? It was difficult to explain, and it nagged at the back of his brain like an irritating itch.

Kaoldan rode alone at the front of the group. He looked over his right shoulder to see Kubrean, Romina and Zahara laughing and joking together.

He felt a pang of regret tinged with jealousy. It was stupid really; he realised that, but still couldn't help but linger on the fact that since they had left the university; he had hardly spoken to his daughters; there was a distance between them and that he had much work to do to rebuild relationships with them. He felt hot anger rising in his chest, seeing how easily they spoke to Kubrean, the closeness of their relationship, that everything was just so easy.

He thought back to times before they left and when they were close, when they were a family with no distance between them at all. The tightest group. But things had changed, Tokel had been right about that. Was it irreparable? He could not say.

Was it too much to expect that they could be together as a family once again? That the closeness could return, perhaps damaged but still there?

It was impossible to predict the effect on all of them and given the fact a substantial stubborn streak was a commonality in all members

of the family; the outcome was far from a certain one. Kaoldan reflected that perhaps he had been successful, that they had grown stronger and independent exactly as he had hoped. But in the back of his mind a doubt arose that there may yet be unforeseen consequences to his actions.

They turned a corner to their left, revealing a long line of trees, silvery and shadowed in the moonlight. As they slowly rose up the hill leading towards the training facility, the heads of the City Watch could be seen popping in and out of this small sentry boxes looking towards the group of Walkers. They entered the courtyard in silence slowly heading to their rooms polite goodnights were said, Kaoldan nodded reassuringly towards his daughters who returned the courtesy before they disappeared into the shadows of their accommodation. A small smile appeared on Kaoldan's face. Maybe everything would be alright after all.

Kaoldan slept fitfully that night. He tossed and turned, his mind a rush of ideas, words, feelings and thoughts. At the forefront of his mind, the thoughts of his daughters. How much they had changed, and reassuringly how much they had not. He sniffed in the night air, considering the difficulties he now faced in building and rebuilding this relationship with them. They seemed to have grown up very well without him; it made him feel sort of redundant, a spare part, unneeded, unwatched and strangely unloved.

The love between the two of them was clear for all to see. They were close. He couldn't even think about how he might integrate himself back into their lives, to bring their family back together. Or even if that was the right thing to do.

He was beginning to understand Kubrean's reasons for bringing them back together. It had been too long, too much time had passed, and too many things had changed, and yet many things had not.

He still felt a protectiveness for both of his daughters and was still

unsure how best to shield them from the world, where he had failed once he would not fail them again. One thing was for sure, he would try, and he would try his best. It would take time and progress would be slow and uncertain, but he was determined he had to make it work.

He stared at the ceiling for the hundredth time, just shadows in the night for company, Dref snoring loudly in the corner. It was no good; he was going to have to do something.

He rose quietly, dressed himself in simple clothes, slipped on his comfortable shoes and left his room. Snuck down the stairs in the dark, wood creaking on this way downstairs, he left by the front door eager to seek fresh air and open space.

The night outside was well lit with moonlight trees silvery and cast in shadows, the soil hard and reassuring. He ground the balls of his feet into the earth; it felt good, reassuring. His feet barely making a sound as he slowly made his way away from buildings towards the trees ahead.

Events of the day still swirled around, filling his head, the strange familiarity with the assassin. Questions that remained unanswered about Reng; three hundred years was a very long time, many lifetimes during which souls would have been absorbed by the Abyss. It was difficult to know what to think. Eumenia had most definitely known what she was talking about, and yet. Something was missing. He was uncertain what it was as he ventured deeper into the wood.

It was after a few moments he found himself surrounded by thick high trees in the dark as he noticed a light ahead of him. It moved steadily left and right, like a firefly surrounded by leaves. Cautiously the trees parted like a pair of curtains, thick and velvety ahead of him was a dark figure holding a glowing green blade.

Kaoldan quietly approached, hiding behind a tree but still keen to observe the dark figure in the moonlight drifting but purposefully left and right, hacking, ducking and diving. The blade continued its movement swirling, twisting in wide circles. It moved with grace and a kind of fluidity that showed intense skills and confidence. The

green colour of the blade caused the shadows to shift in the trees. It was only when the figure spun to face him he saw a blonde ponytail swish as her body continued to twist and turn.

Romina's face was a picture of concentration and focus the green light from the blade illuminated her face. It took him a moment to adjust his mind. He looked at her from two distinct perspectives. One of being a red Walker, the other as her father. As a red Walker Kaoldan had over twenty years' experience, he was a veteran of war and battles. Part of his role as an Augur was to train the next generation; he helped Walkers mature to work their way through the colours. She had potential. There was no denying that. She moved with confidence, with purpose, with focus completely caught in the task, her foot movements sure and strong. She emanated strength, skill, confidence and eagerness.

His mind flashed back to Yasmina; a bitterness rose in his throat. He swallowed and lowered himself down to a crouch. He continued to watch, but now softening his perspective to that of a father, a warm glow started to grow from the centre of his chest, down towards his fingers around to his back.

What Kaoldan saw in front of him was no real surprise. Practising in the woods in the middle of the night had been something his wife had always done – a flash of memories which he pushed away - it appeared that the practice had been adopted by the next generation.

He watched silently, not moving for several minutes. She changed her Walker blade several times into a staff, an axe, two swords and finally the traditional Walker blade itself. She followed the movements expected of a Walker: The Crescent Moon, The Waterfall, The Rising Sun, The Sisters. They were all textbook, all crisp, clean and efficient. She stopped and slowly reduced the blade back to its base form of one foot of black metal. She ran a hand through her hair, turned as if she heard something.

Kaoldan did not say a word. She stood with her hands on her hips for several minutes, panting, then readjusted her ponytail.

He twisted his feet to get more comfortable, and a twig snapped.

He looked down sharply, then up towards Romina.

She was facing almost towards him, eyes searching, blade out and glowing green.

His cover was blown. He stepped out from behind the hulking trunk of the tree.

‘Not bad,’ he said, clearing his throat.

Romina spun facing towards him, blade raised high.

He slowly stepped towards her, raising open hands in a gesture towards her.

‘Your footwork is a little sloppy,’ he said. ‘Some of your swings are slightly wide causing you to overextend. It requires a little more precision,’ he considered for a moment. ‘But overall, not bad, not bad at all,’ he concluded, looking towards her face softened as he approached.

Her body relaxed as he did so.

He took another few steps forward into the clearing where she stood. He gestured towards the surroundings.

‘This was something that was done by somebody I very much loved,’ he said. ‘She used to love the solitude, the quiet. The ability to escape from everything, to focus and concentrate the tranquillity and the serenity always helped to put her mind in the right place.’

Romina raised a hand.

‘No,’ she said, shaking her head vigorously and staring into the distance.

‘No, I do not wish to know,’ she said. ‘I do not wish to know about that. This is not the right time. I train hard. I know what I’m doing.’ She said defiantly. ‘I do not wish to know what you think,’ she said, her face crumpled. ‘It is not the right time,’ she repeated, turning away, covered her mouth.

He took a step forwards spreading his hands.

‘I only meant to offer help,’ he blurted, embarrassed.

‘Don’t!’ she snarled. ‘Don’t think that just by turning up here after all these years that everything is alright.’ She turned towards him, glaring, her teeth bared.

‘This changes nothing. You cannot seriously expect that all is well between us?’ The corners of her mouth curled into a sneer.

She paused, bit her lip, slowly shaking her head.

‘But what should I expect? You always were arrogant. You said that you knew best, said that you knew the right way to do things, promised that everything would be alright.’ She licked her top teeth. ‘But it wasn’t then, and it isn’t now.’ She turned sharply and hurried away.

He half attempted to walk after her.

‘No,’ she shouted over her shoulder.

He took another slower half step, leaves rustling underfoot.

She stopped in her tracks, turned, looked at him and pointed.

‘Just don’t,’ she said, lowering her hand to her hips. She shook her head. ‘You were meant to be there, to protect, to protect all of us. The fact is, you didn’t then, and you can’t now. We simply don’t need you anymore.’

The words were a cold, hard slap in his face.

Her head sagged slightly before she turned and ran into the darkness, disappearing into the distance.

He stopped in his tracks, defeated. His throat felt big, solid, he couldn’t breathe, air snorted through his nose as he stretched his neck out.

He turned, shoulders heavy, and walked the way Romina had run moments before. His face illuminated in silver and shadow, making his way back to his bed. Climbing up the stairs back to his bedroom seemed twice as hard as before. His legs felt leaden, his head equally so. He closed the door with a wooden clunk, rolled into bed and softly wept.

Chapter 14 - Him

He had changed.

She decided, sitting back in her seat.

He was taller than she remembered, almost to the point of being gangly. She could not recall with any distinct clarity how tall her mother had been, and by her reckoning she was only half a head shorter than her father.

She considered things as she nibbled on a piece of cheese, observing him from the other side of the table. His forehead was furrowed, she noticed, tilting her head slightly to the left, slight wrinkles around the corner of his eyes. He laughed easily, smiled a lot, but was still a stranger to her.

Yesterday had been a strange day. She considered glancing at her father. He had returned. That she had not expected. It seemed a lifetime since she had last seen him, and he had changed a great deal in some obvious ways.

He seemed easier, if slightly stilted and unsure of himself around her. She looked at him and whenever their eyes met; he smiled politely, and quickly his eyes darted away; the behaviours of a stranger, she concluded. The behaviours of somebody she had to get to know again. Exactly how she felt about this she was unsure, but there was some semblance of excitement and curiosity about doing so.

The events of the day had taken their toll. She felt drained, tired, confused, excited, sad and wired. A tension had kept her awake. This wasn't uncommon, something she had experienced a great deal over the years. She had tossed and turned, her mind racing. She had walked, then gone back to bed, but still not been able to find sleep. She needed to get the energy out of her system; she needed to practice.

So, she had left the bedroom and headed somewhere private. And had followed the moves that she had learnt so well over these past

few years. The moves that help to clear the clutter from her mind, that allowed her to go to a place where her mind could make sense of all that had happened.

The interruption by her father had startled her.

He seemed as embarrassed as she was caught unawares. Her first feeling it been that of anger. How dare he, how dare he interrupt this, how dare he presume to think that his input was required? How dare he stop her?

But it was the mention of her mother that had torn through her mind. The floodgates opened. She hadn't really thought about her mother properly for years. Any hint that those memories were to emerge into her consciousness were quickly, ruthlessly stamped out and put back into a box in the furthest recesses of her mind.

He had blown that apart. She had been hit by a sickening wave of images, thoughts and feelings. It had almost overwhelmed her, but she had used her anger to good effect. Focusing on her anger towards him and not on the collage of her mother in her mind.

She had reacted badly. She considered afterwards, angry, confused. The mention of her mother had made her even more defiant: she had to go. She had to leave. Was he really that stupid and deluded that he could really think he could just walk back into their lives after so many years, as if nothing had happened? As if nothing had changed, as if everything was as it always had been. She reached onto the table to grab another block of cheese. She nibbled and looked at him. She felt conflicted. Pleased on the one hand to see him, on the other who was this man to appear and expect to fulfil a place in her life he had left so easily.

There was a degree of happiness, if she was being honest with herself. But there were also gaps. Where had he been? What had he been doing? Why had he done what he had done? Why had he been away so long?

A memory frayed around the edges became clearer, the greys filled with returning colours. Of that dreary, dark day when he told them sternly as a father that they were to go away and learn the

Ways of the Walker. The journey was something of a blur to two sisters holding hands, seeking comfort from each other. A whirlwind of emotion, difficulties, and thoughts on a journey that felt like it was to the very edge of the world. But when they had arrived, they had found their place.

Two young girls on an adventure together with only each other for company, ill at ease with their new surroundings. They had learnt together, had to learn through each other. They had cried together, holding each other tight late into the night, feeling their way through their loss and the gaping absence.

They had grown, studied the Ways of the Walker, just as their father had wanted, but he did not come. Time had passed slowly at first, then quickly, again he did not come. And before they knew it, years had passed and still he had not come.

She finished a piece of bread with a final gobble, rubbed the crumbs from her fingers, leaned forward and brushed the remnants of her breakfast from her top. She took a long drink of milk, spying her father over the top of the glass. He caught her eyes and immediately looked away.

He was as wary and uncertain as she. He was her father that was true and there were clearly many things they needed to rediscover about each other. There was an awkwardness - heightened with nerves - in all of them about how that should be done.

Overall, she was pleased to see him, yet it carried a bitterness with a heavy edge that unsettled her. On some level she was angry and unsure, she concluded, sitting back in the seat. And she would not let him so easily back into their lives. Respect was earned, not given she had learned, and so it would be the case here.

Zahara was less grumpy and smiled more than usual. The group seemed to have accepted them. The reassuring presence of Kubrean and Zalen had helped - familiar faces while receiving stranger ones. She swallowed deeply, milk cooling her as she reached for an apple.

She hadn't been able to sleep much last night, and today she felt weary and starving. The conversations and the activity at the

university had been a mixture of monotony and curiosity. Losing the lecturer Eumenia had caused her excitement, far more excitement than she had been willing to admit. A death so close; it teased and tantalised her.

Now they were to leave as part of the group to head back to Thura, an interesting development. She didn't know the place, and the prospect was not an unpleasant one, she decided.

All this change and Kubrean the cause of it. He looked at her across the table and a smile grew on her face. The reassurance of the old man's presence brought her certainty and security; a familiar face and a most welcome one.

She had always loved the old man dearly. He had been a source of stability. He'd been there. He hadn't abandoned them as others had - she glared at her father - then back at Kubrean, his crocodile grin spreading across his face. He had been there; he had visited often. He had consoled them; he had guided them. He had helped them; he had been the constant reassurance, the stability that they needed; always approachable, always with a smile, always willing to listen.

The fact he had been there when her father had reappeared had helped significantly. The man that had walked through her door yesterday was a stranger, a remnant of memories long past.

She had reacted to the arrival of her father more out of nervous surprise and excitement than anything else. If she was really being honest, her squeal, bounding across the room and subsequent hug had been as much of a surprise to her as it was to him. His presence in their lives that had once had the greatest of influences was now a mere echo.

However, as the day had progressed, the excitement had subsided and been replaced with a small ball of irritation which as the day had progress had grown inside her stomach to a knot of anger and frustration accompanied by a million different questions and scenarios. She had to leave her bed at that ungodly hour to work the feelings out of her system. Then he had appeared uninvited,

unexpected and unwelcome, just as he had earlier that day.

She looked at Kaoldan thoughtfully. Even though they had been apart for many years, his arrogance had lessened. He appeared to be less brash, less sure of himself. In fact, she considered he appeared to be half the man she once knew. She would have to apologise. This she knew. Not only was he her father, but he was a Red Walker. She, by comparison, was still a novice, not yet a Guardian or Green Walker. But she would make him wait, she thought - not for long - but she would definitely make him wait.

Romina glanced at Zahara across the table and smiled. Her sister appeared to have been unaffected by the events of yesterday. It had not affected her appetite as her sister reached for another honey cake. She caught her sister's eye. A smile passed between them.

They had never spent time apart, not in all the time since they had been separated from their father. They had never spent anytime separated from each other, for which Romina was always grateful. They were sisters, but they were more than that. They were best friends, fellow students, fellow Walkers. Romina decided she needed to speak to her sister at some point about everything that had happened, but first she needed to quench her thirst with some more milk; why was she so hungry?

As if sensing her thoughts, Kubrean rose from his seat.

'Please,' he said, opening his arms, spreading, gesturing towards the table. 'Have your fill. I fear this may be the last good hot meal for a while as we head out.' He half bowed to the group, sat around the table, then promptly turned and left his footsteps echoed around the room.

The squeak of Zalen's chair showed he was the next to leave.

'Well,' he announced. 'Better get those big cats sorted out for you. Any volunteers to help?' he asked, looking around the table. Kaoldan looked at his friend, then Romina and then he stood.

'I'll help,' he said.

'Me too, I suppose,' said Dalon stifling a yawn.

Kaoldan smiled meekly and nodded his head towards the rest of

the Walkers around the table. He glanced one last time at Romina, then quickly and quietly left the room.

‘And what about you two?’ asked Kryst, stretching out his arms, a slight crack accompanying the effort. ‘Lovely as this food is, I suppose there is work to do,’ he looked towards both of the girls.

‘Take this advice,’ he said, not pausing for permission. ‘Make sure you get your fill. I fear the journey back will be quick and rather uncomfortable.’ He stood working his neck from side-to-side ironing out the kinks.

He paused and bit his lip.

‘It is good to have you with us and despite how stiff your father may appear to be. He is pleased you are here, and he is pleased that you are coming back with us.’ He said glancing towards the door Kaoldan had left by.

He rested his hands on the table, leaning forward, the wood creaking under his considerable frame.

‘Whether or not he knows it, he is happy, or he will be once his brain kicks in.’ He knocked three times on the table with one hand and on his head with the other.

Romina smiled despite herself.

The big man smiled, great teeth appearing on his bearded face.

He twisted his mouth. Then he reached towards the table, grabbed a honey cake and an apple, stuffing the fruit into the pocket of his trousers.

‘Don't wait for too long,’ he said. He turned and clomped towards the door. The squeak of hinges and the clatter of metal announced its closing.

Romina settled back into her chair; wood creaked as silence settled in the room. She looked over towards her sister, who was eagerly devouring yet another honey cake.

‘So...’ she asked.

Zahara's head perked up.

‘So...’ she challenged back, a small smile appearing on her face.

‘What on earth do you make of all this?’ Romina asked.

Zahara frowned, then shrugged before returning to her cake.

Romina grimaced. 'Another time then when you're less busy,' she muttered to Zahara; the nibbling continued.

Dref appeared from out of the shadows underneath the table and she ruffled his head. She sniffed and lent back in a chair, drumming her fingers together.

Zahara sighed.

'Would you stop that?' she said wearily.

'What?' said Romina, fingers pausing their rhythm.

'That,' she waved a hand towards her sister. 'Thinking. I can hear you stewing about something from over here.'

Romina gave her a withering look.

She looked at her sister, who took another bite of the cake for herself and deposited a small amount in Dref's mouth after he raised his paw.

'At least you're making friends,' Romina muttered.

'It could be a lot worse,' said Zahara without turning, still teasing the dog. 'At least we'll get to leave this stuffy old place and see the world,' she waved a hand neglectfully towards their surroundings.

Romina grunted her approval.

'You are right, I suppose when we left Vanguard, I wondered what all this was about. As usual, Kubrean doesn't always give much away. Everything we really need is with us. So...'

'So...' said Zahara with a raised eyebrow.

'It appears we have been freed under the watchful eye of our Grey Master and a newly found father,' said Romina, cocking her head.

'Freedom? You really see it like that?'

Romina pursed her lips. She wasn't sure how she felt about it, but the word seemed right and that was good enough for her.

'Do you suppose that they would have let this happen if we were not ready?' she challenged back.

'Maybe,' said Zahara. 'Kubrean has been known to take some risks letting his heart overrule his head.'

Romina shook her head and raised a hand.

‘No,’ she scolded, a wave of sickness washing over her, ‘I don’t want to discuss that and besides this is different, he wants us here.’

‘Why?’ asked Zahara, face suddenly serious.

Romina hesitated.

It was a good point. Why were they here? They had no special skills that the group did not already possess. And if anything, the group had gone to considerable time and effort to bring them to Prava. This was before she considered the significant and very obvious rift between them and their father.

She shook her head dismissively.

‘That doesn’t really matter,’ she said, trying to sound more confident than she actually felt.

Zahara snorted. ‘You can fool the others, but you can’t fool me. It is an enormous world out there, you know, Vanguard is not the entirety of it.’

‘I know,’ replied Romina, flicking at crumbs on the table.

Zahara grinned, knowing she had made her point.

‘Whatever is out there and whatever is required of us, we will be fine. No harm will come to us.’

Zahara sighed, ‘I’m sure you are right, just don’t be so blasé about it. You’re meant to be the older, smarter sister; remember?’

‘Good job I am then,’ she said, raising an eyebrow, reaching towards Dref with some honey cake. The dog trotted over, intrigued by the offer. He jumped forwards and nipped at the hand containing the treat.

‘Owww...’ Romina shrieked, snapping her hand back as if burnt by fire.

‘Told you there was danger everywhere,’ said Zahara, struggling to keep a straight face.

Romina glared back at her sister; her pride hurt more than anything.

‘Danger everywhere,’ said Zahara, patting Dref’s back, the big dog happily chewing on his breakfast.

Considering the size of a panthera. It had always amazed Romina that despite how much they could carry - bags, endless satchels of provisions and equipment, a large leather saddle and on top of that a Walker as well - they were effectively just big cats.

Essa turned her head towards Romina, the clank of heavy packs causing her no harm. She moved her ginger and black mottled feet, scraping up sand and soil, pulling up small clouds of dust.

Romina placed the heavy canvas bag down on the floor. She approached Essa slowly and ruffled the fluffy fur around the big cat's head. Essa twisted and nuzzled her head towards the touch.

'We've come a long way,' she whispered, ruffling fur at the top of her head between the ears. The cat closed, then opened its big blue eyes. 'We have further to go. I'm not sure what we are going to find out there. Slightly scared, if I'm honest.' She flashed a smile at the cat who just coolly gazed at her.

'But I can assure you of this, we will face it together as we always have,' Essa heard and quietly closed her, purring to herself.

'So...' came a voice from behind her, jolting her back to reality.

She turned to see Zalen stood in front of her.

'Do you think you're ready for the big wide world?' he said, rocking on his heels. 'It's very different to being in Vanguard. Lots of dangerous things in the world.'

She cradled her nibbled fingers as he continued.

'A lot of good things and a lot of bad things to see,' he said, moving his head from side to side thoughtfully. 'You'll be fine,' he said reassuringly, gazing at her.

She nodded, lowering her head, slightly embarrassed.

He cleared his throat.

'How are things with him?' He gestured awkwardly, pointing his head backwards behind him towards where Kaoldan was standing talking with Kubrean. He raised his eyebrows in the most unsubtle fashions.

‘You know...’ he said, ‘Him... the stubborn one.’

A smile crept onto Romina's face. ‘Yes, yes’, I know him,’ she reassured.

Zalen grinned at his own cleverness.

‘Things are...’ she struggled for the right word.

‘Complex...’ she said, pursing her lips.

‘Complex...’ nodded Zalen.

‘It will be fine,’ she said with a shrug of her shoulders, although in her head she was not so certain of anything. ‘These things will take time. We are as much a stranger to him as he is to us, but we are in such fine company. How could anything go wrong? How could anything be other than fantastic?’ she said, clamping a hand on Zalen's shoulder, seemingly more for his reassurance than her own.

‘Right,’ the big man nodded back; his eyes filled with doubt.

His face went serious.

‘He missed you; you know,’ Zalen said, looking down, then straight back into her eyes.

‘He missed you a lot, but he also regrets it. He would never admit to doing so, being the stubborn old bugger he is. But he missed you, as we all missed...’ he nodded uncomfortably.

‘He didn't really know how to handle it. If the truth be told...’ he said, biting his lower lip. ‘I'm not really sure any of us did,’

Shut up, thought Romina, digging fingers into her palms.

Zalen continued, oblivious.

‘If I'm perfectly honest, it was so unexpected, to lose both of them so soon, so quickly. It took us all by surprise,’ he shrugged, continuing to alternate his glance between the ground and Romina.

She gritted her teeth, feeling sicker by the second.

‘We were all stunned. I guess the realities of the world in which we live came crashing down. A lot of us changed on that day. It's not like they write a book for this sort of thing,’ he joked weakly.

‘I suppose not,’ Romina looked down, relaxing her fingers, red blood engrained under her fingernails. ‘I know,’ she said coldly.

‘He did what he thought was the best thing,’ said Zalen, staring

intently at Romina, his eyes pressed her almost as if he was trying to reinforce what he was saying. 'We were all in a state of confusion,' he sighed. 'Do me a favour?'

'Name it,' she said, forcing a smile, desperately wishing to be anywhere else.

'If you do harbour any ill feelings towards him, share it out,' he said. 'He lost almost everything that day. We all lost something.' He grimaced, then turned and walked away without waiting for a response.

'He wasn't the only one,' she muttered, white hot fury sparking in her guts. She picked up the canvas bag, continuing to attach her equipment to a statuesque Essa.

Romina fumbled with buckles and belts, trying to attach the bag to her panthera. Her fingers felt slow, numb, it slipped out of her grasp and clattered to the floor.

She raised a hand to cover her mouth, tears half developed as her hands shook. She stood still, unable to turn breath ragged, heavy as she struggled to regain control. She closed her eyes and gripped her saddle tightly, fingers straining between the warmth of the saddle and the hot fur of her panthera; the leather creaking as she let out a slow, deliberate breath.

Opening her eyes again a moment later she gritted her teeth, let out a heavy breath reached down and picked up the bag. She continued to attach it to Essa, who turned, staring at it.

'It will be fine,' she whispered to Essa, patting the big cat. 'It'll be fine...'

Who exactly she was reassuring, she wasn't quite sure.

The countryside that surrounded them was vast, greenfield sprawling out in every direction, the grass a surging, swirling green ocean. Scatterings of trees, hills broke up the landscape as Romina road easily in Essa's saddle.

She felt better, or at least she thought she did.

This was progress, she thought.

This was progress in a great many ways, progress towards a new home, progress in their task and progress in her life. She turned slowly to look towards Kaoldan, Kubrean and Zahara.

She had imagined this in much of her life, wondered what it would be like to leave the sanctuary that was Vanguard. To head out into the big wide world and to be a Walker.

Zahara appeared to be taking everything in her stride, as she always did. Looking around, taking in the surroundings. She caught Romina looking at her and she smiled and winked, spreading her hands as if to say, look at all of this.

Romina smiled; her sister had brightened over the last couple of days. She wrinkled her nose; she had hated the sea journey; it seemed to take forever. The constant rocking and rolling, to-ing and fro-ing, dipping and rising waves. Just the thought of it made her stomach heave. A change of career to be a sailor or an angler was not exactly an option for either of them.

Dref padded up alongside her, trotting along quite happily. He looked up at Romina, his tongue lolling happily out of the side of his mouth. The dog had been a surprise to Romina. She had always been more of a cat person.

Essa had struggled to tolerate the dog's regular attempts to seek a pat or a stroke from Romina. The panthera had glared at the dog, letting loose a low growl whenever he approached. But when Romina was on her back, the big cat stayed silent, although Romina felt the panthera tense and the swish of her tail.

Dref saw this as a challenge and seemed incredibly at ease with her and her sister, much to the annoyance it appeared of her father. The very fact that her father had a dog had also been something of a surprise.

She caught sight of him in the shadows of the firelight in the evening, giving the dog pats and praise. The dog appeared to love it and appear to love him. It caused a slight pang of jealousy that

tweaked at her heart.

She frowned then turned her attention, rather pointlessly she had to admit, back towards glaring at her father.

A growl echoed from Dref.

Her head darted towards him.

The fur heckled up on his back like arrow heads.

She looked toward Dref's head, eyes squinting as the growl grew.

Romina stopped Essa in her tracks.

Something black, something swirling.

A dark cloud, small but growing, grass whipping in a circle beneath it.

It grew steadily outwards, fingers of electricity crackled and felt outwards as if blindly groping to establish their surroundings.

Romina looked on; a wave of coldness growing in her stomach, her jaw slackened.

There was a bright flash of light.

She blinked, eyes fluttering the stinging sensation at the back of her head slowly fizzing away.

She felt Essa tense.

The dark vortex continued to grow, as wide as a house now. The air fizzed and something dark shot out of the centre. It zigzagged drunkenly across the sky, a low hum vibrating in the air. It was a small black ball, like a miniature comet complete with streaking tail.

Dref barked loudly, the noise echoing.

Another comet emerged, and another. All fizzing and whining above their heads. She looked back towards the rest of the group who had now turned to face it, Kubrean's face grim.

Zahara moved forward.

The dark vortex moved, passing straight over Romina's head. Her neck cracked as she twisted to follow it. Three, four comets had now emerged and were circling above them erratically.

One comet buzzed passed her, causing Essa to duck.

The vortex stopped in front of Kaoldan and Kubrean.

Essa's head darted everywhere. Her back legs went slack, semi-panic spreading through the large panthera.

Another black comet approached, fizzing overhead.

There was a low deep rumble, then a chittering, clicking sound.

Silence.

Then a shiny black ball dropped through the vortex, crashing to the ground with a boom. The chittering grew, shiny plates slid, throbbed and shifted. A clawed leg jerked outwards, then another.

Essa turned, lowered herself still further, tensed, then she bolted.

Romina struggled to stay in the saddle as the large panthera hurtled forwards, wind whipping at her face.

She looked back helplessly as the black ball behind them emerged.

Essa made at great speed towards a large wooded area to the left down in the valley. Romina turned her head, hearing another shout from behind her despite the air vibrating in her ears.

Romina struggled, pulling on the reins, attempting to slow the panicked panthera.

Zahara shouted something, words lost in the wind.

Romina tried to stop the great panthera, but there was no turning her away.

There was no stopping her. Essa did not respond.

Chapter 15 - Alone

Kaoldan's body froze, mouth gaping as the two panthera carrying his daughters disappeared into the distance.

'No,' he whispered, a coldness leaking from his heart spreading throughout his body.

He stood up in his stirrups, tightening his grip on the reins of Tren, leather creaking. He could see them bounding off towards a small forest. Followed by several dark comets and Dref.

'No,' he shouted.

The creature that had landed stampeded across the ground like a large beetle, long, narrow, crooked legs scuttling across the ground. It moved itself directly in the way of Kaoldan's route after his daughters.

It chattered to itself in a series of audible clicks. It stopped, turned, faced the two Walkers directly in front of it. It swayed slightly as if limbering itself up, as tall as a house. From its back, seven black cloaked figures clambered down. Fanning out to extend the line, cutting off any access to the woods where the other two Walkers were heading.

Kaoldan stretched on to his toes but had lost sight of his two girls.

One figure moved forward, the leader Kaoldan assumed.

It stood tall, human, clad in black robes, with black leather armour attached at various points to arms, legs, knees, and elbows. Face hidden by a black hood. It moved forward slowly, confidently.

The vortex behind it shuddered, crackled and with a burst of light disappeared amidst a shower of sparks.

'Surrender,' came a muffled voice.

Kaoldan frowned.

'Surrender,' it repeated, raising its right gloved hand as if offering a great opportunity to the two men in front of it.

Kaoldan glanced at Kubrean. The old man shrugged his shoulders.

'Since when have we ever taken notice of anything,' he shouted.

A smile grew on Kaoldan's face.

This they could deal with. Warm confidence rose through his body, washing away the icy fear.

'Terribly sorry,' shouted Kaoldan at the top of his voice, 'I'm afraid we can't do that today, we are in something of a hurry.'

Then he noticed something strange.

The air around the seven dark individuals shimmered as if suddenly hot, they removed short black rods from their sides, purple light flashed. The rods grew into axes, maces and swords.

Kaoldan looked on in horror. This wasn't good.

The warm confidence in his body shrank away, like a lake gripped by the chill of winter.

He looked sideways at Kubrean.

Kubrean looked back. Raising both of his eyebrows spoke volumes.

A nervous irritation grew in Kaoldan's stomach. He clenched his teeth.

'Frak it,' he said.

He climbed down from Tren's back removed his burgundy travellers' cloak carefully placing it inside one of the side saddle pockets.

He reached for his Walkerblade, pulling it clear of the scabbard and felt the familiar, reassuring warmth of Fajin energy rising within his body; he visualised what he wanted. The black rod within his hand flashed lightning green and morphed into a double-ended glaive.

He glanced to his left. Kubrean had done exactly the same but was stood with his favourite weapons - two fierce looking maces, his face grim, business-like. The two panthera rocked backwards, low growls emitting from their throats.

Stillness.

The first to move was a short, powerful looking individual to Kaoldan's right, charging towards him with alarming speed. Kaoldan

set himself adjusting his feet. The individual approached, a roar echoing from behind the mask.

Extending their sword arm out to one side, it leapt in the air with almost superhuman strength. It would have landed straight behind Kaoldan had he not anticipated the landing.

Without taking his eyes off the other enemies he swung his Walkerblade in a huge looping arc, catching it in the centre, biting deep into its black armour with a metallic crack followed by a muffled gurgle.

Kaoldan gathered Fajin energy inside him, it felt good, gritting his teeth and without thinking swung the blade around again 180° around in a half circle elegantly lopping off the individual's head with the other blade, like the sound of a cleaver biting into a melon. A yellow image rose from the head and the body of the warrior, merging, then it rose into the sky.

To his left Tren had already followed his master's lead and charged forward, bouncing left then right. Attempting to gain the upper hand of a gangly opponent with two short swords, Tren feinted to the left then drove straight to the right, landing his paws squarely on the chest of his opponent. Knocking the shrouded figure back several feet with a yelp.

Tren pounced like a cat onto a mouse, landing on their chest. With a sickening crack the armour underneath shattered, giving way to the mighty pressure placed upon it. The figure lolled, arms flopping lifeless pink light and another spectre heading toward the Abyss.

There was a noise, echoing.

Applause.

To his surprise, Kaoldan heard applause.

Soft leathery pats.

‘Well done,’ came the voice from within the hood. ‘Well done. Not some of my better pupils,’ it inclined its head towards the headless body behind Kaoldan. ‘Definitely not one of my better students, but I had hoped that they would give a better account of themselves,’ it said with an air of resignation.

They stared at each other.

Nobody moved.

The leader took a step forward, pulling back a long thick velvety hood to reveal a dark chiselled face, with a strong jaw and short iron grey hair.

He stood tall, appearing to be limbering himself up.

Kaoldan paused.

Why had he paused?

Why had any of them paused?

The leader shook the dark cloak from his shoulders; it dropped to the floor, revealing powerful muscles and a sturdy frame.

He looked to his left and right. The four remaining warriors changed their swords for long bladed spears, and they began fanning out, separating Kaoldan from Kubrean and the pantheras.

Kaoldan tried to move, to counter it, but it was no good they shifted their positions to complete the curtain.

The leader wrinkled his nose and slowly shook his head.

‘Just me and you, I think,’ he said licking his lips, and he smiled.

They circled each other, slowly but surely, eyes fixed. Even at this distance, Kaoldan could see the green eyes of the man who was his opponent.

‘It is so rare nowadays,’ said the man.

‘So very rare,’ he said, shaking his head, almost in disbelief. ‘I never thought I would meet more of you,’ opening his right hand, ‘But the fates have decided that today is a glorious day.’ He said raising his open hand to the skies.

He sighed and shook his head.

‘You,’ he pointed towards Kaoldan. ‘You have been chosen,’ he said, ‘You, above all others,’ he nodded in agreement with a smile growing across his face. ‘You have been chosen for a great honour. It has been a very long time since I killed a red Walker,’ said the man, clearly enjoying the occasion. ‘Reds are my favourites; experienced, assured, not reckless like the younger ones,’ he gestured towards the two dead warriors.

‘Enough of this,’ said Kaoldan softly.

‘If you insist,’ offered the man with a cool smile. He pulled out a dull rod with his left hand. It flashed purple into the same weapon that Kaoldan held in his hands, a double-ended glaive.

The man looked at the weapon in his hand, hefting it as if seeing the weapon for the first time.

‘Such a treat,’ he grinned. ‘I haven’t used one of these for many, many years,’ the smile slowly dissolved as he turned and locked his stare on Kaoldan.

Kaoldan took the first steps forward, swinging his Walkerblade in a wide arc, it was met in mid-air by the blade of his opponent.

Several quick slashes by Kaoldan were countered by his opponent, who launched several offensive strikes towards Kaoldan. Kaoldan pulled the Fajin energy into his body. He felt it flow through him, warm and reassuring.

‘No, no, no...’ tutted the man. ‘That won’t do you any good at all,’ he said, shaking his head.

‘You can try it. If you’d like,’ he said, cocking his head to one side. ‘But I think you’ll find that I can do the same.’ He flew forwards a fierce expression on his face.

Kaoldan parried instinctively. If he had not pulled Fajin energy into his body, the blows that hit his weapon would have crushed him; a series of jolting, bone jarring blows. He had to take several paces back, countering strike after strike that rained down towards him. He felt the Fajin energy inside him deplete, blow after blow sapping it away.

Then the onslaught stopped.

The man in black observed Kaoldan, a look of immense pleasure upon his face.

‘As you can see,’ he nodded, turning and walking away from Kaoldan. ‘You are not the only one who can do that sort of thing.’ A smile grew on his face.

‘Disappointed, are we?’ he said mockingly. ‘Don’t be. Life is full of disappointments. Just know this, I am Ormrik of the Otan, and that

is the last time you shall ever be disappointed.'

Kaoldan's eyes darted to the right, towards the forest his daughters had disappeared into moments before. He gritted his teeth, his face contorted in concentration.

He charged forwards warmth having returned to his aching muscles, launching blow after blow after blow at the body, legs, head, aiming high, low, jarring, jolting skittering clanging.

Ormrik took several steps back, taken aback by the ferocity and the speed of Kaoldan's blows.

In the background, the beetle just stood. Like a giant black statue doing nothing, other than guarding the way to the forest and the girls.

Kaoldan glanced to his left and saw Kubrean, Tren and Max dealing with the other four Otan warriors.

This was proving to be too much hard work. The four Otan were more than holding their own. Spears were helping to keep the panthera at bay as they snarled, showing their teeth, looking for a gap to exploit.

Kubrean was fighting with an Otan, also armed with a long spear. His heavy maces banging, clanging, making slow, measured progress forward.

Kaoldan turned his attention to Ormrik, who stood in front of him, as if he had all the time in the world; a sneer plastered all over his face.

A slow panic rose within Kaoldan's stomach, cold and creeping.

Too long.

This was all taking too long.

The countryside flashed by as Romina's heart raced.

She turned left and right, desperate to see behind her. The dark comets fizzed just overhead.

She saw the flashes of green blades in the distance, bouncing and juddering as she sat helplessly on top of the panthera's back. They

entered the woods, and she lost sight of them as the branches and leaves clouded her view. She had to tried to shout, but it just came out a breathy wheeze.

She heard a yell from behind her, Zahara was not far behind.

Essa still trying her best to get as much distance between herself and the black vortex as possible.

The surroundings of the trees, the silence and her pace eased slightly. Slowly, slowly, they calmed the big cat.

Romina pulled back on the reins, as hard as she could, locking her legs. She gritted her teeth, straining every muscle in her body. She pulled and shouted until Essa slowed, coming to a halt in a small clearing of trees.

Romina turned around, looking in every direction for any sign of danger, her breath ragged.

Nothing.

Romina relaxed in her saddle. Her heart was pounding, her body flowed with adrenaline. She heard shouting echoing through the trees.

Zahara.

'I'm over here,' she shouted, standing in the saddle and waving.

Zahara appeared from behind a cluster of trees, half caught in the shadow of the foliage.

'What's got into you?' she screamed. 'We've got to go back and help.'

'Don't blame me,' yelled Romina. 'Blame this on my big scared cat.' She gestured to Essa, turning the panthera towards her sister. Essa was regaining her senses, body relaxing; she turned and looked at her rider, half embarrassed, half relieved.

'We've got to get back, we've got to help okay,' Zahara shouted back at her.

Romina raised her hand. 'A moment,' she yelled back.

She paused, calming herself back down. She slowly dismounted from the panthera, legs slightly wobbly, walked around to face the front of the cat.

‘What got into you?’ she questioned, ruffling behind Essa’s ears. Essa just looked back at her, blue eyes wide.

She pursed her lips.

Essa had never done this before. She had always been reliable, brave, never a panthera to suffer anxiety or in this case blind panic. It was not uncommon for pantheras to react like this. They were living, breathing animals after all, and anything that threatens that was bound to cause such a reaction of some kind. And yet she found this reaction worrying. Romina lightly held each side of the big cat’s head, carefully cradling it.

‘We have to go back,’ she said, calmly and yet in a tone that left no room for negotiation as she moved over towards her sister.

Essa tried to turn her head away. Romina ruffled behind each ear while struggling to hold the head. The tickling slowly did the trick. Essa’s eyes flickered back up to meet Romina’s, and the wriggling stopped.

‘That’s better,’ she smiled. ‘But we still have to go back. We have to help. People are in danger.’ Besides us, thought Romina.

Essa’s response was a sheepish lowering of the eyes.

‘We can do this. I take care of you; you take care of me. Remember?’

Essa’s head rose, alert. She looked behind Romina over her shoulder, eyes narrowing. A low growl rose in her throat.

She heard the fizzing first, soft then louder, vibrating outwards like a fly trapped in her ear.

Romina turned to see a handful of dark comets zigzagging downwards through the branches into the clearing. They hit the ground with a crackle and a loud pop, bursting like bubbles to release dark grey mist. A group of them burst near each other, creating a vast haze.

Dark shapes emerged as the mist cleared. Crouched down, they slowly stood up, stretching as they did so. One by one they emerged from the mist, robes billowing outwards.

Romina’s head darted towards her sister on the other side of the

clearing. Their eyes met, and a coldness rose within her stomach.

They drifted deliberately around the edge of the clearing. Sidestepping, moving diagonally, spreading on into a long thin line.

Another three emerged to the left, as Zahara yelled something.

Romina didn't catch what she said, the words muffled as her head pounded, but the rising panic in her voice was clear. Zahara dismounted from Shara, clutching her Walkerblade whilst moving closer to her sister. The blade flashed green and morphed into a large longsword. She set herself grasping the handle with both hands, flexing her fingers, legs shoulder width apart, settling into the ground. She looked at her sister.

Romina reached for her Walkerblade. It flashed green, morphing into a long double-ended glaive. She crept carefully to the side of her sister, turning they were now back to back, as they faced the now nine individuals that had almost surrounded them.

Essa looked left and right, as did Shara. The big cats standing at the side of their Walker masters. A low growl emerged from both.

The figures stopped moving. They had now completely encircled the sisters.

Romina swallowed, her throat and mouth dry. The figures that surrounded them waited, then in perfect unison each reached inside their robes, producing a dull short rod of metal. There was a flash and purple weapons appeared in their hands, swords, axes and long curved blades.

Time seemed to stand still.

Romina's heart hammered within her chest. She looked left and right, attempted to lick her lips with her dry tongue; then the calm was shattered.

Half the figures charged forwards, cloaks billowing, their faces hidden. Shara and Essa roared and bounded forward, leaping straight into the dark figures that screamed in muffled terror as the pantheras crashed down on top of them.

Romina looked towards three individuals who were walking towards her now. One sprang forwards. She instinctively jabbed the

glaive forwards the longsword of her opponent parried it away.

She took a step sideways and moved forward again all the time, gathering Fajin energy inside her body. She felt it, a tingle moving up through her feet, through her torso into her arms, gradually reaching her head. She swung the glaive in wide arcs; once, twice, three times towards the lead opponent, who parried each effort with increasing desperation. She took a sideways step and sprang forward, extending her thrust this time, her opponent unable to completely parried the blow. It caught them deep and high in the chest with a sickening crack and squelch; the opponent screamed and folded around the point as it entered the body.

She twisted the blade, jerking it backwards as the body crumpled into a heap on the floor. Slowly, a green image of the crumpled heap emerged from the body. Ghostlike shimmering slowly, rising towards the branches through the trees and the upper canopy towards the sky.

Romina looked open-mouthed in amazement, then shook her head back into the reality of the situation. She looked left and right at the cloaked figures who were advancing towards her.

‘Not bad,’ nodded Ormrik, pursing his lips, ‘Not bad at all.’

Kaoldan snorted, struggling to catch his breath.

‘You have seen some action, my friend. That much is clear to me. You are unpredictable, you have almost caught me a few times. Almost,’ he wagged his finger as if telling off a disobedient dog. ‘But not quite.’

‘Do you always talk so much?’ asked Kaoldan through clenched teeth.

‘Sometimes,’ he nodded in reply. ‘It is one of my shortcomings. Occasions like this are so few and far between, I try to make the most of them. Making them last as long as I can.’ He raised his hand, grasping his fingers together into a fist. ‘I like to enjoy my work. It is

a matter of etiquette, you understand.'

Kaoldan said nothing, his eyes fixed on Ormrik.

Ormrik sniffed and stretched out his neck. 'Seems my words are wasted on you,' his eyes narrowed. 'So, I shall try to make your suffering short.' He spun around and leapt forward, blade raised high above his head.

She heard the clang of metal and steel behind her, mixed with the grunts of effort from Zahara. She considered turning to help, but then thought better of it. Her sister had always been a good fighter. She was about to strike at the figure on her left when Essa appeared out of nowhere, snarling, landing with a crunch on top of a screaming victim. A small wave of relief swept over her, good to see her panthera had found the fight inside of her. How she had done it, she did not know, if Essa felt half as scared as Romina did at that moment.

She turned to her right, readjusting her feet, rustling in the grass as she did so. She moved forward jabbing, constantly jabbing the figure in front of her, falling back, parrying blows.

Taking a much larger step forwards she thrust her glaive forwards. It missed the stomach of her opponent by inches.

She twisted the blade upwards with a flick of her wrist. The tip of the blade caught the edge of the hood of her opponent. There was a ripping sound and a burst of bright red blood upwards like a blossoming flower and a sharp scream; it revealed the face of a young woman.

She paused, looking at the identity of the person revealed in front of her. Eyes flickered around catching minor details, blue eyes, dimples, crooked teeth. The woman was young, almost as young as Romina.

The top of her head was cut, blood slowly leaking out over her forehead like a spider's web. Face contorted, she roared at Romina

charging forwards.

Romina stepped backwards, uncertain of herself. She hesitated and jabbed forward on instinct. Whether the strike was pure luck or utter skill, she would never know - but it hit where it needed and caught the young woman in the stomach. Romina gathered the Fajin energy inside her, twisted the blade sharply, but nothing happened other than a sickening squelch.

The woman snarled, eyes wide, spraying spittle from her mouth. She attempted to swing her sword towards Romina. It missed, but only just, causing Romina to take half a step backwards. She shoved the blade, pushing the glaive forwards again.

This time she gritted her teeth as she did so, and there was a sickening crack, then a whizz followed by a dull thud.

An arrow appeared straight through the side of the young woman's head. The woman's body flopped as Romina jerked the glaive loose. The dead body collapsed on the floor and a small purple imprint of her body rose. The orb glimmered and sparkled as it rose towards the heavens.

Another dull thud, an arrow protruding from the chest of the other warrior who flopped to the floor. Yellow light shimmered and rose from the corpse.

A shout to her left, cause Romina to look. There stood her father and Kubrean, bows and arrows in hand. He shouted something unintelligible towards her. She couldn't make out the words clearly, so he shouted again.

'Are you okay?' he shouted as he ran towards her, arrow notched to his bow as he surveyed the surroundings.

'Yes, yes,' she spluttered, raising a hand.

'You sure?' Kaoldan asked, concern etched all over his face.

'I am fine,' she said with a weak smile.

In truth, she felt anything but.

Chapter 16 – Lucky Man

Kaoldan gnawed at his fingernail. He winced, then saw there was no nail left to nibble at. He snorted, the only gnawing now would be in his guts; he rolled his shoulders, trying to shake the feeling away.

The attack had come swift and merciless.

The four of them had been lucky to survive such overwhelming odds.

Sixteen enemies.

Sixteen.

The number stuck in his head like a bad thought.

Romina's panthera had bolted, why he was not sure, but she had bolted all the same and Zahara had followed. Both disappeared from his view, disappeared from his sight, disappeared from his protection.

He bit his lip. His guts felt like water.

They had been very lucky.

Or more accurately, he had been lucky.

He had fought Ormrik with everything he had, every trick he knew, and had still been lucky to escape with his life.

It was like the old bastard knew what Kaoldan was about to do before he did it. A telepathic ability to deflect, evade and dodge every attack he made.

Kaoldan had felt the energy draining from his muscles, limbs heavy. Ice cold doubt had entered his head, regretful thoughts. Despair picked at his concentration.

Was this it?

Was this all he would be?

Was this all he had done?

What would happen to his daughters?

Was this his gift to them?

His legacy - raising a family, losing a family, and hiding away like some sort of coward.

He felt his eyes twitch, flicker as a lump grew in his throat. He swallowed it down, shakily pushing his tongue into the corners of his mouth.

A low growl and a roar to his side had jolted him back into reality. Tren crept forwards eyes fixed on Ormrik. Kaoldan felt a wave of relief wash over him. Dark thoughts swept away.

The tide had turned only once Kubrean and Max had finished dealing with the other members of the Otan.

Ormrik backed away, cold eyes fixed on Kaoldan, his mouth twisting, slowly nodding his head.

Tren and Max growled and crept forward. Kubrean hefting his maces, rustling his way through the grass to Kaoldan's side.

Ormrik paused and shook his head, a grin growing on his face. 'You. Are a lucky man,' he said matter-of-factly.

He flicked his wrist and the purple double ended glaive disappeared a short rod of dark iron in its place. He pursed his lips, sniffed, and placed the rod back inside his belt.

'Again,' he said. 'I'll be seeing you again,' he pointed towards Kaoldan. 'You should improve your technique. I won't be so generous next time,' his grin turned into a stiff smile.

Without removing his eyes from Kaoldan, he stretched out an arm and snapped his fingers. The sound cracked across the land like a whip.

A screech echoed around them.

Kubrean's head darted to the noise behind them. It was like a storm had landed right on top of them. Wind swirled and whipped. Kaoldan had to shield his eyes from soil and grass that exploded everywhere, as a dark shaped floated effortlessly over their heads. The shape landed with a monstrous boom, followed by another metallic screech.

Kaoldan's eyelids fluttered. He wiped his face, grit scratching the edge of his eye.

The beetle stood proud and still by Ormrik's side, black wings billowing out in the wind, quite the magnificent sight.

Ormrik waved his hand down - eyes still fixed on Kaoldan - and the creature lowered its head. The Otan warrior grunted and heaved himself up on to its neck. The creature raised itself up and called out; the pantheras growled, but no-one moved.

Then very deliberately Ormrik turned in his seat and looked to Kaoldan's side and politely nodded.

Kaoldan glanced to see Kubrean stood maces at the ready, fingers white and flexing, jaw set hard.

The creature lowered itself, then sprang up into the air, its wings unfurled, and it thrust downwards. Debris blew wildly around Kaoldan. It let out a screech as it rose into the sky, a dark shape shrinking into the distance, blue and white mingling together until it was gone.

Kaoldan shuddered out a long wheezing breath and closed his eyes tight. He set his jaw and took several deep breaths, in through his nose and out through his mouth, steadying himself, heart slowing, warmth returning.

Opening his eyes it stung, bright light piercing, he winced letting the colours return and blobs sharpen into recognisable shapes.

Kaoldan turned to Kubrean, and the old man blew out a breath. He shrugged his shoulders, trying his best to appear nonchalant and headed over toward Max. Kaoldan frowned and was about to speak, words on the tip of his tongue.

The girls.

His mind shot back to the girls.

Kubrean had the same thought at that moment. They climbed onto the pantheras and charged toward the forest and followed in the general direction of the girls.

It felt like an eternity before they'd found them. Tension increasing with each moment in Kaoldan's body.

Light broke through the branches, Kaoldan craned his neck, flickers of light; green and purple.

He hissed, Kubrean's head jerked, his ears sharp.

Kaoldan urged Tren forwards. The big cat quivered as he moved.

They brushed through low-hanging branches laden with thick leaves; he caught fractures of images, noise, effort, metal clanged.

He brushed a last branch away, a clearing spread out before him. His mind a maelstrom of fear. The fear of what might be, the fear of what could be, a vast suffocating fear that weighed down on his chest.

There were bodies scattered on the ground, Kaoldan's eyes flickered over each of them fearing the worst.

He realised he was holding his breath.

All dark heaps, no grey. But no sign of them either.

A scream echoed out, and he looked up.

Several figures in the shadows of the canopy emerged, green and purple blades flickering, swirling.

A green orb rose from a collapsing figure.

He saw two figure slide into the light.

The taller of the two clad in grey, blonde hair whipping around its head. The figure jabbed forwards with a long green blade once then twice the second time she extended her thrust; it pierced the midriff of her opponent. But this did not stop them. They wriggled forward. Another dark shape moved forward behind it.

Kaoldan instantly reached to his right. Pulling a bow from its sling, he fumbled for an arrow. It was the only option.

He stretched his neck, let out a low deep breath and closed his eyes. Warmth began penetrating his body, through his arms, chest and legs. Familiar, comforting, Fajin energy. He opened his eyes, pulling the bow close to his chin, feathers of the arrow tickling his nose.

Everything throbbed and glowed. The clearing stood out in staggering detail, the pattern of bark on trees, the sway of grass, yellow flowers bobbing in the breeze, stitching on the side of the Otan warrior's robes.

Time slowed.

A bird's flapping wings ground to a halt.

He held his breath and flicked his fingers; the string caught, and

the arrowed hummed. It sailed into the distance, quivering as it flew.

His arrow struck true, taking her opponent in the side of the head, just as Romina had hesitated.

He pulled another arrow, let it fly. It hit the second figure in the chest; it fell.

He dismounted from Tren - jogging over to Romina - looking around carefully, surveying the horizon. Another arrow notched, ready. He shouted something at her, but she did not respond.

‘Are you sure you are okay?’ he asked again, staring at her.

She appeared pale but unharmed.

He repeated the question. Her head snapped up.

‘Yes. I am okay,’ she replied, although her smile was unconvincing.

Kaoldan frowned, he had seen that look before.

Rustling and Zahara emerged from the shadows, blade in hand,

‘You ok?’ he asked, an urgency within his voice.

She nodded; face smeared with blood.

His relief was short-lived. His training kicked in. There may be others.

‘We need to scout the area,’ he said. ‘We need to be certain that there are no more of them.’

Daughters stood both as if in a trance.

‘I need you to focus,’ he said a little more loudly than he had intended, but his nerves were frayed, and he said it again, gazing at each of them.

They snapped back into reality and caught his eye, nodding their heads as if just waking from a dream.

The girls or the women, which he now reflected that they were, appeared otherwise unshaken. But Kaoldan knew better the wide-eyed expression on Romina's face. It was a look he had seen many times before on novice Walkers.

Meaning they had crossed a threshold.

The threshold of taking a life.

It is one thing practising and training to take life.

It is quite another to do so.

Strangely, he realised he felt a little proud, but it was a feeling that caused him slight embarrassment. Did he really want daughters able to take life so quickly? On balance, he realised he did.

‘I want you to go as a pair, stay in sight and take the pantheras and Dref with you,’ he insisted to Zahara. The greater the number, the lesser the threat, he reasoned.

Zahara turned to acknowledge his instruction and slowly walked towards him, surveying the environment as she headed his way. She appeared much less shaken by the experience than her older sister, slipping backwards, step-by-step surveying the environment for any further threats, green sword in hand, Dref at her side.

Kaoldan swallowed hard and narrowed his eyes. Something niggled at the back of his mind; a knot of concern, something unfamiliar. He pushed it from his mind as a crumpled heap caught his attention. He slowly approached one of the bodies in the clearing whilst still surveying the forest.

Curious, he knelt at the side of the corpse. The woman was lightly armed and did not carry any of the usual equipment used by the Krund.

These were a different kind of enemy. An enemy that he and Kubrean had never faced before. He pursed his lips and took a breath surveying the horizons his daughters were still in sight combing the trees, weapons at the ready. He looked up as Kubrean approached.

‘Who are they?’ he asked.

‘Damned if I know,’ replied Kubrean, poking at her dead body with his foot.

That look again.

It flickered across Kubrean’s face, almost imperceptible, but Kaoldan saw it and for the second time that day he said nothing.

Kaoldan noticed little things, slight stiffness, not avoiding eye contact but not seeking it either.

Something was not right. Kubrean was tense, even though the fighting had ended.

‘They are certainly not the Krund,’ said Kaoldan, pressing the point as Kubrean looked into the distance avoiding his querying stare. ‘They are better trained, better armed, better equipped. So, we perhaps have a more significant problem?’

Kubrean nodded.

A glint of dull metal caught his eye.

Kaoldan reached forward, grasping the rod partially hidden by the grass. It felt cold to the touch, as if sensing it was being held by a stranger. Kaoldan hefted it in his hand. It was light with almost no weight and was therefore no ordinary metal. It had a texture to it, a grip of some sort. He narrowed his eyes, focusing in. No. It was engraved with small intricate writing, in a language he did not understand. He twisted it between his fingers, eyes searching the lettering covered every part of the shaft, and each end there was a symbol, jagged and twisted.

He flicked it with his wrist, nothing.

Then on instinct he gathered Fajin into his body, then flicked his wrist again. There was a flash of light. He winced, his hand suddenly grew heavy. Opening one eye then the other a long dark sword lay in his hand rippling, flexing as if a rainbow were trapped inside struggling to escape. Blue, yellows, orange, green, white swirled within the dark boundaries of the sword.

Kaoldan pulled a face. ‘Impressive,’ he breathed standing eying the blade from point to hilt. He set his feet to take a practice swing. It was light, moved well, just like a Walkerblade but different somehow. He gathered his will again, Fajin rose within his chest and the blade flashed white. Morphing into a double ended glaive. He stood opened mouthed, swishing the blade in practice strokes.

Kubrean watched silently, his eyes not leaving the blade. ‘Impressive,’ he murmured.

Kaoldan hummed a response, continuing to move the blade in circles. Then he sniffed and blew out a long breath.

‘I think,’ said Kaoldan, ‘that we have a *very* serious problem,’ he looked at Kubrean.

Kubrean frowned.

‘Fajin,’ said Kaoldan, offering the blade to Kubrean ‘they knew Fajin. How can this be?’

Kubrean took the blade inspecting it and pulled a face.

‘I thought we were the only users of Fajin?’ said Kaoldan, looking at his friend.

Kubrean twisted the blade in his hand. It flashed white and returned to a rod of iron. He flipped it in his hand and offered the end to Kaoldan.

‘Seems we are not,’ he said, raising his eyebrows.

Kaoldan inspected the rod.

‘There were rumours,’ Kubrean said, his face creased with concern, ‘About others like us. Others who can use Fajin, others that do not see the world in the way we do. We really need to talk about this with Nova and members of the Grey Council. Another thing to discuss in depth when we get back to Thura after we have spoken to Duke Lomman. But this is a most worrying development.’

‘I'd better check on the women,’ said Kaoldan, nodding to his right.

‘Women now is it?’ said Kubrean with a grin.

Kaoldan chewed his lip whilst tucking the rod into his belt.

‘Yes, women it is,’ he said with a frown rising to make his way towards his daughters.

‘Are you sure you're okay?’ he said to Zahara.

‘As well as can be expected,’ she answered with a light smile.

‘We need to get out of here,’ said Kaoldan. ‘It's not safe. They know we are here; they may come again.’ Images of Ormrik's cold smile flashed through his mind.

Zahara nodded solemnly. She raised her hand to her mouth and whistled loudly, twice.

Rustling and the sound of snapping branches. Shara emerged

through the foliage, thrashing in protest, with a snort looking left and right as she approached Zahara, who mounted her panthera.

Kaoldan turned his attention to Romina, brushing leaves out of her way, rubbing her chest with a pained expression on her face.

‘Are you sure you’re okay?’ he double checked.

‘Yes, of course,’ she smiled, avoiding his eyes. ‘Nice to put theory into practice.’

Kaoldan didn’t believe her for a moment.

She looked at him half smiled, sucked her teeth then climbed on the back of Essa; the ginger panthera continued to look left and right, surveying the environment, looking for potential new threats.

It seemed to Kaoldan that her panthera had actually dealt with the situation better than her master, despite a poor start.

His mind raced.

Who were the Otan?

Why had they attacked the group?

What objective had they had?

What reason for trying to kill four Walkers in the middle of nowhere? He sighed. These were thoughts for another time, so with effort he pushed them to the back of his mind. Another time.

A flood of immediate concern then swamped Kaoldan's head, worry for his daughters, pride about the outcome of the encounter, fear of Ormrik. Picking his way through the clearing he realised that the two Walkers needed reassurance, but were also his daughters. His pace faltered slightly. Not young girls needing their father, women needing their father, an altogether different prospect. He licked his lips and felt his guts turn over.

He too needed reassurance.

And if the look on Romina’s face after the fight was anything to go by, he was going to need to do so carefully. Not just master to student - that he could do - but father to daughter, and it was not a skill he was certain he possessed.

He swallowed hard.

New territory, he thought, unfamiliar territory.

Chapter 17 - Distance

The rest of the journey felt like a dream to Romina. Even though they had covered hundreds of miles, she had barely said a word since the encounter.

Every time they'd stopped and each evening, she had made her excuses and gone to sleep early and arisen before anybody else. Every time her father had tried to speak to her, she'd found some way of escaping; some reason, some excuse not to talk. The need to collect vegetables or go hunting for food. Any chore she could use as a reason not to speak to him, she had taken.

She felt bad about it. She desperately wanted to speak to somebody. Zahara appeared unaffected by the whole encounter as usual taking everything in her confident stride.

The best she had managed had been very one-sided conversations with Dref. The big schnauzer had followed her everywhere, no matter the time of day and despite her best efforts to find some solitude. Perhaps the dog was magical, as Zalen had suggested.

She grumbled to herself as she made her way back through the trees, darkness seeping into the forest.

'Okay,' she said, waving her hands in finality.

'Enough of this,' she almost stamped her foot in frustration.

No answer, but a cocked head. One ear flopped over his head.

'Let's just get it out there,' she said a little louder than she intended.

Eyebrows knitted together, and he sneezed.

'How can I speak to him?'

A low yowl.

'How can I speak to him about this?' she said with a shrug.

He blinked twice.

'He is a stranger,' she said weakly.

A wrinkle of his nose.

‘He’s meant to be my father, but he has never,’ and she wagged her finger, ‘acted like one. Never.’

She blinked, eyes fluttering, and a pressure arose from her chest. ‘Never...’ she murmured, brow furrowed.

‘You sure about that?’ came a voice out of the shadows.

She spun around, automatically reached for her blade.

A powerful hand gripped at her arm, the blade flashed green as it was slapped from her hand and skittered to the floor.

‘No need for that,’ said a friendly smile in the darkness.

She shut her eyes tightly, collapsing into his embrace. Pushing the pressure and the prickling behind her eyes away.

‘Good reflexes though,’ said the voice deep and reassuring.

She bit her lip then stood, strength returning to her body.

Kubrean released her from his grip.

‘Thanks for the warning,’ she said to Dref.

The dog smiled back, sarcasm washing over him.

‘Shall we...’ offered Kubrean with an inclination of his head.

She nodded with a sniff, taking a step forward to retrieve her blade from the floor.

The fire crackled as she stared deep into the flames, poking absentmindedly with a stick.

‘Cold night,’ said Kubrean, settling himself down on a log beside her with a groan.

‘The others?’ she enquired.

‘Both sound asleep.’

She smiled briefly, pleasantly continuing to poke the fire.

‘My knees feel the cold even more these days,’ said the old man, rubbing his legs with his hands. ‘I’m not the man I used to be,’ a small sad smile appeared on his face.

‘I doubt any of us are the same person we used to be,’ said Romina, not taking her eyes off the fire.

‘It is one of life's inevitabilities,’ mused Kubrean. ‘That we should change in ways we may not always know. We may not want to, but we do always change. Just one of the many things I have learnt in my life,’ he half laughed, placing a hand on Romina's shoulder. ‘You still have much to learn.’

Her face creased, looked at him mockingly.

‘I know plenty,’ she said defensively.

‘Really? Do you really? Then why since the encounter have you barely said more than a dozen words to anyone besides him.’ He nodded towards Dref, sat comfortably on the floor, but eyes awake.

She gently brushed his hand from her shoulder.

‘I have nothing to say,’ she said grumpily getting up, sand, gravel scraping beneath her feet. ‘And I have many things to do,’ she said, waving a hand. ‘Many chores, we have to look after our masters,’ she said with a cheeky smile.

‘Perhaps’ he said, gazing at her, ‘But do not believe for one moment I do not know what is going on here. I've seen this many times before, your father has also seen it.’

She snorted.

‘It is easy to learn of life. It is easy to appreciate life. It is also,’ he said, pondering. ‘very easy to take life. It is one of the hardest things in the world to learn to live with it.’

She turned to leave.

‘Stay,’ he said firmly.

She froze.

‘Sit,’ he patted at a space beside him on the log. ‘Keep an old man company,’ his smile attempting to disarm her.

She pushed her tongue into her cheek, sucked at her teeth and sat.

‘Knowledge is a good thing, in almost all cases. However, the knowledge that you have ended the life of a person is not. Somebody of flesh and bone with a heart, muscles, with a history of family, friends, lovers, and perhaps children too. Everybody has somebody. And it is all ended like that,’ he snapped his fingers.

She winced.

'Don't...' she said irritably. 'Don't analyse me. I knew this was part of the job when I undertook my training. I knew that the day would come when I would have to take a life and I'm prepared for that,' she said, chin rising but with uncertainty in her eyes.

'Maybe...'

She nodded. 'Definitely...'

'Maybe, you were prepared in theory, but not in reality.'

A snort of derision

Kubrean picked up the stick with his left hand and began poking the fire.

'He was about 25,' said Kubrean, mouth twisted in concentration, patches of light and shadow on his face. 'He came at me from nowhere. He looked at me with such hatred. The rush of an angry man, the rush of a man blindly looking to strike at something, as if to make his world, and the entire world along with it better. He seemed to take forever, his face contorted, charging towards me with a bloody enormous axe high above his head. Strangely, in that time, I noticed everything.'

He looked towards Romina, eyes searching for something. 'Everything about him, brown leather boots splattered with mud, his dark grey trousers and light creamy shirt tied at the waist with a black belt and a stupidly large buckle,'

His face softened.

'I don't know why he chose me, nearest person to him I suppose. It was the strangest thing,' said Kubrean, shaking his head, a smile growing on his face.

'What was?'

'He looked like a pirate...' he snorted, suppressing a laugh. 'A pirate, you know, from story books and one of those shows you see in big cities; all fluffy puffy shirt. The only thing he was missing was a patch over his eye. But it was that great big belt buckle I remember more than anything.' He said glancing at Romina, who looked straight back at him.

‘The stupid size of that belt buckle, it seemed to be the size of a melon,’ chuckled Kubrean. ‘I struck him down with a simple blow; ran him straight through his chest without even realising I had done so. Time seemed to stand still. The whole thing passed in slow motion. Seconds felt like hours, I knew he was dead before he hit the floor,’ said Kubrean, smile fading.

‘I never even knew his name. The darndest thing...’ he said, shaking his head. ‘I think I was about your age, when it happened - even though it was a lifetime ago I still remember it like it was yesterday.’

‘It still haunts me,’ said Kubrean. The fire crackled as he poked it. ‘If that’s any consolation,’ he opened his hands wide and friendly. ‘I think I was sick seven times a day for at least the next week. None of my Masters knew, of course, but nothing stayed down. I had hoped to bury him. A somewhat stupid thing to think given the circumstances, but I felt obliged to do something. Something to make it right. Something to lessen the guilt. Something to make me feel better, to remove this hollow feeling inside me,’ he thumped at his chest with a closed fist, eyes not moving from the fire.

‘In the end, I guess it was me or him. He came out of nowhere; what I did was on instinct, but that didn’t make it any better. I was still responsible. I held the blade and ran him through. His orb was the most beautiful purple, like a wine, velvety,’ he pinched at the air with his fingers.

‘They teach you everything you need to know about the world,’ Kubrean said, pointing to the skies. ‘The power and the wonder, the magic of Fajin, how to protect yourself, how to protect others and how to take a life. One thing they never teach you is how to live with taking that life.’

Romina stood in silence, observing the old man solemnly without a flicker of emotion.

‘I can deal with it,’ she said again, sounding slightly more uncertain of herself than she did before. ‘It’s just part of the job,’ she sniffed.

Kubrean shook his head.

‘No,’ he whispered. ‘It is not part of the job.’

She continued, ignoring his words.

‘It is just something that I’m expected to do and as you say,’ she said, moving forwards and waving her hands loosely in the air before placing both of them on her hips again. ‘It was her or me, life or death. What else could I be expected to do?’

‘Learn from it,’ he said, leaning forwards. ‘Understand that taking life is not part of the job, that protecting life, protecting everything IS the job. Bloodshed and orbs are a last option, when nothing else can work. Taking a life should be a last resort.’

‘Really...’ she sneered.

‘Yes,’ he said with infuriating calm.

‘So, I was just to ward them off with flowers and kind words, was I?’

‘That is not my point.’

‘They would have stopped, would they?’ her voice raising an octave.

‘No, they probably wouldn’t have. But don’t now automatically assume that bloodshed is the answer.’

‘But it was...’ she said with a snarl.

‘Here, yes. But not always.’

‘I took a life,’ she said. ‘In fact, I took several lives,’ her eyebrows raised. ‘That girl,’ her voice trailed off; hand raised to cover her mouth; a breath quivered out.

‘Your first, and unfortunately not your last,’ said Kubrean. ‘I had the same conversation with your father many years ago. He understood it was one lesson he learned quickly.’

Romina snorted. ‘He learns nothing quickly.’

‘He is not perfect, but people are not meant to be perfect.’

She looked at the old man through narrow eyes.

‘Speak to him.’

Silence.

‘He is your father.’

She shook her head.

‘Like it or not. He is here and from now on part of your life.’

‘He never has been before.’

Kubrean’s face softened. ‘That is unfair, and you know it.’

She snorted.

‘This is as hard for you as it is for him.’

‘Really...?’

‘Yes. Fortunately for you, being a daughter is far easier than being a father.’

She laughed. ‘He has never acted like a father before, why would he start now?’

‘He is not starting, because he has never stopped, because you don’t know everything. Good intentions are all a matter of perspective,’ said Kubrean, not mirroring the anger she felt.

‘He is trying to be a father now, if you’d just let him in.’

Her jaw tightened.

Kubrean nodded his head slowly. ‘You are just like him. Stubbornness seems to run throughout your family.’

‘Or it did...’ she said, eyes fierce and searching.

Kubrean looked at her sadly. ‘That,’ he said, raising his eyebrows. ‘Is a conversation for another day.’ He struggled to his feet with a grunt. ‘As you are so keen to look for a fight, you can take the first watch.’

She said nothing, breathing sharply through her nose.

What was she doing? Her confidence dropped and her face softened.

Something brushed at her side. Her head jerked down, numb with anger.

The familiar black furry shape of Dref appeared by her hand, his eyes searching. ‘I have a watch companion,’ she said, trying to regain control of her emotions, kneeling down beside him, ruffling his fur.

Kubrean looked at her for a little longer than she was comfortable with.

‘And a conversational companion at that,’ he said, turning slowly

but not removing his eyes from hers until the very last second. Moving toward a space in front of a tree with a blanket that would be his bed for the night.

Despite her best efforts, Romina was sick twice in the following hours. She did it discreetly away from the camp at the base of trees hiding the evidence by dragging soil with her boots. Dref looked on in puzzled amusement.

‘Don't tell anyone,’ she whispered.

The dog looked back, seeming to agree.

The one thing that stuck in her head, more than anything else, was the age of the young woman that she killed. She remembered her face more than anything else. It appeared to be made of porcelain. She was blonde-haired and blue-eyed, but she had been determined to take Romina's life. What else could she do, she reasoned in her head? It was her or me.

She had acted on instinct. She had acted on a deep-seated desire to stay alive more than anything else. The rush of adrenaline had been welcome, but had unsettled her. The Fajin magic she had tried to use, only partially successfully, had further added to the dreamlike memories, now lingering as the face of the woman appeared in her head again. She knelt down the other side of the tree, taking in the dark grey landscape that spread out before her like a table.

She could see for miles. It was a clear night, moons high in the sky, and very little cloud, meaning she could see almost everything around her - a sea of silver grass shimmered and waved in the wind. Occasional tufts and clumps of small forests scattered here and there, breaking up the landscape: but still the image of the woman's face drawn back in anger filled her mind.

She absently stroked the dog who sat obediently by her side, a silent companion as tears slowly rolled down her face.

The next morning, she awoke, having slept very little combined with the hard ground, cold weariness, and dreamless sleep, adding to her disorientation. She stretched and went to check on Essa and the rest of the group. She noticed Kaoldan watching her intently from the corner of her eye.

‘We should make Thura today if the weather holds,’ said Kaoldan, nodding towards the sky conversationally.

‘I hope so,’ she replied, smiling weakly. ‘This journey really seems to take forever.’

He smiled back at her. ‘Something we can both agree on, I know exactly what you mean. It has been quite a few weeks.’

‘You could say that,’ she replied, half smiling, uncertain how to respond.

‘We have much to discuss,’ he pressed moving forward, staring at her, although she saw uncertainty in his eyes.

She nodded. ‘All in good time,’ she smiled weakly before focusing her attention on an apparently troublesome saddlebag at Essa’s side.

She heard him let out a slow controlled breath, noticed him waiting, ignoring the hint for what felt like the longest time, then he turned and moved away.

Kaoldan’s prediction about the weather turned out to be true, and it held for the rest of the day. They made excellent progress through rolling countryside with more hills, trees and grass. What finally emerged in front of Romina late that afternoon was something that she had never seen before.

True, she had seen towns and villages. What she had never seen was a city like Thura. She paused with Essa as they stopped at the top of the hill that rolled down into the valley like a huge velvet carpet leading towards the golden city below.

How could a place be so big, she thought to herself? How many people could this place possibly hold. She looked left and right. The walls of the city seem to continue on forever.

Its central structures were not of the impressiveness of the towering university which had taken her breath away when she first arrived, but then everything she saw before her was entirely human built making the spectacle even more impressive.

‘It is quite a sight,’ smiled Kubrean as he trotted up beside her.

‘That is an understatement,’ she said, shaking her head in amazement.

‘Wait till you get down there,’ said Kubrean, smiling like a crocodile. ‘That really will blow your mind,’ he said with a wink before continuing off ahead of her downhill towards the city.

She felt a sickening fear developing inside of her, deep within her stomach as it slowly rose and consume the whole of her body. It was a most unexpected sensation. In the last few weeks, she had seen more of the world than she had ever seen before. Stopped in unknown places, met dozens of people, and seen amazing new things. But the prospect of entering a city of this size and scale presented her with a challenge that she had never faced before. And it was a challenge that she appeared to fear.

‘Can you believe the size of this place?’ she said to her sister as she pulled up alongside her.

Zahara turned and shrugged. ‘Just a bigger version of a village to me.’

‘But so many people...’ emphasised Romina, gesturing towards the city in front of them before looking back at her sister.

‘Just more people...’ shrugged Zahara again. ‘No big deal. Not scared are you big sister?’ she teased.

‘Of course not...’ deflected Romina sitting up straight in her saddle. ‘Like you say, just more people,’ she said, looking somewhat reluctantly towards the city walls as they grew larger and taller.

‘I am looking forward to the prospect of a bath and a good comfy bed,’ she said.

'I agree with you there,' nodded Zahara. 'There are some things a woman should not go without. Speaking of which, you have been very quiet and somewhat conspicuous by your absence...' said Zahara, leaning towards her sister, staring at her, face a picture of concern. 'Are you okay?' she pressed.

Romina wrinkled her nose. 'Just a lot to take in,' she said dismissively. 'Lots to take in and not much time to do it in. A learning curve,' she said brightly.

'A steep one, apparently,' said Zahara, nodding in agreement.

A looming shadow fell across them.

'And more learning to do here, no doubt,' she said, looking towards the slowly opening city gates.

Romina's head pulsed as she looked up and found it harder to swallow.

Doors squealed in protest as they approached, a wave of sound and smells hit Romina square in the face. She blinked rapidly, her grip on Essa's reins tightened. The first thing she noticed was the sound.

The incessant chattering of background noise buzzed and hummed around her ears like an irritating fly. She readjusted herself in her saddle as they progressed through the entrance. She felt a great weight beginning to envelop her, surrounding her.

So many people. Brightly coloured, busy about their business, buildings looming, streets and alleyways heading off in a head spinning a number of different directions. To say that it was a lot to take in was an understatement.

The rest of the group appeared relaxed and happy in their new surroundings. Romina was anything but.

The bustle, the noise, the smell of so many people - both washed and apparently mostly unwashed - and the constant movement. Her attention was caught by one sight, then quickly moved to another. So much to look at, to listen to, and smell; her brain felt numb, battered into submission by this assault on her senses.

She felt edgy, her feet and her fingers prickled with anticipation

and fear.

She did not like this place.

Through the hustle and bustle of the crowd, they moved. Hundreds of people moving fluidly and freely around them like a river around stones.

The experiences and sounds pulsed through her; her eyes, ears and nose to the top and front of her head.

She closed her eyes for a moment, unable to take the barrage any longer. This only made things worse. It amplified the sound.

The cries of street sellers.

The clatter of horses.

The movement of carts.

The stampede of hundreds of feet.

She hummed a song, a tune that she remembered from her childhood. She concentrated on it. The notes, the beat, the melody, swam around her head, clearing away the buzzing. Distraction from her surroundings, she focused on it, tapping out the rhythm with her fingers. The jolt of the contact and the feel of the warm leather comforting.

Paying no attention and no heed to the direction that she was heading. Trusting Essa to follow the rest of the group.

She slowly, but surely, lowered her pulse rate, calmed herself down. The tingling in her fingers, slowly, slowly subsided and was replaced with a slight nervousness, a raw energy.

An energy that she was uncomfortable with but felt that she could control.

Movement stopped.

She slowly squinted and opened one eye; images blurred.

She opened it a little more.

Her surroundings were now slightly less chaotic. Buildings were spaced further back, there were trees, much fewer people, some sign of nature in this horrendous place. A dusty pathway continued off in front of them offering views of a park, grass, flowers, bushes in the distance. She turned around to look behind her. The throng they had

just gone through disappearing into the distance, and with it the noise, the hustle and bustle and the barrage of smells.

‘Don’t look so miserable, dearie,’ came a screech from further down the road.

Romina frowned, head searching to find the origin of the voice.

‘I can help make you happier...’ followed by a cackle.

‘What are they talking about?’ Romina muttered.

‘Probably best not to ask,’ said a voice beside her; Kaoldan.

She frowned again.

‘My, my, you are a pretty one,’ the owner of the voice becoming clearer through the glare of the sun. It belonged to a stringy, blonde-haired woman, dressed in just her underwear.

Romina jolted. ‘Shouldn’t she be wearing some clothes?’ she said before her head had realised whom she was talking to.

Kaoldan pursed his lips, suppressing a smile. ‘Maybe not given her line of work.’

Romina’s face went slack. ‘Her line of work?’

Kaoldan stiffened.

Romina looked up at the woman on the balcony, cackling noisily to some unseen person within the building. A mass of trussed up curls and far more makeup than was ever reasonable, thought Romina.

She looked back towards Kaoldan, shrugging her shoulders and shaking her head.

‘Never mind...’ he said, face reddening.

‘Be seeing you soon,’ the woman pointed at Romina with a heavily jewelled hand, rings clinking.

Romina felt a shudder work down her body. Something about the look from that woman made her nervous and rather hot, but she wasn’t quite sure why. A slow wave of realisation washed over her.

Kaoldan suppressed a smile.

‘And YOU even sooner,’ she said to Kaoldan, biting the air with a snap.

Kaoldan bristled, uncertain where to look.

‘You know her?’ asked Romina, face innocent.

‘He certainly does... don’t you, my dear,’ winked the woman badly, raising a wine glass.

Kaoldan turned even redder. He made a sort of gravelly honking noise, like a goose being strangled. Stretched out his neck, coughed, took a considered breath out and looked at the floor.

‘What? Kubrean?’ he pointed towards the old warrior at the front of the group, opening his palm. ‘He wants me for something,’ he shrugged rather limply, smiling apologetically and before waiting for an answer rode off.

A small grin appeared on Romina’s face as she looked up at the woman on the balcony who pointed at a rapidly disappearing Kaoldan, shrugged and mouthed ‘Who’s he?’ Then she paused, and a smile grew on her face, eyes not moving from Romina; like a cat considering its lunch.

That warm, nervous feeling returned, and Romina frowned as small ripples of electricity tickled at her chest.

The noise from the balcony faded. Here in their new surroundings she felt relaxed, happier, less as though the world was not trying to suffocate her. She looked up, skies were blue and white, clouds drifting slowly past; she breathed in deeply and exhaled slowly.

‘An assault upon your senses,’ said Kubrean sat waiting patiently for her, an eyebrow raised.

‘Something like that,’ she replied.

‘I remember the first time I came to such a vast city,’ he said, ‘Scared the hell out of me. So much life. So much happening. It felt like I was drowning in a sea of people.’ He frowned. ‘You will grow used to it. The noise, the throng of activity,’ he waved his hand, ‘soon disappears.’

‘I don’t think I’ll ever get used to that noise,’ she said, looking around.

‘You’ll see,’ said Kubrean mysteriously.

‘It is so very good to be home,’ boomed Kubrean as they entered the compound of the Walkers chapterhouse.

The surroundings that greeted Romina were very much to her liking - gravel paths, squares and rectangles of vegetables and crops being grown, surrounded by a handful of people carefully tending the plants. Gravel crunched as they approached the front entrance of a large rectangular building at the centre, which Kubrean and Kaoldan both seemed immensely pleased to see. Even Dref was pleased, charging between the gardeners, seeking attention from anyone willing to provide it, and there were plenty willing.

It was late in the afternoon, and Romina was suddenly hit by a tremendous wave of weariness. The events of recent weeks had built up, taking more out of her than she had realised.

‘Well, well, well...’ echoed a voice.

Romina turned to her left, surprised, half reaching for her Walkerblade. She stopped, stretching her fingers casually, trying to make it appear as though that was exactly what she had intended to do. What was she doing?

‘Nice of you to come and visit,’ said a tall, dark-haired young man tartly, his hands on his hips.

‘I require less of your sarcasm and more of your help,’ said Kubrean to the young man. ‘Fetch some of your brothers and sisters to give us a hand,’ he said.

‘As you wish,’ said the young man, bowing before turning on his heels and jogging towards the house to get help.

The old man slowly, with a low groan, climbed down off Max's back.

‘Thank you, my friend,’ he said to the big cat ruffling his ears. ‘Thank you for taking care of us and for returning me safely back.’

The big cat looked at his Master in acknowledgement, apparently nonplussed by the praise.

Kubrean turned and removed some larger bags from the front of the big cat.

Max turned and leaned in, purring softly, slowly laying his not inconsiderable head on Kubrean shoulders. The big man wrapped his left arm around the neck of panthera and they embraced roughly.

Romina felt a small twinge of jealousy.

‘That’s better,’ Kubrean said with a smile.

The tramp of many feet announced six young men and women all similarly dressed in grey and black moving towards the group.

‘Thank you, brothers and sisters,’ said Kaoldan at Romina’s side as the other Walkers bowed and helped remove bags and saddlebags.

Romina took a sharp breath in and lowered herself from Essa’s back, the saddle creaking as she did so. Her legs felt weak and tingly; she stamped the floor, trying to get the blood flowing.

‘Leave that,’ said Kubrean, raising his hand. ‘Zahara and Romina, you are to go straight into that house.’ He pointed towards the front door. ‘Get something to eat and then bed to rest.’

‘No. I’d rather help,’ she said, determined to do her bit.

‘I don’t think he was asking,’ said Kaoldan quietly. ‘Best do as he says and take some time to get that journey out of your system.’

‘But we just sat and rode for a few weeks,’ she shrugged.

‘I think we did a bit more than that, don’t you?’ said Kaoldan calmly.

She was about to protest.

He raised his hand slightly.

‘A lot has happened, just put it like that,’ he said.

She looked at him uncertainly.

‘I’m just trying to help here,’ he shrugged. ‘And besides, I’m not the one telling you to do it, he is,’

She paused.

‘Go on, make an old man happy,’ he said, creasing his eyes.

‘Him or you?’ she goaded.

He smiled at that.

‘You,’ Kubrean’s voice boomed. ‘You will do as you are told,’ Kubrean leaned, looking around Kaoldan bag in hand. ‘Each word, I

am the Grey and you will do as I say. Go eat, rest, and ignore my bad poetry.'

Kaoldan winced.

Romina looked briefly towards her father, who nodded in agreement.

'It would be wise,' said Kaoldan. 'We, old people, have done this before. This is still something new for you, no matter how much you may think you are okay. Trust me. You're going to sleep like the dead tonight.' He turned his attention back to the bags on the side of Essa, the conversation clearly over.

Honey cakes, apples and milk were provided by the kitchen and the two women sat lazily in a large wood panelled room, a small fire licking and crackling in the background.

'So what do you think of this place?' asked Romina to her sister, sucking the honey from her fingers.

Zahara stretched back in her seat.

'Not really sure if I'm honest,' she said, looking around the surroundings. 'Not as grand as Vanguard, but certainly homely,' she said. 'I think I could grow to like this place,' considering each word.

'I suppose this is our new home now,' she said, wriggling her toes towards the fire.

That was a thought, in all the rush, all the journeys, all the activity of recent weeks. Romina hadn't really considered. This was her new home, unless Kubrean had somewhere else for them to go. This was it.

Looking around; it could have been far worse.

She only considered herself to have had two proper homes. This would be her third. Her first home and the home of a family; the memories were washed away, dreamlike. The second home had been the one she loved the most. It had been safe, but made of hard, brutal, granite stones. Dull, bleak weather. The rain constant, but it

had felt like hers. Hers and Zahara's.

Now this. She scrunched her mouth up, taking in the surroundings. Something entirely softer, somewhat alien to her. But that being said, the prospect of a comfy bed, plentiful food and a fire was appealing. And she had her sister by her side. She looked at her younger sibling ravenously demolishing yet another apple. This place could be something.

She tapped at the side of her cup with her finger; it seemed comfortable, familiar somehow. She considered it, then with a small nod to herself that was it. This would be a home, a good home. The fleeting appearance of her father added in a note of caution at the back of her mind. Although the surroundings may be comfortable and familiar. The occupants within it were almost certainly not.

Chapter 18 – Good Authority

‘Zuivosal!? Zuivosal...’ exclaimed Kaoldan.

‘Why on earth do we have to go there?’ he said irritably.

‘Because,’ said Nova, rubbing the temples on the side of his head for the fiftieth time that morning. ‘We believe it may have the answers to many of our questions.’ He placed his elbows on the table and pressed his fingers together, ‘Despite our best efforts, we still don’t really know what is going on.’

‘Tell me about it,’ murmured Kaoldan under his breath.

‘Zuivosal is to be blunt,’ he emphasised to Nova, ‘the arse end of nowhere. It is a derelict place and from the best of my memory has been uninhabited for centuries. There is nothing,’ he shook his head with finality. ‘Nothing there.’ His head was throbbing. The meeting this morning had been long, heated and most of all unproductive.

‘I have it on good authority. That that is the place we need to go,’ said Nova, spreading his hands, smiling politely.

‘And what exactly is this authority?’ asked Kaoldan, leaning on the table. His eyes narrowed, questioning his friend.

‘The authority is unimportant,’ said Tokel, dismissing him with a wave of her hand.

Kaoldan clenched his teeth. He rose from his chair and walked over to the side of the room. Snatching a glass from the side table, he poured himself some water.

‘The authority says,’ continued Nova, ‘that Zuivosal contains information that we don’t have. There is most definitely something happening and to be honest, we know very little about it. The death of this lecturer and your encounter with the Otan are probably the most obvious examples of whatever it is.’ He said waving his hands. ‘But Zuivosal is our next destination,’ he said, locking eyes with Kaoldan.

‘I need some air,’ said Kaoldan, loudly placing the glass back on the sideboard. He strode across the room and the door banged

closed behind him. He walked for a few minutes, mind rushing in no coherent order until he found the entrance to the wooded area of the Palace. He walked through purposefully, taking in several deep breaths, letting them out of his body slowly.

Everything had made him angry today.

The meeting.

The lack of progress.

The questions

Nova.

Tokel.

And himself.

Normally they and Kaoldan found it easy to work together, it was well established and unchallenging, however today had irritated him immensely. He continued to walk deeper into the wood.

He flexed his fingers and shook his hands out. This helped, but his mind still raced. To his surprise, recent events had taken on an increasingly emotional toll on him. He found himself drained, hollow and isolated. Promising snippets of discussions as they had returned to the chapter house had proved to be a false dawn. The women had been allocated duties away from him in recent weeks. Their paths crossed, but always over a meal, or in a large group. And whenever he tried to start a conversation or to gather the courage to suggest a proper talk, he found the words had not come.

Strange how he had fought monsters and enemies that most people would run a mile away from, but he could not say simple words to two women.

He wrinkled his nose; the sun catching his eyes through the branches.

In particular, he had found the affectionate reunion of Nova, Tokel, and his daughters had sparked a deep jealousy within him. He had watched from the sidelines; an observer to hugs, smiles, kindness, and unabashed joy.

Kaoldan felt a pang deep inside his chest. He was not normally the jealous sort, but something about the openness and how the

reunion had taken place, deeply, deeply angered him.

In fact, in recent weeks he had found himself becoming angrier and angrier. Further out of his comfort zone, more things to contend with, more issues that needed his attention, and in many ways issues he felt ill-equipped to deal with.

The attack by the mysterious Otan had unsettled him the most. The feeling of utter helplessness as he saw his two girls riding into the distance away from him with danger following close behind.

They had gone into that forest as girls and emerged from it as women.

As Walkers.

On many levels he was pleased. Delighted that they had managed so well without him, but the result had also hurt him. He had long suspected that they did not need him as much, and this horrible cold reality had been confirmed on that day.

This feeling of helplessness had manifested itself in anger.

Romina had taken any and every opportunity to avoid him. And during any conversation between them, she had been as responsive as a rock. Blank faced, nodding when needed, she had done everything he had asked. As good as any good young Walker should be, but none of the things he really wanted to speak about had been discussed.

She wasn't receptive and Zahara was no different, slightly more polite but no more willing to listen to what Kaoldan had to say. No more willing to show an interest of any sort. This too made him feel more isolated and redundant, and in turn angrier.

He had come to the awful, inevitable and not entirely surprising conclusion that their relationship was broken. And the worst thing was, he had no idea how to fix it. His fathering skills seem to have abandoned him.

He always used to know what to do, what to say, how to react and make the best of a bad situation. He had been given the respect he had expected of being a father, but that seemed like a very selfish view, he now reflected. Respect was earned, not given, and he had

very much overused it. But times had changed, and it was partly his fault, he had to admit. He had hardly slept in recent weeks. The combination of a rough journey and difficult unresolved issues, all of which were giving him rather a terrible headache. Lowering himself to the ground under a large oak tree, settling down on the floor, he sat cross legged. Taking in the surrounding view. Trees. Nothing but trees and truth be told, he was glad that this was the case.

Movement out of the left corner of his eye caught his attention.

He looked, squinting into the distance through the foliage. There was undoubtedly a black figure, hooded, moving quietly, but carefully through the woods.

Kaoldan twisted and rose to a kneel. He studied the figure from a distance. There was something about it, something familiar, then realisation hit him. The assassin they had encountered at Prava.

The similarities were undeniable.

He crouched, not moving, not wishing to be seen. He moved slowly towards the figure carefully hiding behind trees, watching where he walked so as not to make a noise. A danger, a fear rose within him from his feet through his legs through to his chest, a coldness.

Why was it here? What possible purpose could it have?

One thing was for certain, as Kaoldan set his jaw, this time it would not escape. Kaoldan focused, reached and pulled the Walkerblade from his side. He paused behind a tree, glancing around the edge of the trunk.

The figure had stopped behind a small bunch of trees on the edge of the forest, backing towards the entrance to the main palace.

Multiple options rushed through Kaoldan's head. There was no way that he could reach the front door before the figure, no way that he could call for help; he was alone in the wooded area. He had to do something; irritation gnawed at him. He bit his lip, glanced again at the figure. It had stopped, so there was only one choice.

He crept from behind the tree and ran as quietly as he could directly towards the figure, some thirty strides in front of him.

Gathering Fajin energy within his body, it flooded and tickled through every muscle; the Walkerblade flashed green in his right hand, morphing into a broadsword.

A grin grew on his face.

Then, to his horror, without even turning, it simply raised its right hand and clenched. Kaoldan jolted and stopped dead in his tracks. Still some ten strides from his intended target, Kaoldan couldn't move.

He tensed, tried to twist and turn; his muscles ached. It felt as though he was clamped in iron. He looked towards the figure which had turned to look at him.

It was tall, slender and hooded.

Forcing Fajin energy up through his body, his stomach and chest burning he nodded towards his opponent. A translucent orb popped out of his head flying like an arrow towards its target, but the figure simply waved it away deflected it towards the palace. An explosion of masonry and stones, a cloud of dust enveloped the figure.

Kaoldan tried again. Warm, Fajin energy rose through him. He nodded the swell of the energy, making his head feel like it was about to explode.

The orb missed the figure; it jerked away to the side, hardly believing his poor aim. But the bolt was not meant to hit the figure.

It cracked into a large branch above his opponent. Splinters burst outwards. There was a creak, a sharp snap, and the branch crashed to the floor, causing the figure to dive out of the way. A spray of branches and twigs; leaves rained down momentarily distracting his opponent.

The vice-like grip around his body instantly gone.

Then Kaoldan was upon him. His opponent pulled a black rod from his side, it flashed pink into a long-curved sword.

Their blades clashed, the noise echoing around the forest. Kaoldan pushed forward, unleashing a series of quick slashes; high, low, left, then right. His opponent parried them, telegraphed each move, parrying each.

Kaoldan frowned, chest heaving.

'I can bring the entire city guard out here with one shout,' he yelled, 'You have nowhere to go. Surrender.'

The opponent paused, cocked its head to one side.

Kaoldan clenched his teeth, charging forward again, unleashing a series of savage cuts, which his opponent blocked and parried away. It stood its ground, refusing to give way.

It sprang forward, blade singing through the air as Kaoldan parried blows to his left and right. Quicker, more ferocious, more intense; he was forced to take several steps back. As they exchanged blows, metal clashing together, they half circled each other.

Each attempted attacks of their own, but each equal in their defence.

'Let's get a better look at you,' snarled Kaoldan through clenched teeth. 'Who are you? What do you want?' he demanded.

To his surprise, the figure responded.

'As you wish,' it said, pulling back a bunched up black hood to reveal long untangled, but well-kept white hair. It shook its head, removing strands of hair from its face.

Or his face in this case.

He looked coolly at Kaoldan. Pale skin, blue eyes.

'Does this make things better?' he enquired, 'Knowing who you are fighting?'

Kaoldan, slightly at a loss for words, did not respond.

He tensed then sprang forward once again, unleashing a series of cuts and slashes with his sword. The man parried with equal skill. Kaoldan tried one last flourish then back away, arms aching, legs on fire.

The man took a deliberate step away. There was negligible difference between them in terms of size, strength and skill.

'Neat trick back there,' said the white-haired man with a small nod, 'Just gave you the slightest gap you needed to break my spell.'

'Half a second is all I need,' said Kaoldan under his breath, anger rising within him. He charged forward one more time. The man

turned to his left. Leading Kaoldan through towards a tree.

Partly through blinding fury, partly in frustration. He didn't notice a tree root until it was too late. His left foot caught underneath it and he tumbled over, bones jolted, head spinning, world turned upside down. His Walkerblade skittering from his hand, clanging across the ground, and in that split second, he knew he was finished.

Before he had a chance to move, the pink blade of his opponent was on him pressed into his neck.

The metal cold. Terribly cold.

He let out a shuddering breath and paused - his mind blank - before slowly closing his eyes.

Two screams brought him back to his senses. Eyes now wide, he saw Zahara and Romina burst through the vegetation, Walkerblades in hand. They attacked the white-haired stranger, forcing him back.

He parried left and right, for half a second Kaoldan had to admire the co-ordination and the combined effort of their attack. They gave him no ground and no time to think. All he could do was react in every direction to a series of blows. Kaoldan then felt something he had not for a long time, pride.

It swelled within his stomach and rose to his heart. Pride that his two young women were defending their father, then concern returned to his mind.

He scrambled with his hands. Fingers scratching desperately to loosen the roots ensnaring his left foot. He raised his right hand, flickered his fingers, and his Walkerblade whistled through the air and smacked into his hand.

He chopped through the thickest of the roots, brown and caked in mud. Hack. Hack. Hack. Cream coloured insides appeared. He wriggled his foot free. Then sprang to his feet and charged in the direction of the melee.

'Enough!' thundered a voice through the forest, 'Enough of this!'

Kaoldan turned to his left, still running. To his surprise Nova was

determinedly making his way into the woods, staff thumping slowly on the ground in irritation.

‘He is with me...’ he barked. ‘Clear enough?’

Finally, the two women hesitated, glancing at Kaoldan, who shrugged and looked at Nova.

Nova nodded. ‘He is with me,’ he said, emphasising each word. ‘Is that so difficult to understand, apparently so,’ he said sourly, baring his teeth. ‘Heavens above,’ he muttered partly to himself, partly to the trees and the sky above him.

Raising his hands as if introducing a theatre act and proudly so judging by the growing smile on his face.

‘Kaoldan, Zahara and Romina let me introduce you to Aralorne Beldarne Mortane. My good authority,’ he emphasised.

The white-haired warrior with a flurry, flashed his pink sword into a black rod stood stiffly and bowed to each of the three Walkers, who stood aghast.

Kaoldan sat fixed, mind blank, arms folded, staring directly at the man across the table from him. The man in question looked about him, pleased to have made such new colleagues so quickly. His white hair was shoulder length. He had a pale complexion, easy smile, and dark blue eyes.

Kaoldan took an immediate dislike to this man, he wasn't sure why; he wasn't sure how he had come to this conclusion, but what he knew was that he didn't trust this person one bit.

‘As I was saying,’ said Nova, crossing the room, cane tapping on the floor. ‘I have it on good authority,’ he nodded towards Aralorne, who beamed. ‘That the place we need to go to is Zuivosal.’

‘And how do you know that this is the place we have to go?’ spat Kaoldan, his eyes locked on Aralorne.

The white-haired man looked Kaoldan full in the face.

‘I know many things you don't, many things you need not know,’

he said. Voice clear, bright and confident.

Kaoldan's jaw tensed even more.

'The information that you received from Prava was correct,' he nodded. 'Reng lived an unnaturally long life - 300 or so years. If I'm correct and I know I am,' he said.

'How he could do this is not something that is widely known. Fortunately for you, I have studied Reng virtually all my life. I am probably the foremost authority on him in the world,' he said, lightly, inspecting his nails. 'Like it or not,' he glanced at Kaoldan, 'You need information, accurate information, and rather quickly I'm led to believe,' he looked towards Nova, who nodded.

'And amazingly you turn up, appearing here just at the right time,' said Kaoldan, looking at the faces around the table. 'Rather convenient, wouldn't you say?'

The doubtful expression on Kubrean's face showed he was thinking the same thing.

Nova stepped forward, taking a seat at the table next to his wife Tokel. He took a long drink of water before carefully, deliberately placing the drink down on the table with a dull clonk.

Tokel gripped his hand affectionately, a smile growing on her face. She looked at him. His eyes fell upon her and he nodded.

She cleared her throat.

'If you'll forgive me this next part,' she looked towards Aralorne, who raised a hand in acknowledgement, apparently nonplussed.

She turned to face Kaoldan and Kubrean.

'I had certain,' Tokel fished for the right word, 'suspicions, some time ago,' she said with a pained expression on her face. 'So, I took certain steps to investigate them. These investigations led me to Aralorne. And everything he has said on this matter, so far, has been true and has proven to be so frequently by several sources,' she added.

'So, in answer to your question, Kaoldan, I understand your suspicion. But yes, he is here by invitation at our request and he has information that can help us. We need help to make more progress

with our own investigations,' she shrugged her shoulders. 'You will just have to trust that this is correct.'

Kubrean cleared his throat. 'So, what precisely makes you the leading authority on this man Reng?' he said, holding the gaze of Aralorne.

Aralorne settled back in his seat, wood creaking.

'If I may?' he gestured towards Tokel, who nodded.

The etiquette of the situation caused Kaoldan to scrunch his mouth up tighter. Anger at politeness? That was a first. He closed his eyes, took a breath, flexed his fingers out and rolled his neck, joints cracking, and focused his eyes on Aralorne.

'You ready?' the white-haired man asked of Kaoldan, eyebrows raised.

Anger flashed over him again, but he pushed it down, forced a smile and nodded.

'I grew up in the town of Treg; a rather backwards and inward facing place,' he said reluctantly. 'Long winters and brief summers, there wasn't really much to do there. Apart from reading, and it is incredible what you can discover if you're willing to read long and deep,' he said.

'Once I was old enough, I left the town and travelled. I've been to many weird and wonderful places that you really wouldn't believe. But that is another story,' he said coolly. 'During this time of collecting and gathering knowledge I discovered I had rather a skill for it, and a mind big enough to piece things together that others could not. I am certain when I say I am rather more intelligent than you all,' he said with a small flickering smile. He looked at Kaoldan. 'If you'll forgive my bluntness.'

Kaoldan frowned and began nibbling at his fingernails.

Kubrean interrupted. 'No offence is taken,' he said, raising his hand.

Aralorne smiled. 'Excellent and how very gracious of you,' he said with a small nod. 'People can be terribly sensitive and rather protective when intelligence is raised. Facts are facts,' he said. 'Given

the acceptance in the room, I would go as far as to say I am far more intelligent than the vast majority of people in the world.'

'How gracious of you,' muttered Kaoldan.

Kubrean shot him a look.

Kaoldan continued nibbling at his thumbnail.

'I have a particular talent,' he continued, ignoring Kaoldan's increasing frown. 'Facts and figures, dates, I enjoy a good story, particularly a good mystery. The tale of Reng is one that I came across in my youth. And it has become something of a...' he selected the right word. 'Something of an obsession. Reng was, and is, to all intents and purposes, one of the greatest people to have ever lived in the world. If you're willing to forgive his rather direct approach to justice and maintaining his authority over people.'

'Mass murder and genocide has its downsides,' said Kaoldan, an edge to his voice.

'Yes, I suppose it does. It all depends how you see these things, I suppose. I try to maintain a neutrality. Judging the evidence on the facts, not the moral or ethical side of things,' said Aralorne, considering the point.

Kubrean looked at Kaoldan and slightly shook his head. Kaoldan knew the look well. It was one that he had grown increasingly familiar with over the years. A look that said shut up. To tread lightly, to play nice, to allow the intelligent bastard to continue to tell a story.

Kaoldan nodded slightly and settle back into his seat.

'What was I saying?' said Aralorne, lacing his fingers together and resting his arms on the sides of his chair.

'Reng,' said Tokel.

'Reng, of course. He ruled for just over 300 years. How was he able to do this, I hear you ask?' He said, looking inquiringly around the table.

Silence.

'The answer is very simple,' he said, finger touching his chin. 'He cheated death.'

A rustle of nervous movement spread around the room.

‘Yes, quite my reaction at the time. His soul was never consumed by the Abyss. He could prevent his soul from leaving his body with one simple trick. The Dark Crown.’

Despite himself, Kaoldan leaned forward in his seat.

‘Oh, it is nothing to be ashamed of,’ waved away Aralorne. ‘Only a handful of people in the world are even aware of the existence of the Dark Crown.’

Kaoldan nodded but maintained his silence.

‘The Dark Crown allows anyone who wears it to cheat death,’ said Aralorne. ‘Put simply, your soul never leaves your body. Never. And if the soul cannot leave the body, you are in effect...’

‘Immortal...’ murmured Kubrean.

‘Quite so,’ nodded Aralorne, pleased with himself. ‘Rather a neat trick, I am sure you would agree.’

Questions began forming in Kaoldan’s head.

‘So, what is the Dark Crown? Where did it come from? What eventually caused him to die?’ said Tokel, leaning forward, captured by the tales told by the white-haired man.

Aralorne sniffed. ‘We aren’t really one hundred percent certain,’ a crease growing across his face. ‘There are conflicting stories, but most agree that there was an element of treachery, an element of double cross. Three hundred years is a long time for anybody to reign. Particularly, if you were as unpopular as Reng was reported to be. Conspiracies against you are bound to happen, eventually. It is one question I would very much like to find an answer to myself,’ he said, looking at his fingers stretching out on the table, before looking at everybody. ‘I don’t know everything,’ he shrugged.

‘So why the visit to Zuivosal?’ asked Kaoldan, who felt annoyed with himself for sitting forward, enraptured by the story.

‘Because I believe it would provide the answers to the questions that we both seek,’ said Aralorne. ‘It is an ancient place, as you rightly pointed out. But it is my belief that there are relics, articles, books, scriptures of varying sorts that should provide answers,’ he leaned forward.

‘It has very much been a wish of mine to go to Zuivosal in my life,’ said Aralorne. ‘Now,’ he said with satisfaction. ‘I have the perfect opportunity to both complete my studies and potentially to save the world as well,’ he said. ‘If you’re into that sort of thing,’ he added, brushing a speck of dust from his black top.

Kaoldan eyed him suspiciously, as did Kubrean.

Nova noticed the stare and interrupted.

‘As you both know, Zuivosal was abandoned centuries ago. There were certain arrangements,’ he winced at the word. ‘Put into place to make sure that Zuivosal could never be accessed by those who may wish to do harm. That is where the partnership of the Walkers and my good authority must work together to gain access to Zuivosal and its secrets. It is a proposal I have already spoken to Duke Lomman about, and he is in full agreement. The partnership will take place,’ he said. ‘It has a good chance of success, if handled in the right way, and it is my intention to make sure that that happens. So I will accompany you on this journey.’

Kaoldan and Kubrean glanced at each other, then at Nova with the same look of concern.

Nova noticed that look too. He dismissed them with a wave of his hand.

‘I’m not that old,’ he snapped. ‘There is still life in this old body yet,’ he said, patting his knees. ‘And I wish to see the ruins of Zuivosal. So it is settled.’

Kaoldan glanced at Tokel, her face impassive, but he knew better. She was worried and not as entirely onboard as Nova made out.

‘We leave in the next day or so, and that is final’, he said, stood with a screech of his chair; nodded, harrumph, then turned and quickly departed the room. Tokel unusually sat very still.

Aralorne acted on the cue, he stood, ‘You must excuse me,’ he said. ‘I have preparations to make,’ without waiting for any acknowledgement, he twisted and followed Nova out of the same door. The door banged closed behind them.

Kaoldan sniffed and looked at Kubrean.

The old man's eyes said everything.

'As a member of the Grey Council, why was I not told?' he asked Tokel, who bristled a sharp intake of breath.

'Because you were not, and either was I,' she snapped. 'Do you honestly think I am any happier about this?'

Kubrean shrugged.

'Well, I am not. Just for the record,' she snorted heavily through her nose.

'Stupid old fool. Racing off to the end of the world. Men!' she shook her head.

Kubrean and Kaoldan both looked away.

'He's obsessed,' she shrugged her shoulders to nobody in particular. 'Like a teenager, with stupid ideas of travelling the world. Like he can at his age,' she folded her arms.

Silence.

'I don't trust him,' said Kaoldan, trying to change the subject.

'Don't...' said Tokel irritably, squishing her mouth from side to side.

'I've had that conversation with him already. Stubborn old fool won't listen. It is too convenient. And yet...' she sniffed, 'He is an excellent judge of character.'

A good point.

She sighed. 'Stubborn old sod.'

Silence.

'Men!' she snapped.

Kaoldan found an interesting button on his top he had never noticed before. He fingered it with his thumb.

A very interesting button.

He looked up cautiously, eyes wary.

'You're not the only one,' said Kubrean reassuringly. 'It fits just a little too well for my liking. I've never been one to believe in coincidence and I doubt I will start now,' he said, 'But Nova has the authority to make this decision and particularly if he's been able to get Duke Lomman onside,' he shrugged his shoulders. 'I don't really

see how we can stop this from happening.’

Tokel snorted.

‘So be it,’ said Kaoldan, ‘If this is going to happen. I fully intend to make sure we go there with enough of a show of force to convince this good authority that both we mean business and we can take care of anything that may come our way.’

He noticed a slight curling on the edges of Tokel’s mouth.

‘Agreed,’ said Kubrean. ‘I will make suitable arrangements, don’t worry, I’ve no intention of allowing this Aralorne to get everything he wants. Not too easily anyway.’ He glanced towards Tokel nervously.

‘And strangely, having Nova come with us is a good thing.’

Tokel turned towards him, jaw clenched, a stern look on her face.

‘If you’ll hear me out,’ he raised his hands defensively. ‘He knows this man. He appears to trust this man. We must offer the courtesy to him that Nova expects. He is the most senior of us on the Grey Council, and Duke Lomman is no fool either.’

Tokel paused.

‘We will be there to make sure that this Aralorne does everything that he is meant to and nothing he is not. It is safer this way, much as I dislike it. Ultimately, we have no choice.’

Her face fell, eyes taking in the floor. She was as resigned to it as Kaoldan.

‘Don’t worry,’ said Kaoldan. ‘I will keep a close eye on him.’

‘We all will...’ said Kubrean, extending a hand to the old woman. She looked up, sniffed, and wiped her eye.

‘Men...’ she said with a crooked smile.

‘I forgot to mention,’ said Kubrean, looking at Kaoldan, as if remembering something important. ‘Somebody who wants to speak to you,’ he said, pointed to the door to the left.

‘I’ll head back to the chapter house you go talk, have a conversation. Take as long as you need...’ he said, then he turned towards Tokel, still cradling the woman’s hands.

Kaoldan looked on, puzzled.

‘Just go,’ smiled Kubrean. ‘It’s okay, it is at their request,’ he nodded towards the door. ‘Down the corridor to the left.’

And that was the end of the conversation.

Kaoldan stood, cocked his head to one side then shook it, turned on his heels and walked towards the nearest exit, closing the door quietly behind him.

Kaoldan approached the door, stood outside and paused.

Why did he feel nerves fluttering in his stomach?

He checked his uniform, brushed it, made several minor adjustments to his belt and his Walkerblade. He stretched his neck out and took a deep breath, held it for several seconds, then slowly breathed out. Nerves for the moment suppressed.

He raised his right hand, paused, closed his eyes and knocked three times on the door.

‘Enter...’ echoed a muffled voice through the wood.

Kaoldan grabbed the iron latch and open the door. It squeaked as he entered the room. It was light inside, a large central table surrounded by six high-back chairs, one covered in crimson felt at the head. At one end of the room was a small fire in a square stone surround. At the other end of the left was an enormous desk behind that desk sat Duke Lomman.

He was writing something. He placed the pen down on the table.

‘Come in, come in,’ he beckoned to Kaoldan, who entered, closing the door behind him.

‘Please, please take a seat’ said Duke Lomman, rising gesturing towards a large chair placed in front of the desk.

‘I’m so glad that you could come,’ he said. ‘I wanted to thank you.’

Kaoldan’s eyebrows knitted together as he made his way across the stone floor. He settled himself into the high-backed chair.

‘You must forgive me,’ he started. ‘I wasn’t aware that any thanks were needed,’ said Kaoldan, brushing imaginary fluff from his legs

before he crossed them.

‘That is where you are quite wrong,’ said Duke Lomman, taking a seat. ‘I would like to thank you for your professionalism,’ he said gruffly, lacing his fingers together, resting his chin on his hands. ‘Your professionalism and your discretion,’ he mumbled, nodding. ‘Regarding the death of my daughter.’

He swallowed heavily and cleared his throat.

‘It’s funny,’ he looked into a space far past Kaoldan’s head. ‘My wife seemed to know of her death before I did. In some strange way I feel this was wrong,’ he smiled weakly. ‘And yet somehow it makes sense,’ a smile flashed across his face. ‘She took the news rather well. Far better than I’ve dealt with it in truth.’

The Duke coughed and fidgeted in his seat. ‘It is rather strange. I miss her and yet she is still here,’ he waved his hands around the room. ‘She was an independent, spirited girl. Matters of state have taken priority throughout my life, something I now regret,’ he said. ‘I wanted to ask you something.’

Duke Lomman sat straight in the seat, his face wrinkled and twitched.

‘Did she die well?’ he asked.

He stared intently at Kaoldan. It seemed to be important to him.

Kaoldan wriggled uncomfortably in his seat. ‘I don’t think anybody dies well,’ he blurted out without thinking. He narrowed his eyes. ‘However, if you’re asking my honest opinion?’ he raised his eyebrows.

Duke Lomman nodded.

‘Yes, yes, she died well. There was brief pain. It was swift. A small mercy in my line of work.’ It was the truth. No matter how uncomfortable.

Duke Lomman’s face relaxed ever so slightly, but he still stared intently at Kaoldan.

Kaoldan gave a brief description of the events of that day. The tactical approach they had taken as a group. The discovery at the town, the loss of life, the carnage, the death and destruction. He

removed the gorier details from the story. He then described the meeting with the young survivor, the woman. The discovery of her and her revelations regarding what had happened. Her subsequent death and the emergence of the large enemy force and the ensuing battle. His voice drifted off towards the end.

‘You should be very proud of who she was, what she wanted to do for the world,’ said Kaoldan, voice cracking. ‘Practical,’ he croaked, focusing on the carpet in front of the Duke.

‘I was.’ he paused, ‘Practical, about the loss of my first child at the time. You should be practical too. There are few things in this world that hurt as much as losing a child,’ said Kaoldan despite himself. The words tumbling out as he absently fidgeted with the top end of his Walkerblade.

‘It catches you by surprise,’ he looked at the Duke. ‘You never really expect that sort of thing, old stories or old songs, all with new meanings. Memories that you could never recall before,’ he smiled weakly, ‘But it happens,’ he said.

‘Every day it happens. Get used to it. It happens for no reason at all and cannot be explained. It is just part of the world and you have my deepest sympathies,’ he said to Duke Lomman, his eyes flicking up, catching the Duke who sat deflated in his seat, his eyes reddening. He tried to maintain an air of dignity and composure, but even that couldn't stop the trickle of a tear down his face.

‘You should remember her the right way. Forget the bad, keep the good. Remember, even though she's gone, she is still with you and look after your wife. Don't make the mistakes I did. Support each other. There is still much good that you can do with the right focus.’

Kaoldan gestured towards the desk.

‘Given the office you hold. The responsibility and the authority that you have. You can make this world a better place. You can bring more light into the world than the darkness would currently suggest,’ Kaoldan cleared his throat. He suddenly became aware he had been speaking for too long.

‘Please forgive my bluntness,’ he said, ‘My intention is not to upset

you nor to prolong your grief. She died well, doing something she loved. Something she was very capable of doing. She had a great future ahead of her. She was a wonderful woman. Please accept my word, that there are far worse ways this could have happened. Take some solace that she's now at peace.' He swallowed, mouth far too dry right then. He wanted on some levels to stop talking but found that he could not. It felt good.

'Do you have people in your life you can speak to? You have many friends or family. Your wife should be the first. Don't hide this. Don't pretend this does not exist, that you don't feel how you do. She will want to know. If you pretend all is well, you will awake one morning and find a chasm between you. Just like I did. Speak about it with her,' he stretched out his neck.

'I am far better at giving advice than taking my own, but if you are in a dark place. Know this. It shall pass. And when you find yourself back in that dark place in the future, this too shall pass. If you need to speak to someone I can listen,' offered Kaoldan. 'If it helps, of course.'

The reddening around Duke Lomman's eyes had got worse. His eyes were mirrors. He sniffed loudly, wiping his hand with the back of his sleeve.

'The worst part is, it seemed like she lived for such a short period. I so wanted her to do things. You look at your child and think – yes, go, live your life – but you are terrified when they do. I'd hoped she would find somebody. One thing that makes me so sad – and it's rather silly really - is that she never fell in love. She was loved by us, but that is a different kind of love. I had hoped that she would fall deeply, wildly, madly in love with someone special. That she might want to form The Link and maybe even have children. But if she chose not to, then it would ultimately have made no difference to me. Her life, her choices. Just as long as she was happy,' he said, finally blinking.

'We almost had another, another child, but we decided against it. We decided against it... all our efforts, all our attentions on one. Not

an heir and a spare,' he spat distastefully through clenched teeth. He looked at Kaoldan pathetically, half laughed at his own distasteful joke. Soft chuckles descended into deep sobs, shoulders vibrated up and down.

Kaoldan sat quietly, not sure what to do. So he waited, looking respectfully down at the floor. Large, heavy square stone slabs stared back. The noise of Duke Lomman's sobs continued for several uncomfortable minutes. Then they slowed. Then there was a loud sniff and gasp of air as Duke Lomman readjusted himself in his seat.

'I read something once,' said Kaoldan.

'Just the once?'

Kaoldan snorted, grateful for the Duke's attempt at humour.

'Yes, just the once. It was a quote, by some wise and clever person,'

'And what did they have to say?' said the Duke, leaning forward in his seat.

'A life is like a garden. Perfect moments can be had, but not preserved, except in memory,' he said, wrinkling his nose to one side, a prickling behind his eyes. 'It hit me, hard,' he thumped his chest softly, 'Things like that never do normally, but it helped.'

He regretted it as soon as the words left his mouth. Kaoldan was aware he was getting warmer and uncomfortably so.

Duke Lomman nodded slowly, taking in the words.

'You appear to speak as a man of experience?' he said to Kaoldan.

Kaoldan paused, collecting his thoughts.

'Unfortunately, yes,' he said without lifting his eyes from the floor. 'I have witnessed many deaths in my time,' pushing imaginary fluff from his leg. 'It gets no easier,' he smiled weakly, glancing at the Duke. 'Just part of the job, I suppose,' he said, shrugging.

'No, no,' said Duke Lomman. 'You mistake my statement; you speak as if having experienced this yourself,' he stared intently at Kaoldan.

Kaoldan gritted his teeth, suppressing a growing urge to hurt someone, warmth flowing through him. His chest increasingly tight.

He shifted in his seat.

‘No,’ he said, locking eyes with Duke Lomman, his face set. ‘I have never experienced what you are going through. My apologies if I gave that impression. I’ve just gathered a lot of experience from the deaths of others. Again, my deepest sympathies,’ said Kaoldan. ‘If there is nothing else?’ he moved forward in his seat attempting to stand.

‘No, no,’ Duke Lomman wiped a tear from his left eye. ‘That is everything.’ He sniffed, composed again. He gestured towards the door, but Kaoldan saw that look in the Duke’s eyes. A look he knew all too well, it was a look he had seen on himself.

Kaoldan needed no second offer. He nodded, twisted, and walked for the door as quickly as he could, jaw fixed. Palms sweaty, he flexed his fingers as his boots echoed on the stone floor.

He turned and smiled perfunctorily, and half slammed the door behind him. He strode down the corridor, stopping for nothing and nobody, his mind numb, his heart racing, blood pumping around his head until it felt as though it was going to explode. Emerging from the main front entrance, he raised his hand to shield his face, sunlight lancing his eyes, striding towards Tren.

He had to get out of here.

‘Father...’ a voice called out to his left. He glanced over and saw Romina and Zahara looking at him. They both jumped down from a small stone wall. It appeared they’d been waiting for him.

Romina looked at him and Zahara shrugged her shoulders as if to say what now.

Kaoldan looked at them both for what felt like an eternity, then felt a sharp pang deep within his stomach. A pang he had hoped he would never feel again.

‘I’ll see you back at the chapter house,’ he snapped. Giving no further explanation in one swift movement, he put one foot in Tren’s stirrup and climbed onto the grey panthera. Tren sensed his master’s mood, turned and bounded off out of the palace toward the streets.

A panthera at full pace is something to be feared and Tren

appeared to take great delight in charging through the large wide streets of Thura towards the main entrance.

With perfect timing, the main gates opened with a creak, the crowd outside parting; screams and shouts, annoyance and confusion echoed, then faded around Tren as the charge continued. The wind in his face was the only thing that took away the tears streaming down Kaoldan's face.

Chapter 19 – Numbers

‘Eight of us?’ said Kaoldan, looking from the map, paper rustling on the table. His voice echoed around the room.

Tokel sat opposite, nodded.

‘Eight will allow us to protect ourselves in most circumstances,’ she said, ‘But it is small and discreet enough to allow us to slide through the countryside, avoiding most people, towns, and communities.’

‘We need to be quick, but we need to be agile,’ she said, squinting at the map. ‘This journey will be hard,’ she said, looking at the eyes around the table. ‘It is quite a considerable distance to Zuivosal. We will require an extra panthera or two with supplies so we have enough provisions, food, equipment to make the journey there and back. It will save time having to seek towns to resupply, and it will arouse less suspicion.’

‘You’ve got all this planned out, haven’t you?’ said Kubrean with a wry smile.

‘Of course,’ said Tokel. She pursed her lips, trying not to allow the satisfaction to shine through too much.

‘Where exactly is Zuivosal?’ said Zahara, shaking her head. ‘I’ve heard of the place, but I really couldn’t tell you where it is,’ she scoured the map. ‘Geography never was my strong point,’ she said with a shrug.

‘It’s on the other side of the Iron Lake,’ said Zalen, relaxing back in his seat, picking at his nails with a small knife.

She peered at the map, mouth gaping.

The blonde Walker that morning, along with Kryst and Dalon, had gone some way to settle Kaoldan. He had not spoken to his friend yet, but he realised just by having him around made him feel better.

‘Which also means we have a decision to make,’ he said, straightening in his seat. ‘Do we go by ship or take the longer route by going around the side?’ he said, raising his eyebrows.

Tokel considered the question, taking a long drink from a glass before placing it carefully back on the table.

'I haven't decided in all honesty,' she said, 'It's been so long since I've been there. So, I'm not sure how challenging a sea journey might be. And this works on the assumption that there are actually ships available to hire in Celst?' she said, looking around the table a combination of shaking heads and shrugging shoulders showed that nobody knew.

'I suppose we will just have to make it up as we go along,' she said, pursing her lips.

'Added to that,' said Kryst, deep voice carrying from the corner of the room. 'We are heading towards winter. Which means snow. Lots and lots of snow in my experience,' he said, sitting back, 'Not much fun for anybody.'

'Snow?' snorted Romina 'We're only just coming to the end of summer and you're already saying that we'll be encountering snow?'

'It is entirely possible,' said Kubrean. 'Although it is only late summer here, towards the north around Zuivosal it snows earlier than anywhere else. I suppose it's just something will have to deal with if we come across it.'

'Not exactly your most detailed plans,' sniffed Dalon, a smile showing beneath his beard. 'Somewhat lacking,' he said, fingering the edge of the map.

'Oh, shush,' scolded Tokel, attempting to slap his hand.

Dalon whipped his fingers away just in time, childish grin in place.

'I never said that this would be a straightforward journey,' she said, 'But unfortunately we have no choice. We need answers and we need them now. The sooner we set off, the easier it will be. The longer we wait, the deeper the snow will be and I for one,' she said, looking around the room. 'Cannot wait five or six months to find out answers to these questions. If what you have reported is true, it strongly matches many other reports that I've received from elsewhere within the kingdom.'

'What reports?' asked Romina.

Tokel tapped the side of her nose, 'Never you mind, young lady. Once you're a member of the Grey Council, then you can find out.'

Romina squished her mouth, sulking back into her chair.

'Suffice to say that things are on the move. Circumstances are changing,' Tokel shrugged. 'There are some things that we cannot change and I for one have no intention of going to Zuivosal for any longer than I have to.'

'So, both Nova and you are coming with us?' asked Kubrean, biting his lip.

'Yes,' said Tokel with a flick of her hair. 'We discussed it, and both decided that I was right.'

Kubrean winced.

'I will come with you as well as him,' she nodded.

Just at that moment, there was a creak followed by the familiar tapping of Nova's cane.

'Just in time...' said Dalon, rising and offering his seat.

Nova blinked, surprised to be the centre of attention.

'We were just saying how wonderful it is that Tokel will be joining us on our little trip to the north,' continued Dalon, dusting the seat and gesturing for Nova to sit.

Kaoldan caught the briefest injured look on Nova's face and a glance at his wife, who stood smiling, arms folded.

'Yes,' he said, eyebrows twitching. 'Wonderful news...'

Kaoldan smiled knowingly. He'd have liked to have been a fly on the wall for that conversation.

'Can't let you have all the fun, can I?' said Tokel.

Nova frowned and nodded.

'Is Zuviosal as bad as it's described?' asked Zahara, sitting up in her seat. Her eyes bright with excitement.

'Yes, probably' said Nova, glad of the change of subject.

'It is hard to say what it will be like,' added Tokel.

'I heard it has been sealed for hundreds of years. Imagine the things we will see. Life from another age,' said Zahara, eyes distant.

'It's hardly another age...' offered Kubrean. 'A few hundred years

is not that long.'

Zahara snorted. 'Forty years ago is a long time. Hundreds of years is positively an age.'

A smattering of sniffs and uncomfortable coughs echoed around the room.

'It is hardly the word I would use to describe it,' said Nova, sitting back in his seat.

'Why was it sealed?' Romina asked. 'It was never really made clear in anything I've read,' she shrugged. 'I just thought they moved to the capital, to be nearer to the centre of power in the kingdom?'

Zahara shuck her head. 'No, that wasn't it.'

'Too much snow?' offered Dalon.

Tokel gave him a withering look.

He shrank back into his seat.

'Because bad things happened there,' said Zalen, blowing away the efforts of cleaning his nails.

'Must you?' said Tokel tartly, hands on her hips.

Zalen looked at her, the very picture of innocence.

'I heard it was sealed because Fajin magic went dark and scorched the city,' said Zahara, grinning.

Kaoldan shook his head.

'And you know this for a fact?' she challenged.

His eyes narrowed.

'Exactly, my version is just as possible as yours,' she said, teasing him.

He pressed his lips together, suppressing a smile.

'I don't really know myself,' said Nova, face puzzled.

Tokel shrugged, and Kubrean shook his head.

'I also know that Zuivosal is, and was for many centuries, the home of Walkers,' said Zahara, enjoying the opportunity and the sound of her own voice.

It was something that Kaoldan had noticed over recent weeks. She felt the need to impress, to show her worth amongst more senior Walkers. An endearing, but ultimately unnecessary exercise of the

young, it appeared. He remembered being quite similar himself in his youth.

Not that he needed to do such things now.

Did he? He frowned, chewing his lip as Zahara continued.

‘It was abandoned centuries ago, before a new capital was established at Vanguard. It was the birthplace of the Walker. Hundreds, thousands of Walkers over centuries were trained and based there. It had a long history, some good, some bad, but very little detail exists since it was sealed. But it is the home and the place of origin of all Walkers.’ She moved forward in her seat, elbows placed firmly on the table.

Romina sat entranced by her sister’s tale.

‘But ultimately this helped to ensure its own downfall and the darkest time in our history. At the time they thought the Zuivosal was safe. Too big and secure to be challenged,’ she said. ‘After all, who would want a war with Walkers?’

‘Arrogance,’ grunted Nova.

‘Stupidity’ added Kubrean.

‘Both,’ said Tokel.

‘Walkers were needed out in the world to maintain order and keep the peace. All we know for certain is that Zuivosal was attacked at night by a larger and far superior force. Hundreds of Walkers died, souls claimed by the Abyss. Many masters were lost, an entire generation of red, grey and black. So, the decision was taken by those that survived to seal the entire city - now a graveyard more than a capital - in its entirety.’

A whistle of surprise. ‘That must have taken some effort,’ said Zalen.

‘And it did,’ said Nova sadly, ‘Almost fifty Walkers died gathering together the Fajin energy that was required to erect the shield, the land turned black and grey as a result. It is now surrounded by a sort of transparent curtain and is quite impenetrable. There is a chapter house nearby containing a small contingent of Walkers who are there to monitor and protect the site.’

‘So how exactly are we going to get inside?’ asked Kryst.

‘Leave that up to us,’ said Nova.

Tokel glanced nervously towards her husband,

Kryst cocked his head to one side.

‘I’m not entirely sure what we are going to find when we get there myself,’ he admitted with a shrug. ‘One thing that I am sure of is that we need to do this quickly.’

‘I’ve already covered that bit,’ said Tokel, placing a hand on her husband.

‘Oh,’ he said, looking slightly crestfallen.

‘You should have got here on time,’ she teased.

‘Quite,’ he nodded back.

Tokel looked at him, face soft. ‘I’ve already said eight of us...’

‘Ten,’ he corrected her.

She looked puzzled.

Kaoldan looked up, eyes narrowed. That cold sickening feeling returned, washing over his body.

‘Ten of us,’ confirmed Nova, as if just confirming the facts. ‘Myself, Tokel, Kubrean, Kryst, Zalen, Dalon, Aralorne...’

Kaoldan closed his eyes, hoping against hope that he did not hear...

‘Zahara, Romina and Kaoldan,’ his heart sank.

A gasp of excitement came from Zahara, grabbing her sister, who of the two looked far less joyous at the news. Her eyes flickered towards Kaoldan, then away.

‘That is our group. I have confirmed it with Duke Lomman and the other members of the Grey Council. It is decided.’

Tokel stared at him. Kubrean looked towards Kaoldan.

‘You did this, I did that,’ Nova shrugged. ‘Time saved.’

Tokel squeezed her lips together, mouth tight.

He paused and reconsidered for a moment. ‘Eleven, make it eleven...’

Her eyebrows rose.

‘Lauden. Let’s take him too.’

Her look said everything.

‘What?’ he shrugged. ‘I’m making an executive decision.’

She cocked her head.

‘I have the authority,’ he flashed a defensive smile.

‘Here you do,’ she said coldly, sitting back and folding her arms.

Nova swallowed, neck bobbing.

‘Really?’ said Zalen, sitting forward, timing as usual, perfect or not depending on your point of view. ‘That dark-haired, young Walker is coming with us?’

‘Yes,’ said Nova with a sniff. ‘We have to let the younger ones out.’

Kaoldan noticed, even more to his annoyance, that Nova did not look towards him. He let out a shuddering breath and looked down at the floor, then back up.

Tokel glanced at him, face softening. Kubrean looked nervous too.

Nova continued his little speech. ‘Lauden is young, talented and enthusiastic, something that cannot be said for every member of this group,’ he looked accusingly at Zalen, who, if anything, appeared more injured than before.

‘We leave first thing in the morning at sunrise,’ said Kubrean, keen to move things along. There was a small collective groan around the table.

‘I mean it,’ he said, ‘I am in complete agreement with Nova this needs to be quick and quiet,’ Kaoldan wasn’t so certain about that, he returned his glare towards Nova, flexing and interlinking his fingers.

‘Kaoldan I want you to inform Lauden that he is coming with us,’ said Kubrean, jolting him back into the room.

‘He will, no doubt be pleased, I trust you can temper this and direct it in the right way,’ Kubrean grinned, but it couldn’t completely mask the look of concern on his face.

Kaoldan looked reluctantly back at his Master, slowly nodded, but said nothing. His head was really starting to hurt.

‘It is going to take us around a month to reach Zuivosal,’ said Kubrean, in full Grey Walker mode now. ‘So, pack plenty of supplies

and make sure you take your winter clothes,’

‘Some of us are always dressed for winter,’ said Dalon, rising from his seat, ruffling his beard with a wink.

‘That will be all,’ called Nova over the din of chatter and scraping chairs. ‘Except you Kaoldan, I need a moment of your time.’

‘I’ll stay too,’ said Tokel, leaving no room for negotiation.

Kaoldan rubbed his hands together but remained seated. He noticed a look from Romina towards him before she disappeared through the door; he returned it with a weak smile. He waited patiently as members of the group slowly filed out of the room and closed the door with a solid thud.

‘So?’ said Kaoldan, trying his best not to explode.

‘So,’ returned Nova, carefully resting his cane on the table. ‘How are you?’

Kaoldan's nose wrinkled.

‘Must we?’ he said, rising from his seat and taking a deep breath.

‘Yes,’ blinked Nova, ‘We must,’ he said it with infuriating patience. ‘I know what Duke Lomman spoke to you about.’

Tokel rose, said nothing, but took a drink and settled into a chair illuminated by the shadows and the light of the fire.

‘Tell me you are okay?’ said Nova.

‘Yes,’ said Kaoldan irritably. ‘I am fine with it. We had a nice polite conversation, and all is well.’

Nova’s face suggested he was far from convinced.

‘Duke Lomman is handling the death of his daughter rather well, all things considered,’ said Nova, fiddling with his cane. ‘In fact, far better than I thought he would. His wife appears to be coping less well. Strange how these things affect different people in different ways,’ said Nova, glancing at Kaoldan.

Kaoldan winced.

Tokel sipped her drink, eyes peering over the rim.

‘To be completely honest,’ said Kaoldan. ‘Nova. I have a request. Leave the girls behind.’

‘No,’ said Nova, shaking his head, not even considering the

proposal.

'Please?' Kaoldan felt his face getting warmer, heart throbbing. 'For me. Leave them here,' he said, taking a step forward. 'They have already travelled a great distance. The last thing they need is more time in the saddle,' said Kaoldan, spreading his hands wide.

'Is that really the best you can do?' said Nova, continuing to inspect the top of his cane. 'Travel weariness? I expected far better from you, my boy,' said Nova, staring at him. 'I knew you would ask this question. I hoped, I wondered, I thought things may have changed. It seems I was wrong.'

Kaoldan clenched his jaw and tucked his hands, fizzing with hot and cold, deep into his belt, fearful of what they might do.

'It's disappointing,' Nova said, taking a deep breath and letting it slowly out. 'Even after everything you've seen, after everything you've gone through, you still believe that the best thing for them is to hide them away. By using basic and very predictable excuses. The world is a big and scary place, I quite agree. But hiding them away doesn't do good to anybody. Have they not within the last few weeks proven their worthiness? Shown that they are ready? Proved they are more than capable of handling whatever life has to throw at them?' Nova leaned forward. 'They are ready...'

'Not yet,' said Kaoldan coldly, 'Not yet.'

He turned away, forcing his hands deeper into his belt, fingers curling around the soft leather.

'We were lucky. It could have ended very differently. It was only through good fortune and good training that they survived,' he said.

'That's not the version of events I have been told,' said Nova, matching the stare of Kaoldan. 'I heard quite the opposite given the circumstances and in the situation they did what they needed to do. You are right to an extent. Their training helped, but ultimately it was their actions - as Walkers - that saved their lives. Ultimately, you know they are capable; you are simply too scared to admit it.'

'Don't test me. Don't push me,' spat Kaoldan, taking a step forward, pointing his finger towards the old man. 'Being a parent is

something you know nothing about.'

'Being a parent has nothing to do with it,' said Nova dismissively. 'I have already shared my thoughts with the Grey Council. They are in complete agreement. Given the situation, they were keen that younger novice Walkers join us. Not just here, but across the Kingdom.'

Kaoldan's face fell, fury gone guttered out. His shoulders sagged; he knew he had lost.

'You know something,' said Nova, face brightening as he looked at Kaoldan. 'For someone I consider rather intelligent. You can be incredibly stupid. What did you think was going to happen? They come to Thura and have a holiday? Why do you fight this?' Nova challenged. 'Why at every opportunity must you fight this? There are many ways that this can be handled, you could be supportive, you could be helpful, you can be many things that make all of this much easier for everybody, including yourself. But you choose to fight it.'

Kaoldan gritted his teeth, turned sharply, clenched his fists until they turn white, but did nothing.

'Why? Would someone I have known for so long act this way?'

An image flittered through Kaoldan's mind.

A familiar image.

An image frayed at the edges; colours washed out as if left in the rain.

A worn image: energy sagged from his arm and legs.

An image that had once brought him the greatest of joy, but now brought the complete opposite.

'Because I cannot go through it again,' he murmured. His head sagged. 'I fight it because that is easier than the alternative. Easier than...' he breathed, looking up at the ceiling, the words stopping as a sharp pain lanced at his head behind his eyes. He flinched, taking half a step back, grabbing the back of a chair to steady himself.

Tokel looked sharply at Nova. The old man shifted in his seat.

Kaoldan screwed his eyes up. The pain throbbed, lessened, and then disappeared. He gasped and stood tall, eyelids fluttering until

his vision returned. Shapes forming, colour flooding back into view.

Nova paused, simply watching.

He stretched out his jaw, eyes wide. A slow sigh escaped his lungs.

Kaoldan clanked the seat out from under the table, before sagging into it and eventually looking up towards Nova.

‘As I have already said. What you want and what you need are two entirely different things,’ said Nova. His face softened. ‘Please, if for no other reason, do this for me. Try to make this old man happy, and his wife too.’

Tokel scowled at him, but Nova ignored it.

‘We have a long way to go together and I'd rather not have this kind of atmosphere floating around tainting us all,’ he said.

Kaoldan frowned. What choice did he have?

‘Everything will be alright. I promise. And since when have I ever lied to you?’ his face twitched uncomfortably for a split second, then regain its composure. Tokel said nothing, just looked at her husband.

‘I really have no choice here,’ said Kaoldan, looking at the floor.

‘I'm afraid you don't,’ said Nova, standing. ‘There are many times in life when we have no choice. We simply have to look at what life has dealt us and do the best we can,’ he said with a shrug of his shoulders. ‘Don't you have somewhere else to be? As I recall, there is another member of our group who has yet to be told they are going,’ said the old man, raising his eyebrows expectantly.

‘As you wish,’ whispered Kaoldan, who immediately walked towards the door and left the room, not even turning to acknowledge his old friend.

‘Why does he fight it?’ asked Tokel quietly, looking into the fire.

‘He's stubborn, scared and confused. And because last time he nearly didn't make it through. Fighting it makes perfect sense, but I can't tell him that, he really doesn't know what to do for the best. I don't suppose any of us do.’

Nova rose, making his way to his wife, placing his hand gently into hers. She smiled warmly.

Nova frowned, ‘But either way, he has to change. He has to learn,

to trust that people are stronger than he thinks. Unfortunately, the longer he fights it, the harder this will be.'

To say that Lauden was pleased to hear the news would be something of an understatement. A grin appeared on his face from ear to ear, and Kaoldan could not help but be impressed by the young man's enthusiasm as he shouted in delight.

'I am *really* going?' said Lauden breathlessly to Kaoldan his eyes searching the Red Walker's face for any sign of deceit.

'You do not know how desperate I am to leave this place,' he said, gesturing to the surroundings.

Kaoldan frowned, feeling exactly the opposite.

'I feel as though I've been trapped here forever. I completed my training at Vanguard many years ago and was then immediately posted to this chapter house. It's all I've seen of the world for about four years,' he said, somewhat embarrassed.

'Just do me one favour?' said Kaoldan, smiling helplessly.

'Anything,' said Lauden eagerly, 'Name it...'

'First, never agree to "anything" until you know full well what "anything" is.'

Lauden grinned sheepishly.

'Second, do everything I ask. No matter how strange it may seem. So with that in mind; if you wouldn't mind helping me keep an eye on those two.' He nodded towards Romina and Zahara who were sparring at the other side of the chapter house grounds.

'Really?' scoffed Lauden. 'Why would I need to keep an eye on them?' he snorted, 'Have you seen how good they are?'

He turned to face the two young women as they fought and who appeared to be holding very little back, judging by the grunts and the clashes of steel.

'I think I'd be lucky to beat either of them,' he said admiringly.

Kaoldan folded his arms and pondered.

‘I very much doubt that they’ll need any looking after at all,’ said the young Walker. ‘But,’ he held up his hands defensively, ‘if that is what you wish of me then that is what I will do. I promise not to get in the way, and I will do everything you ask. However, I don’t think I need to look after them. I think they may need to look after me.’ A small smile grew on his face.

Kaoldan bristled; it appeared his daughters may not only need protection from the dangers of the outside world.

‘Master,’ said Lauden, bowing before racing off towards the chapter house, a trail of dust following him.

Kaoldan looked off toward his daughters.

He looked again at the two young women who sparred furiously: chops, swings, parries. Neither giving any ground.

Kaoldan stood and watched, old thoughts and new sparring in his head.

Chapter 20 – Suspicious Mind

Something was going on.

She couldn't put a finger on it, but without any doubt, something was afoot, and she did not like it one bit.

Ever since they had left Thura, Romina had noticed it.

He was more distant. Not in a bad way distant, a more contemplative assessing odds and options kind of distant. It unsettled her; she wasn't sure why, but her father was most definitely up to something.

Wrinkling her nose, she looked up towards the sunshine, its warmth comforting on her face. She had first noticed it after the encounter at the Royal Palace. A break in meetings had provided a wonderful opportunity to get a breath of fresh air. Zahara and Romina had stretched their legs within the gardens of the Royal Palace.

It was only upon arriving in the gardens they had come across the clash between Aralorne and Kaoldan. They spotted the encounter from a distance, sounds of battle echoing around the greenery.

They had thought - and rightly - given Aralorne's clothing that another member of the Otan had entered the grounds. They had both charged forwards without thinking about it. That they had arrived just as their father had stumbled, having lost his footing and very much appeared to be close to losing his head, had been both coincidental and fortunate.

She had always been protective of her little sister, kept an eye on her, even though Zahara was more than capable of taking care of herself. And if truth be told, her sister was a little tougher than she was too. But regardless of this, she was the big sister and certain expectations came along with such a title.

She had felt it in the pit of her stomach; an urge, raw and primal, as she and Zahara ran towards their father. It had just happened without her giving it a second thought. She and her sister had reacted

instinctively, and this was both a pleasing and slightly confusing response all at the same time.

The bond between Romina and her father had always been close. She was very much daddy's girl, and this had been the case, right the way through to the events that had caused their family to splinter.

Their long-enforced exile in Vanguard had created a distance between them, changing her feelings out of all recognition. He had gone from everything to nothing as the years had crept by, causing her to become closer to and more responsible for her sister.

The very fact she had saved her father from what appeared to be a life-threatening situation had stirred long, subdued feelings within her. She had wanted to protect him; it was in her nature in exactly the same way that she wanted to protect her sister.

What she had not expected was the return of such feelings and in such quantity. Her relationship with her father had most definitely changed, she just wasn't sure how. It was no longer father and small girl. It was now father and grown woman.

She cursed his stubbornness and then her own stubbornness, which she got from him - so that was his fault too - but neither were willing to speak about the changes openly.

They'd had more than enough opportunities to do so. But as always, with anything difficult, it had been put off. It was a priority, and yet it was not. Distance and awkward silences were preferable to them both.

She knew eventually they would have to speak about it, but for the moment, the unexpectedness, the thrill and excitement of their journey to Zuivosal had very much given her a very convenient - and at the moment very well used - excuse not to have much to do with her father.

She held her reins loosely in her hands, glancing behind her at her father and Kryst sharing a joke in the distance.

'We are going to have to talk to him eventually, you know,' said Zahara, trotting along close beside her, almost reading telepathically the thoughts bouncing around her sister's head.

Romina winced at the prospect.

'I know,' she said, wrinkling her nose again, glancing at him.

'It's just...' she struggled for the right words, 'so awkward,' she said, shaking her head. 'How do we do this? It's not as if a book has been written about it. And it certainly wasn't part of my training back in Vanguard,' she said irritably. 'It's just so difficult. He's changed. We've changed.'

Zahara nodded sagely in agreement.

'It's just so bloody awkward,' Romina concluded.

'It must be hard for him too,' said Zahara, glancing at her big sister. 'We are hardly the young girls he left behind, and equally I don't suppose there are books on this sort of thing as part of his training either. You're more like him than I am, but I say just get on with it.'

Romina grunted, considering the comments. Her sister was almost always right. She would have to have that conversation, and although she hated to admit it. The sooner, the better for all concerned.

'How long have we been travelling for?' said Zahara, looking around the sprawling countryside. 'It's felt like weeks,' she said, wriggling in her saddle.

Romina grinned.

'That's one trait you do share with him,' said Romina with a small smile. 'Your complete lack of tolerance for travel. He hates it, you hated, for me it's not so bad,' she said, giving her hair a flick.

Zahara looked at her sister and rolled her eyes.

'It has been fifteen days, but it has hardly felt that long to me. We still have a fair journey to go, but we are making excellent progress,' she said, with a satisfactory nod.

She was about to begin a conversation about how good the weather had been when there was a bark from Dref, and an arrow whistled by.

The surrounding terrain was rugged, scatterings of trees - dense and thick - good hiding places for small groups of people with evil

intentions. It was only the incompetence of the archer that gave away their position, and with it the element of surprise.

Like a well-oiled machine, Romina and Zahara shouted a warning to the rest of the group and fell backwards into a tightly formed unit. All eleven of them pulling the panthera's into a compact formation. Shields were removed from backs, clamped firmly into sweaty palms. She risked a look to her side. Her father faced forward, Walkerblade drawn and face grim.

The attack came from four directions at once. Small groups of poorly armed mercenaries poured out of dense woodland scattered across the countryside towards the group. In total, it was a couple of dozen against eleven highly trained and very capable Walkers. It was doomed to failure from the start. Breaking into groups of three, the panthera's and their riders broke off to engage their attackers.

Walkerblades flashed green and morphed into long spears and halberds. The Walkers with the advantage of superior training, equipment and skills; combined with the speed and power of pantheras made quick work of the mercenaries, who were badly organised and stood little chance of success.

It was a short and dirty fight, Romina and Zahara both remained in their saddles.

Romina's training kicked in and she felt nothing. Stroke after stroke of her sword, Essa back to her old self, assured and present. No skittishness, no sudden urge to run. She fought almost absentmindedly, safe in the knowledge that her skills were more than a match for their opponent, that and having ten other Walkers by her side.

A scream, a lolling head, blood spraying like a fountain. The orange glow of an orb.

Next.

And yet, despite the speed and ferocity of the activity, she found her mind wandering, feeling time slow.

She thought how futile it was that they should choose to attack. Dispatching an opponent with a heavy backhand swing, her sword

biting deep into their armour, metal tearing like paper using only the smallest amount of Fajin energy.

It was only after the adrenaline rush, her head returning to her body, that she could truly take in the carnage that surrounded her.

Bodies strewn. Bodies missing hacked legs and arms.

Shields and weapons scattered about the countryside, red blood splattered over the grass and shrubs.

She felt sick.

She swallowed, her throat swollen and sticky.

Shouts between members of the group, checking everyone was ok and accounted for. She raised her hand and shouted.

A second wave of nausea hit her as her father approached from the side.

Romina slid down from her panthera, grass heavy and thick underfoot.

A groan, movement to her side.

She moved towards it warily, her Walkerblade in hand, fingers tense, heart pounding.

The moan, inhuman, came again.

Zahara had also heard the noise and had strolled up to her sister's side.

She took several steps forward. In front of her lay a man, clutching his side, body wrapped around his injury.

'He may have some valuable information,' said Zahara optimistically, glancing at the heap in front of them.

'Maybe,' agreed Romina. 'Might be worth taking him away for questioning?'

Zahara nodded.

While Romina placed her blade at the back of the soldier's neck, Zahara checked for weapons, throwing away a small knife which disappeared into the shrub. After Zahara had finished her search, they each grabbed a shoulder and with effort, and a groan from the soldier, pulled him to his feet.

They half dragged, half walked him to the main group before

dumping him unceremoniously on the floor in the middle of the circle.

Romina looked at her father and at Kubrean. This was her chance to show that she was ok. That she was worthy of a place within this group. To prove to her father that he need not worry or be concerned about her.

She moved forward to lead the interrogation.

Grabbing his neck, she hauled him up.

He cringed.

‘Who are you?’ she shouted at him.

A groan.

‘Why are you here? Why did you attack us?’ she yelled at him.

The soldier lifted his head, his mismatching rust spotted armour did little to disguise the fact he was scared. Yellow hair caked to his head, his eyes darting around looking at each of the Walkers assessing them.

‘I said,’ shouted Romina, ‘Who are you?’

She paused and then asked again, pronounced every word, staring at him intently, her Walkerblade in her right hand. Her fingers trembled around the hilt of the blade, her head ached, she squeezed her jaws together, body pulsing with heat and nervous energy.

‘Who are you?’ she repeated, slower this time.

She felt anger. Anger at once again having been put in danger.

Anger that her sister could have lost her life.

Anger once again that she had been forced to take a life.

Anger once again.

‘Who are you?’ she said quieter this time, ripping his breast plate off with a flick of Fajin energy, it clattered to the ground and she pressed her blade into his chest.

He tensed, sharp intake of breath, but no words came, just a nasally rasping.

No words.

He looked at her, eyes wide, offering the smallest shrug of his shoulders. He was helpless.

In that moment, her patience evaporated. Without even thinking, she swiftly ran him through, shoving the blade into his chest. She twisted the blade; it cracked and popped as it slid deep inside him.

She smiled, feeling better, all her worries gone in an instant.

He grunted, stiffened, a spasm ran up his body to his head, his neck and head twitched.

Green glowed from his body. It rose slowly, shimmering, taking the shape of his perfect, slumped corpse. The green colours swirled, sparkled like glittering wine in a body shaped bottle. She felt her jaw going slack. He seemed to look at her, eyes accusing.

She jerked the blade out of his chest, desperate to back away from his stare.

His body slumped to the floor; his green soul rose, shrinking into an Orb.

Slowly and steadily, like one of those enormous bubbles she had seen street performers create back in Vanguard; silent and graceful.

She took a step back, numbed by her own actions.

A shout came from behind her. She turned towards it.

‘Why did you do that?’ said Kubrean accusingly, marching forwards. ‘There was no reason to do it,’ he said, kneeling by the side of the dead soldier.

She took a step or two back, her head empty.

It was a good question. Why had she killed him?

Her jaw tensed, head throbbed.

‘He refused to answer my questions,’ she stammered, raising her head to meet his eye. Another voice echoed from over her shoulder.

‘Of course, he wouldn’t answer your question,’ said Kaoldan. ‘He couldn’t. Look at his throat,’ he pointed to the corpse she had created.

She squinted, two jagged scars and a hole in the middle of his neck.

‘He couldn’t speak,’ said Kaoldan, shaking his head. ‘None of them can,’ he pointed towards the other bodies scattered through around the ground. ‘It was a suicide mission, and they knew it,’ he said,

voice almost a whisper.

‘Then why should one more death make any difference?’ said Romina, turning to face her father.

‘Because it costs,’ said Kaoldan, turning and slowly walking towards her, ‘Because it is unnecessary. Because it is beneath us; it is not who we are. We only take life when we need too. There was no need, and you had no right to take that man's life.’

Romina took a step back, as if struck.

‘And it wasn't the only thing you got wrong,’ said Kaoldan.

‘Here we go,’ she muttered to herself. She licked her front teeth, ‘Somethings never change.’

‘But somethings do change,’ said Kaoldan seriously, getting to his feet and dusting his hands, brushing soil from his uniform.

‘This role gets harder, not easier. You should have been paying closer attention. A lack of focus could have got you killed,’ he said, his face wrinkled with concern. ‘This is a dangerous world. Walkers were not invincible last time I checked,’

‘And what exactly did I do wrong?’ she flung back at him, eyes narrowing.

He stopped. ‘A bit of everything,’ he said, less convinced this time. ‘But that most of all,’ he pointed to the corpse she had created.

‘I did nothing wrong, I survived. We all survived.’

‘No,’ he shook his head. ‘He didn't. And that is down to you. We should have taken him with us to the chapter house, tried other ways of getting information out of him. But you lacked the foresight and the brainpower to see that,’ he scowled.

Romina's face tightened. ‘Now I know,’ she said petulantly, unable to think of anything more meaningful to say. ‘It didn't get me killed. Nobody was hurt,’ she said, gesturing towards the rest of the group who were busy examining the fallen. ‘I'll do better next time,’

‘Make sure you do, or there may not be a next time,’ said Kaoldan. ‘This is hardly a profession where mistakes can be made twice.’

‘Okay,’ said Romina defensively, ‘What more do you want from me?’

‘To be better than this,’ he pointed at the body, shaking his head. ‘You shouldn’t even be here,’ he spat.

She knew he regretted the words as soon as he said them; a look of uncertainty softened his hard face.

She felt anger rising within her again, hot and satisfying.

‘I knew it,’ she said, shaking her head. ‘You don’t want us here, either of us.’

‘No,’ he said straight faced. ‘I don’t. Neither of you are ready. Despite what Kubrean may think and Nova might dictate. I don’t think you should be here.’

‘They are in charge and they are right,’ she said, although she felt a quiver of doubt douse her anger.

‘They’re wrong,’ he said, shaking his head. ‘The decision should have been mine.’

‘But it wasn’t, was it? They don’t doubt us,’ she raised her chin.

‘I don’t doubt you either, but you still shouldn’t be here.’

‘They are our masters,’ she said, point scoring more than anything, but it still felt good to say it.

‘They aren’t your father...’ he mumbled.

She clicked her tongue, pushing the hot anger down in her stomach. ‘Don’t speak to me like that. I’m not the little girl you left behind all those years ago,’ she spat. The words tumbled out of her mouth before her head realised what she was saying. She clenched her jaw, anger vibrating around her body.

Kaoldan stood, his mouth half open, but saying nothing.

‘You just don’t understand,’ she shouted, shaking her head, blonde hair whipping at the back of her neck. She was now in full flow and not caring about any who heard it. She was now fully aware of what she was saying, but somehow, she just couldn’t stop herself.

‘Living in the past,’ she shouted, ‘You still think that we are these sweet little defenceless girls, that you abandoned. We are not,’ she said defiantly, pointing to her sister. ‘We’ve changed. We have grown, YOU have not. You’re still living in the past. We are not!’ without waiting for a response, she set her jaw, signalled to her sister.

They climbed onto their pantheras and rode away.

The town of Celst was quite the most depressing place Romina had ever visited. Even from the top of the hill, grey fields roll down to the tiny fishing village; grotty sparse and thoroughly uninspiring.

The closer they got, the worse it became, the less vegetation or signs of life there were. The mere presence of the place seeming to kill off anything living close to it. Even the roads in this part of the world were depressing. She considered that even on her most optimistic days Romina could not have said that it was a road at all. It was merely a flat stony pathway that led to a high-staked wooden wall, with oily torches hanging from either side of the main entrance. Creepy and atmospheric.

It had hardly got any better on the inside. Its inhabitants shuffled around like lost sheep, not one person making eye contact. Normally dogs could never resist at least stealing a cheeky bark at the pantheras or Dref, who padded alongside oblivious, before thinking better of it and scrambling away. They couldn't even be bothered to do that, just watching from a distance.

The whole place reeked of depression. It almost felt like it penetrated her armour, wriggled inside her bones. She looked around for something, anything, a sign of life or colour, but everything was grey and miserable.

Dull shutters on the front of windows clattered away, the only animated inhabitants in the whole place. They made their way down what can only be described as the shabbiest of main streets, all townsfolk keeping their distance, going about their business quietly and solemnly.

'We need somewhere to replenish our supplies and someone to scout out a ship we can hire,' said Kubrean.

Romina turned to glance at the Grey Walker, who was talking to Kaoldan as he always did.

Kaoldan glanced at Romina, but she avoided his stare by pretending to tease Dref who sat, tongue lolling. If they had hardly spoken before, they had left Thura, since the encounter with the soldiers in the forest communication had broken down completely. They hadn't spoken for weeks.

She was embarrassed by her actions. Worst of all, she realised, she didn't know why she had reacted the way she did.

Why had she killed that man?

Why hadn't she noticed he could not speak?

Questions upon questions. All without answers.

She felt regret. She had tried to speak to her sister about it, but the words had never come.

She carried it around like a fisherman carrying a foul smell, uncertain of how to get rid of it. Glancing at their surroundings. Depression seemed to be the business of this place, and she was perfectly suited to it.

'I'll make enquiries about transport,' said Kaoldan, nodding towards Kubrean. He glanced again at his daughter, hesitated, as if he wanted to say something, but no words came. He looked towards Zalen. The blonde haired Walker nodded, and the pair disappeared off down a side street, heading towards the harbour.

'I think,' came a deep voice to her right, 'That I may have found a tavern,' said Kryst with an air of satisfaction. 'They do food. They can probably replenish all the supplies we need and if I can work my magic, it won't be too expensive either,'

'Music to my ears,' said Nova, a smile growing on his face.

He and his wife had not ridden panthera's instead they'd made the journey on dark horses. They kept pace with the rest of the Walkers and their pantheras and been joined for much of the journey by the new stranger, Aralorne.

Ever since their encounter in the woods in the Palace of Thura, Romina had kept her distance. They had spoken briefly and civilly at mealtimes, but other than that they had had no conversations whatsoever.

She was wary of the white-haired man. He rarely did anything other than keep to himself, and when he spoke, it was only to Nova and Tokel. She reflected that she had said more to someone she did not trust than she had to her father over recent weeks. That couldn't be a good thing, could it?

The group was fractured, mistrusting and above all, tired and grumpy, which did not make the best of travelling companions. However, the prospect of a good meal and some rest that didn't involve a tent camping under the stars lifted her spirits. Maybe this place wasn't so bad after all?

She was wrong.

It *was* this bad, content completely in keeping with its surroundings.

The soup had been thin, the bread hard and the meat that was presented grisly. Yet despite this, she had eaten more than her fair share and the local beer had helped to make the whole experience slightly more pleasurable.

She sat back on the wooden seat in front of a large table. Thick. stout. Practical furniture for a thick, practical and uninspiring kind of tavern, she mused, nursing her cup. The beer within it smelling dark and nutty. She had had more than her fair share of this as well, and this had helped to make the rest of the meal more palatable.

Her head felt slightly numb in places and she had a small grin that appeared and disappeared on her face.

She also felt slightly giddy, if the truth be told. She had never really been one for drinking, but after that journey having a drink felt good. Felt she had earned it. She was safe. The surroundings, though uninspiring, were civilised. Why should she not let her hair down?

She jerked her head to the left, vision flickering.

Tokel sat beside her.

Romina grinned.

‘Are adventures always so dull?’ she announced, the words proving difficult to get out of her mouth.

‘It feels like they’ve been travelling for ever,’ she said with a nod. It was a rather odd sensation having her mouth say words so clumsily that her brain said so well.

She blinked, slowly exercising her tongue as Tokel turned to face her.

The old woman smiled.

She was the very epitome of a grandparent; dark-skinned, weathered face, white hair tied back loosely in a ponytail, gleaming blue eyes.

Romina and Zahara had known Tokel and Nova all their lives. Even though they were not related, she very much thought of them as her unofficial aunt and uncle. They had always been close, never gone far away, unlike others. They were a reassurance, always had been and still were now.

‘It is not always so difficult,’ said Tokel.

Romina sniffed and leaned in.

‘This place is a bit shit, isn’t it...?’

‘Everywhere has its charms, even here,’ she frowned at Romina. ‘Though it helps when your surroundings are slightly more inspiring than this, I grant you.’

Romina blinked and looked around the tavern; pale painted walls or what were once white painted walls, supported by a dark timber frame with several layers of dust and dirt added for good measure.

‘Nope, definitely shit,’ whispered Romina rather loudly.

The owner, stood behind the bar not twelve strides away, eyed her suspiciously.

Romina raised her cup to him, grinning.

He frowned and looked away.

‘He’s shit too,’ she declared.

‘Anyway, how are you, my dear?’ Tokel said brightly, attempting to change the mood.

Romina pulled a serious face and thought about it.

‘Comfused,’ she announced and nodded slowly, agreeing with herself. Her tongue feeling thick, her lips numb.

‘So many phings to consider. I am this, but I am not that,’ her head nodded from side to side. ‘How I’m supposed to know what I am?’ she said, her face creased with seriousness. ‘I don’t even know what to make of that,’ she pointed with her cup - sloshing part of the content over the table - towards Aralorne sat quietly at the end of the table, finishing whatever food had been placed in front of him.

She blew out a deep sigh.

‘And as for him,’ she scowled, slightly slurring her words, ‘He just doesn’t understand. I’m thinking he never understood. It is also confusing.’

Then, on instinct, she leaned forward, seat creaking, grasping the older woman’s hand, much to her own surprise.

‘I am very glad you are here,’ she announced.

‘I understand,’ Tokel nodded with a wry smile.

‘You understand me, don’t you,’ nodded Romina, the world wobbling as she did so.

‘Yes, yes,’ said Tokel, patting her hand, looking at Romina and then her sister. ‘I do, I understand you both. I understand how difficult this is. I also understand how unsettling this is,’ she said, waving to their surroundings, causing Romina to snort a laugh.

‘Vanguard was a good place. Life was simpler,’ said Romina, retreating into her seat, shoulders hunched.

‘But it is not the world in its entirety. You are only now beginning to see what the world looks like. Unfortunately, it is neither as safe as Vanguard nor as civilised.’

‘Or as tall as Prava,’ added Romina, smacking her numb lips together. ‘It’s an enormous tree, you know,’ she added, just to confirm, showing the height with her hands.

‘I know, I know,’ said Tokel.

Romina squinted, Tokel’s face had changed now, expressionless, her eyes glistening.

‘He missed you,’ she blurted, looking down then back at Romina.

She leaned forwards taking Romina's hands in her own. So soft and warm.

'He missed you far more than you realise. He very rarely speaks of it. I don't think her name or your brother's name has been uttered by him since the incident,' she said, eyes wet. 'He still grieves. I'm not sure he really knows how to handle it or accept the loss despite the time that has passed,' said Tokel.

Romina felt that familiar hotness rising inside her.

'Well, he should,' Romina spat. 'He's an adult, after all. And a father as well,' she nodded. 'He should have this all worked out,' she said, taking another noisy slurp from her cup, the malty contents dousing her temper.

'Don't judge him too harshly,' said Tokel, looking at Romina. 'Seriously, losing your mother and your brother affected him far more than you realise. He had never really had to deal with loss before that day.'

Romina snorted.

'No,' said Tokel, face serious. 'Don't be like that,' her grip of Romina's hand grew tighter; felt like iron.

'It affected all of us,' she said, looking down at the floor, eyes fluttering. She paused, blinked again. 'It affected more of us than you probably realise,' said the old lady sweetly.

Romina opened her mouth, about to speak, but Tokel raised a finger and the words stopped in her throat.

Tokel took a deep breath. Romina realised, just to add to her confusion, that her ears felt very hot.

'Doing the roles that we all do brings with it certain dangers. This is just to be expected, but to lose both of them in such a way and so suddenly, without explanation and in such a short period only added to the devastation he felt,' said the old lady patting Romina's hand.

Romina stared at the embrace of fingers and then at Tokel. But she stayed silent.

'He had never really lost anybody before, his life had been free of it. Given his own family was something alien to him. He never knew

his mother and father,' explained Tokel.

'He never knew what family was. This was his family. Walkers,' said Tokel, spreading her hands. 'Walkers are his family. He had known nothing like it. Because how can you miss what you have never had?'

'Then he met your mother and as love always does, it changed everything. He had a new family. Then your brother arrived and then you two. Everything changed again,' she pursed her lips.

'He went from a pauper to a king, then it was snatched away. Life never gives you reason. Life never explains why. It is brutal, believe me,' Tokel's voice grew louder.

Romina felt a knot in her throat. She swallowed down another mouthful of beer, it made no difference.

'Grief is a difficult thing,' said Tokel. 'It affects people in different ways. Your father's first priority was to keep you safe; it was a period of confusion; many Walkers had been lost. Getting you both far away was something your father, Kubrean, Nova, and myself all agreed with. It was the right decision then and now, although it may not seem so to you,' Tokel sniffed, let out a weary breath and continued.

'It was the best thing. Providing you with shelter, safety and security. It provided you with the right environment to grow, to develop and become the woman you are now. Don't think that taking such a decision was easy for him. I understand your resentment, but don't judge him too harshly; he wasn't the only one who decided. Your father is more than capable of taking care of himself, in most ways,' said Tokel with a relaxed smile.

'He can fight anything or anybody and win. Fighting loss and grief is an entirely different challenge and not necessarily something a stubborn man can do better than a woman,' said Tokel raising her eyebrows.

'I lost too,' said Romina, her voice sounding small. She felt a prickling behind her eyes as they glazed over. With difficulty she swallowed, looking up at the ceiling.

'In fact,' she considered, 'I think I lost more. We. Lost more,' she

shifted, sitting up straight in her seat, jaw, mouth and throat suddenly hot and free.

‘We lost a brother and mother and father,’ she said. ‘It happened quickly. I know why we were sent to Vanguard. It was the right thing to do at that time.’

She stared intently at Tokel; her face etched with concern.

‘But that time has passed,’ said Romina, voice becoming more shrill.

‘Why did he stay away? Why now does he stay so distant? We saw more of you than we did of him,’ said Romina, jaw ridged.

Tokel said nothing. Did nothing.

‘Why did he not care enough to visit? Did he not want to know what had happened to us? I don’t think he really realises the danger,’ she stabbed at the table with her finger. It should have hurt, but she didn’t feel it. ‘He lives in the past; he doesn’t see us for what we are now. He treats us like children. We are not,’ she banged her fist on the table, ‘children anymore.’ The anger fluttered, replaced by a tightness in her throat. Her chest felt heavy and her head now clear.

‘I don’t know him anymore,’ she whispered, sinking back into her seat.

‘I don’t disagree with you’ said Tokel, a note of resignation in her voice.

‘You have changed for the better. Both of you. I fear he has not. He is still very much the person you last loved all those years ago.’

Romina scrunched her face up on hearing the word love.

She didn’t love him. How could she love this stranger? This stranger who claimed to be a family man, but who did nothing to show it.

And yet, he had come, fought through the encounter after they had left Prava. Had made sure that they were safe and kept an eye on them, albeit from afar. He hadn’t wanted them to join the group, had apparently gone facing down far more senior Walkers to get them removed from this group. Was that a form of love? She wrinkled her nose, pulling her feet into her chest, now perched on

her chair.

And the encounter in the Palace grounds in Thura. They had both intervened when they had seen their father in trouble. She hadn't really thought about why. Was that also a sign of love, but from daughters to a father. She wrapped her arms tighter around her knees.

'He still believes he is the father of two young girls. And that is how he views things now. But don't worry, my dear,' said Tokel with a squeeze of her hand. 'We will change him. After all, women are better than men.'

'Men and women are equal; I think you'll find,' announced a voice to Romina's right.

She turned. Nova was taking a seat at her side.

'I think. In fact,' he continued oblivious to the discussion he had just blundered into, 'I can confirm that men and women are equal,' he said with a smile, helping himself to a piece of meat from the central platter, he winced slightly as he swallowed it.

'As you wish, my dear,' said Tokel, winking at Romina. 'As you wish...'

Two large, grey figures collapsed into seats further down the table.

'Well,' said Kaoldan with a smile. 'I've got us a ship.'

'WE. Got a ship,' corrected Zalen.

'Some tough negotiation, but WE have a ship,' he nodded to Zalen, who grinned back.

'It will leave Celst tomorrow morning. They have agreed to take us and bring us back. The ship is big enough for all of us, and it should only take four or five days to reach Zuivosal. There is an old abandoned harbour near Zuivosal where we can disembark and the Captain has agreed to wait for us there until we return, but it will cost us,' he said picking up a hunk of bread, inspected it, frowned, popped it into his mouth, chewed, pulled a face and swallowed.

'I hope you've brought enough money with you,' said Kaoldan to Nova. 'This journey will not be cheap, we are paying slightly over the

odds. If I'm honest, I'm not very good at negotiating with traders and ship captains,' he said with a weak smile.

'It's not the only thing you're bad at,' growled Romina. 'There are many other things you are bad at too,' she said, jabbing her finger in his direction.

His face was a picture of puzzlement.

'You know what I'm talking about,' she spat, jabbing the finger nearer towards him.

She suddenly felt slightly sick, lightheaded, having decided that she'd had enough. Standing slightly unsteadily, she turned and made for the exit of the tavern, legs heavy, but head light.

She felt sweaty and desperate for some cool fresh air away from the smokiness of the tavern; she burst through the door, almost falling.

The coldness hit her like a bucket of water. She staggered forward a few steps, leaning uncomfortably against a wooden post outside in the main street. Bent over, she sucked in air and stood, throwing her head back and opening her eyes to the sight of a million stars in a blue velvet sky.

More cool air entered her body.

She blinked, re-composed herself and decided that she needed to sleep, weariness tugged at every muscle. Their accommodation, and her bed within it, in a small building next door to the tavern.

'Aren't you a sight for sore eyes?' came a voice out of the murk.

She turned, half startled. The owner of the voice was a tall, weaselly looking man. He held a small bottle in his hand.

'Yes, yes, yes,' he chattered to himself, taking several steps towards her, boots squelching.

'You're very nice indeed,' he said, looking her up and down like a leg of lamb. 'I would very much like to get better acquainted with you,' he said and made a grab for her arm, trying to grasp her hand.

She flinched, took a step backwards.

'No, no, no,' he said, slurring his words, 'That's not how this works. No need to be scared, little lady. My, my name is Alex.' He

half bowed, pulling his hat from his head, light stray hairs doing a terrible job of covering his baldpate.

‘I would very much like to make your acquaintance,’ he said, holding his hat in both hands in front of him respectfully.

‘No,’ said Romina instantly, shaking her head. She turned and continued toward her accommodation.

A rapid squelch of footsteps behind her.

‘No, no, no...’ Alex smirked, ‘I don’t believe you understand,’ he said, moving directly in front of her. ‘It was not a request,’ his eyes glistened in the lamplight.

He took a step towards her.

She could smell his rancid breath.

He smiled, lips curling up over his crooked brown teeth.

He reached towards her.

She took half a step back, her mind blank.

She twisted as he took a step, rolling her fingers into a fist.

‘Come on now girl,’ he said, brown teeth bared, tongue poking snake-like between them.

Her face hardened.

He clicked his tongue between his teeth.

With the heel of her palm she hit him squarely under the chin, there was a sound like a rusty cleaver biting into meat, he spluttered, staggered back, she hit him again, this time up into his nose.

There was a crack, a scream and dark, sticky blood covered her hand.

He creased up, hands cradling his face, a squawk emerging from his lips, but still stood.

This was unacceptable.

She solidly and with a great deal of satisfaction kicked him squarely between the legs. He grunted and collapsed on the floor in a groaning, rasping heap.

She stood taller, the rush of adrenaline clearing the mind.

It felt good.

So, she kicked him again, head clearing a little more, her body

coming back to life. One more kick, this time to his head, snapping it back, and he was silent. A shapeless heap in the darkness.

She nodded to herself; better.

A vague memory of bed beckoned to her. She frowned, looking to her left and right, but couldn't quite decide which way.

She paused, and a door slammed shut behind her.

'What exactly do you mean it's not the only thing I'm bad at?' said Kaoldan, a grey figure silhouetted against light leaking through the tavern windows. He stood tall; arms folded across his chest.

Romina ignored him, turned in the direction she thought her accommodation was, and slowly set off down the street.

'I demand an explanation,' he half shouted, voice echoing around the street.

It flicked a switch in her head, anger; hot and wonderful rose from her feet to her head.

She stopped, turned and snarled.

'You abandoned us!' she shouted. 'You left us,' pointing at him. 'You. You did that, you sent us away,' her eyes prickled, anger fading into tears.

'We needed you, but still you left, abandoned us and never came back,' she said. 'And I will never forgive you for that,' she shook her head.

He took a step forward, arms falling to his side.

'No,' she barked at him. 'Leave me alone. You're good at that,' she spat, turned without another word and staggered off into the night.

Chapter 21 – The Next Day

Movement.

Pain.

She jerked, twisting in her bed, a tangle of sheets, like a cotton octopus, trying their best to keep her captive. Her guts gurgled, a wave of pain flooded her head, followed closely by a wave of nausea that rolled her stomach.

She let out a small groan: this really was not the best way to wake up. Turning away from the light, she shrank herself back into a foetal position.

There was a flick and rustle of cloth; and light spilled into the room; she cringed.

‘Good morning, sleepyhead,’ said a voice.

Romina opened one eye and winced, light pricking her brain. She took a breath and opened her left eye again a fraction. In the corner of the room, sat crossed legged on the opposite bed sat Zahara a wicked grin on her face.

‘How are we this morning?’ she enquired, tongue poking at her cheek. Trying, and very much failing, to suppress a grin of great satisfaction when asking the question.

‘Please don’t,’ groaned Romina, pulling the blanket over her head. But still the muffled voice of her sister continued.

‘Feeling slightly the worse for wear,’ she said, a small laugh echoed around the room.

In an act of defiance, Romina whipped the blanket off her head and attempted to sit straight on the side of the bed. This was a huge mistake, she realised as a wave of nausea sloshed around her body. She groaned, placing her head in her hands.

More laughter echoed around the room.

‘Must you?’ groaned Romina through her fingers.

‘I could say a great many things,’ said Zahara, voice deep with satisfaction. ‘But I won’t. Although what I will say is that you should

know better. You were always a bit of a lightweight, and beer never was really your friend. Now, gin on the other hand...' her voice tinkled with mischief.

Romina suppressed a growing urge to be sick.

More giggles.

'I know, I know,' groaned Romina, looking up at her sister's face through her fingers, her discomfort increasing.

The door burst open and a very serious looking Dref marched into the room. He turned, saw Zahara and sprang towards her, growling and yelping in delight.

Romina groaned.

Dref turned, and his smile grew.

Romina's eyes went wide with horror.

'No,' she warned, raising her hands in front of her.

The dog blinked.

'No,' she warned again, eyebrows raised.

Whatever the dog word for no was, it certainly wasn't no.

He bounded over the room, thoroughly delighted to see her. She shrieked, covering her head with her arms. The dog even more amused and excited to play a game of find the face.

He licked and nuzzled.

She squealed and kicked.

'Alright,' she yelled, 'Enough!' her hair sticking out at various angles.

The dog stopped and looked at her, eyebrows knitted together. What wasn't there to enjoy?

She sighed and surrendered.

Dref smiled and laid his head on her lap, happy to receive a ruffle of his head.

'What do you remember of last night?' asked Zahara, her face wide with glee.

Romina squinted - head still throbbing - half images flashed through her mind; food, sadness, outdoors, weaselly man, shouting and a feeling of fury. She looked at her hands, stains of dried brown

blood smeared between her fingers.

Dref snorted and raised his head.

'Sorry,' she said, going back to massaging his ears.

His head dropped again.

'Well?' said Zahara.

'Not so much,' she admitted. 'Why is there something that I should remember?'

'Oh, I don't know,' said Zahara, pursing her lips, 'Maybe an argument, maybe two or three. In the street, very loudly,' she pulled a face. 'Other than that, not too much else,' she shrugged.

Romina buried her head in her hands. This truly was the worst start to a day.

'Oh,' added Zahara brightly, 'did I forget to mention that we're about to go on a ship for five days?'

Romina groaned.

This really couldn't get any worse.

She was wrong.

The docks were like a level of hell.

The sounds: clanking, shouts, bells and screeching birds.

The smell: fish and salt played havoc with her stomach.

She had drunk several pints of water and attempted to eat a meagre amount of bread, but it did very little to quell the nausea that ebbed and flowed through her body.

She was sitting on a crate, eyes closed, trying to control the urge not to be sick.

Seagulls screeched above her, piercing her ears.

The crash of the waves, a tormenting drum.

Her sister was right, drinking had never been a friend. Romina had tried it in small amounts at Vanguard, mainly with meals and at formal occasions, but this was the first time she had ever really drunk in any sort of quantity.

She now wondered what the appeal of drink truly was, if this was the end result.

She swore to herself; she would never drink again. The worst thing was, everybody else appeared to be coping so well. They moved around brightly with almost a spring in their step. Where they got this ability from. How they could do this, she wasn't sure. Maybe it was just practice, or maybe they just hid it better. Either way, it irritated her. She hadn't seen her father that morning, having had her sister recount some finer points of the argument in the street. It was a prospect she really wasn't looking forward to. She breathed out slowly and dared to open her eyes.

The dock bustling with activity. Leather clad fishermen carrying boxes and crates, shouted orders, echoed around. The sea sloshed by the side of her.

She burped and winced.

Creaking timbers. Rolling ships.

Her stomach heaved.

This all made the prospect of a sea voyage in her current state very unappealing, but not as unappealing as the prospect of having to speak to her father again.

Being stuck on a ship with him for several days with no duties to attend to, no scouting to volunteer for, no food to hunt; meant that the chances of her not having to speak to him were non-existent. This filled her with a feeling far worse than her hangover.

She wasn't exactly sure what she had said. What she remembered, rather vividly, were the emotions; white hotness of anger, deep resentment and hatred she had felt towards him last night.

She burped again and swallowed down acrid spit that flooded her mouth.

'I hope you're not thinking of throwing up all over my ship,' said a voice.

Romina removed her head from her hands and looked up to be met with the image of a woman, stood like a cat, hands held loosely behind her back, chin raised.

‘Inga, Inga Stone,’ the woman offered a hand to Romina, who waved it away weakly.

The woman shrugged her shoulders. Her necklaces clinked as she did so.

She looked like she had been taken from an oil painting of a sea captain.

Inga tucked her hands back into a substantial belt around her midriff. A collection of small knives neatly tucked inside, with two short curved swords at either side.

‘Someone once told me you can never have too many knives,’ said Inga with a sniff, as if reading Romina’s mind.

She was dressed casually. A scrappy dress of dark blue flapped in the wind. She wore tall brown boots and her curtain of red wavy hair was only kept in place by a red bandana which covered the front of her head. She was, Romina decided right then, rather beautiful.

‘Nice day for it,’ she announced, looking towards the horizon.

‘Why are you going to Zuivosal?’ she said, making an attempt at conversation, glancing at Romina, who was gradually winning the fight over the urge to be sick.

‘There’s something there that we have to find out,’ said Romina, who stood with a wince but blinked and stretched out the muscles in her mouth. She was tired of feeling sick and decided that the best thing to do was just power through it.

She offered her hand to Inga, who noticed and snatched it, shaking it vigorously.

‘Pleased to meet you,’ she said.

‘Likewise,’ replied Romina.

‘Unusual to see Walkers this far north, and especially in this part of the world. Must be something rather important.’

Romina shook her head, then regretted it.

‘Only something of historical value, nothing more,’ she said dismissively with a smile. ‘You know how obsessed some people get with pieces of paper. We need to find something to complete a collection. It is that simple,’ she shrugged, lying badly.

Inga's eyes narrowed, considering the story.

'Either way. I'm making a nice little profit from this venture,' said Inga, rocking on her toes, smile growing. 'So much easier to carry people than cargo sometimes, and much more profitable too,' she winked.

Romina found herself smiling back, her first proper smile of the day followed by a wave of fizzing in her muscles. They no longer ached so badly.

'And particularly when the negotiator is so eager to make progress,' she said, nodding in the direction behind Romina.

Romina turned to see a stone-faced Kaoldan looking towards her for what felt like a very long time.

She swallowed, not moving a muscle.

He turned, head bowed slightly.

'Looks like you're not the only one feeling bad this morning,' chirped Inga.

Romina watched her father lifting a bag from Tren, heaving it onto his slouched shoulder before making his way up the gangplank to the ship.

'He with you?' she arched an eyebrow.

Romina nodded slowly.

'This is going to be fun...' mused Inga.

Five days on a ship with nowhere to escape to and nothing to do made Romina feel sicker than ever.

Chapter 22 – Making Waves

Kaoldan hated travelling.

The sheer monotony. Boredom was the thing he hated the most, but truly travel by sea was the worst. Travelling on land there were differences, trees, grassland, hills, no hills, mountains, valleys, lakes, streams and wildlife.

Travelling by sea was the complete opposite. Everything was the same.

The same waves and same water, the same colours, green/blue with dull grey thrown in for good measure. Occasionally a bird to break up the monotony of waves and water, but that was it. The sea matched the colour of the sky, which only added to the combination of dull gloom.

Winds whipped at him. He pulled his burgundy cloak closer around him, rolling his shoulders, as he turned away from the front of the ship. He slowly walked along the wooden planks of the ship. Sails of dirty white billowed out high above him.

With this wind, they would make excellent progress. That was some consolation at least.

Today was the second day of their journey. The first had been a novelty, the second it had lost its appeal very quickly.

They settled into minor chores. Conversations amongst the group had been bright, if perfunctory. By the afternoon of the second day, he concluded he was going to have to say something to clear the air between himself and Romina. But she had not left her cabin, opting to remain there for the whole of the day. She had appeared briefly to eat and then disappeared as quickly, allowing Kaoldan no opportunity to approach, let alone speak of the things she had said in that desolate, dirty street in Celst.

Words that had cut into him, deeper and more painful than any blade. It wasn't so much the words she had spoken; it was the way she had said them.

From the heart. Hard and honest. Raw, with no hesitation.

The worst part was that she was right.

She had been right in everything. It was the truth, and that was why it hurt so much. It was the truth. She and her sister had been abandoned, but Romina was more affected by this than her sister. Maybe just a classic case of differences between siblings.

In effect, he had abandoned them.

Losing Morveen and Jayk, even using their names, was enough to tighten his chest and make his heart shudder. Even after all this time, those two words had an effect unlike any other.

Losing his wife, Morveen, had been devastating news, but to lose his firstborn son Jayk at the same time had been cruelty itself, and almost too much to bear. Their faces flashed through his mind, his vision blurred with light. He steadied himself, fingers grasping blindly for the side of the ship.

Hard, damp wood. He heaved in breaths, gulping them down.

He stood still for a moment.

It had only been the thought of his two young daughters that had stopped him doing something much more serious.

Their young faces flashed through his head, eyes wide, slack jawed, faces concentrating on his every word. There had been no tears, but this had only made it worse. Hard reality, hard faces, at least on the surface.

He clasped his other hand to his mouth, squeezing his eyes closed and swallowed.

He hadn't been there for Morveen and Jayk.

And they had been taken from him.

They had left that morning, and he hadn't even said goodbye.

He hadn't even told his wife he loved her. It was something small, but it was also something that he made sure he did every day. Three simple words that meant so much – I love you – taken for granted, but not said on that last day or since.

He had gone through thousands of hours, recounting what could have been different about that day.

What if he had said it?

What if he had been there?

What if he had protested more fiercely and gone in her place?

What if he had not been convinced by Morveen to let her lead the group to Rynk?

He gripped the side of the ship, knuckles whitening, muttering to himself.

Jayk was not ready, they all knew it. But Kaoldan had pushed, badgering Kubrean, pulling in favour wherever and however he could to fulfil his son's wish. Kubrean had reluctantly approved it, and Morveen would be there. What could go wrong?

Everything was the answer.

His jaw tensed as he worked well-trodden thoughts out of his mind.

From a group of twenty-four Walkers, there had been only two survivors.

Gythe, a Grey Walker of some reputation. No fool. Tough. Reliable. She had been injured, lucky to make it back at all, but she had also saved Ramazi, the Paragon Master of the Walker Order.

He had been seriously injured, but she had rescued him and return them both safely to Zaeng all the way from Rynk.

They had sent a larger group to discover what had happened.

Forty Walkers, including Kaoldan, Zalen and Kubrean, grim and determined to find out what had happened.

The ravine they found was a ruin of bodies.

So many bodies. Burnt, blooded, ripped apart. Scattered, like leaves in the autumn, hidden amongst bushes, in pools of water, slumped against trees.

He had found Morveen and Jayk - bodies broken - close to each other, shields shattered, pinned against a sheer rock face. They had been trapped, no chance of escape. Killed like animals. Blood, so much blood.

The thought of it still gripped his heart with icy dread. The look on their faces peaceful, like they were frozen. With a trembling hand

he had closed their eyes, unable to deal with the accusing looks they gave him.

He had been forced to bury them in the valley, in the shade of a tree; they would have approved. The soil had been so black, sticky, and difficult to move. He remembered their faces before wrapping them in their cloaks. Asleep, at peace. The entire experience surreal, as if it were happening to somebody else.

Given the evidence they found; footprints, broken weapons, and the tattered remains of clothing from Thodar. It was simply a case of them being surprised and overwhelmed.

And yet this explanation, accepted by the Grey Council and the Paragon Master of the Walker Order at that time, did not sit well with Kaoldan.

Morveen was experienced, cautious. She would never had entered such a ravine without taking precautions. She would never have let their guard slip so badly.

Would she?

The truth was that they would never know, and this unsatisfactory answer sat ill at ease with Kaoldan. It poisoned his thoughts and tore into his mind. Creating more questions, more what-ifs, hundreds of scenarios played out in his head and in his dreams, but they were never accompanied by any answers.

Over time, he had compartmentalised these voices, but they still came back now and then, haunting him. He had instead chosen to do the only thing within his control. Safety was the priority. Making sure that the girls were safe.

Safe from the world. And safe from him.

He feared, given the grief that had overwhelmed him, that he would be of no use to them. So, it made sense that the girls should be elsewhere. Far away, but well protected and well catered for.

Vanguard provided the perfect location. The safest place in the kingdom of Athos. The girls would be surrounded by people and surroundings he trusted, and they would also have something to focus on - learning the Way of the Walker.

All agreed with the decision; Kubrean, Nova and Tokel.

Ultimately, it had been Kaoldan's choice, and it was not one he had until now regretted.

His decision to stay away from Vanguard had also been a choice.

But the more time passed, the harder it became.

How could he face them?

What could he do? Arrive at the gates, say hello, and pretend everything was the same as before? No.

He knew that Vanguard was the right place, but his decision to not visit them had gnawed away at him. He had changed his mind. Dozens, perhaps hundreds of times. Visit. Don't visit. But it was a prospect that offered him no joy, only suffocating fear. He had justified the decision. Told himself that the girls seeing him again was only a reminder of what they had lost. It would hurt them again. But this was an argument that now seemed pathetically weak. Selfish thoughts. Cowardly thoughts, if he was honest. Now, the decision to send them away and his decision not to visit had compounded problems.

He had done it for various reasons, but also because it was the best thing for him. He was a Red Walker, so had certain responsibilities, or so he had told himself. It surrounded himself with things he was comfortable with: places, faces, tasks that were easy. He buried himself in them. Time had passed quickly and quietly.

He couldn't blame Romina for her hostility. He did still see those two young girls, in need of protection, in need of guidance. His world had been changed, turned upside down by forces outside of his control. How was their situation any different?

It was not.

He raised his hand to his head and pinched the top of his nose.

The fact they had completed their training so soon, and to such praise and celebration, had been a source of pride to him. But it also meant an end to a selfishly convenient arrangement.

The biggest problem was that he had a relationship with them that was out of date. He had not changed; they had, and wonderfully so.

His relationship with them, his strength, had lain in that he knew what to do, or at least appeared to. He was the adult, they the children. Now he was the adult and they too adults. He no longer had the upper hand of experience, of being certain what he was doing was correct.

Parenthood was, he had discovered very early on, the hardest job in the world. Children feel safe if they are confident in the abilities of those around them. It was perfectly possible to not know everything, but to put on a brave face and to work it out as you went along. This wasn't the case anymore.

He did not know what to do.

He did not know what to say.

He did not know how to act, and they saw straight through any pretence he had tried to create such confidence or even bluff his way through it. He had never really known his parents; they had died when he was young. He had never known the value and wonder of family until he and Morveen had created their own. It brought him more love and joy than he had ever thought possible.

He had taken to the role of being a father with ease, despite his fears. He had been patient when needed, firm, loving and understanding. This all gave him the confidence that he knew what he was doing. Take that away and what was he now?

A man lost.

A shell of a man.

A man with a family in name only.

He had to speak to them. His heart sank, and he chewed at the inside of his cheek as he stared out at the blue, black, green waves that rolled and crashed around the ship.

'I'd like to ask where you are,' said a voice, bringing him back to reality. 'But I fear where that might be.'

Kaoldan turned to see Zalen stood wrapped in his red travellers' cloak, wind whipping through his hair. He took a step forward to stand beside his friend.

'I think I know where you are now,' he said, looking out to the sea,

avoiding Kaoldan's eyes. 'One thing I've always admired about you, probably more than anything else, has been your devotion to your family. You would do anything for them, absolutely anything. Losing Morveen and Jayk changed that.'

Their names pressed down upon Kaoldan's shoulders like a pair of rocks and he held his hand up, but Zalen continued.

'It also changed you, but I knew you'd be ok. You had a strength within you and a clarity of thought many others would not have had. It was the right thing to do to send them to Vanguard,' he nodded, somehow able to read his friend's mind.

Kaoldan stood still, taking in the waves, and listened.

'You shouldn't regret that; I would have done the same if I'd been in your shoes,' he conceded with a nod. 'Having them brought back into your life after such a long time was not exactly something you chose. Again, you showed strength.'

Kaoldan swallowed, throat dry.

'Since then...' Zalen frowned, paused. 'The girls have needed you, but you've not been there. You are a family, you belong together. It is something you cannot avoid any more,' he looked towards Kaoldan and then away quickly.

'I've never worried about you,' he said, eyes serious, 'Never. Even after the deaths, even after the losses. I knew you'd get through as I knew the girls will get through it. This is the first time I am worried about you and them,' said Zalen solemnly.

'You seem cracked,' said Zalen, seeming to struggle to find the right words. 'I can't say I know what has changed, but you just seem broken, scared, and that's something I've never seen before,' he took a deep breath and gently rested his hand on Kaoldan's shoulder.

Kaoldan couldn't help himself.

His head fizzed, his nose ached, and then the tears came. They swelled in his eyes as his shoulders hunched and his chest heaved.

Tears rolled slowly down his cheek, mixing with the spray from the sea. Cold and warm saltwater mingling together. He sniffed loudly, wiping his face. He folded his arms across his chest, feet

shuffling, body squirming.

‘What can I do?’ he stammered, ‘What can I possibly say to them that will make things better? Make the world right. I failed them. It is that simple. I failed to protect them,’ he felt lightheaded, swallowing again.

‘Nonsense,’ said Zalen, ‘you have protected them. You have protected them from this world, but perhaps too much so. And what you say doesn't really matter,’ he said, squeezing Kaoldan's shoulder. ‘As long as you do say something and soon.’

He patted his old friend on the back affectionately. He looked to Kaoldan, his face serious, he chewed his lip as the ship lurched.

Kaoldan frowned.

‘You know, I've seen you face down many horrible things. We fought together frequently against incredible odds. I wasn't even sure that we would survive,’ he raised his eyebrows. ‘But we did. Somehow, we always found a way through. You were never scared of anything, never fazed by anything, not monsters, not the Krund, not by our enemies, but you seem scared now,’ he frowned.

‘It's a side of you I have never seen before, and that is what really worries me, and in turn that's what scares me,’ he said. ‘I'm not sure what I would say now, especially to anyone looking to me for some sort of guidance or counselling.’

A small wry smile crept onto Kaoldan's face.

‘It must be difficult being a father,’ said Zalen. ‘I'm almost jealous. I'd love to be in your shoes to have what you have, difficult though it may be. You've always guided and advised me when I've needed it and I'll be failing in my responsibilities to you if I didn't say this to you now,’ he stared at Kaoldan, deep into his eyes, unflinching.

He cleared his throat. ‘It is better to do something than live with the fear of it.’

Kaoldan raised his eyebrows.

‘I know,’ said Zalen with a smirk. ‘Deep. I read it somewhere.’

Kaoldan stayed silent, stifling a small smile.

Zalen sniffed, face serious once more. ‘Talk to them, both of them,

before the end of this voyage. Before things are damaged beyond repair. The longer you leave it, the worse it will be.'

Kaoldan knew his friend was correct. He had felt the distance between himself and his daughters growing, a chasm now between them.

What could he possibly say? What could a man who had no relationship or influence with his daughters possibly say that would be of any solace to them?

But he knew he had to try.

Silently, he wiped the rest of the tears from his face. Roughly bear hugged Zalen, patting him firmly on the back.

He sniffed loudly.

Zalen nodded solemnly at him. He wiped his face one more time, then turned towards the stairs.

'If it's any consolation,' added Zalen. 'I think Morveen would have been proud of your efforts. I think she would have done the same if the roles had been reversed. You weren't to blame for what happened and she would not hold it against you.' he squeezed then let go of Kaoldan's hand.

Kaoldan glanced at his hand, then looked away sharply, hiding his trembling chin from his friend. He walked away, rubbing the back of his neck. If only Zalen knew.

Chapter 23 – Open Doors

The swaying of the ship and the creaking echoes of the timbers were the only things that accompanied Kaoldan as he slowly and slightly ungracefully made his way down the steps.

He walked along the dim, lightly lit corridor - smoothing his clothes out, mind blank - towards the front door. Pausing, he felt the throb of his heart.

He felt something brush against his leg.

Dref looked up, eyes wide.

Kaoldan breathed out slowly and ruffled the dog's head.

Dref smiled.

'Wish me luck,' he whispered to the dog.

Closing his eyes, he knocked heavily twice on the dense wood and waited.

Silence. The ship continued to roll, wood straining against the waves.

He knocked again, louder this time.

Again silence.

He hesitated, then turned to leave.

A noise. Slight, but a sound, nonetheless.

Dref bristled, the fur on the back of his neck rising. He let out a low gurgling growl.

Kaoldan stopped, turned, ears searching. Waited then slowly turned, dismissing it as his imagination.

Dref growled again, deeper this time, edging towards the door.

Kaoldan paused; something didn't feel right.

He marched back to the door and knocked again.

Nothing.

A sickening feeling of panic rose from the pit of his stomach.

He tried the handle; it clanked metallically, helplessly.

He tried it again.

And again. Clank. Clank.

‘Romina...’ he said, voice bordering on a shout.

‘Zahara,’ louder this time.

He clicked his fingers, Dref’s growling stopped, but his head did not look away, eyes fixed on the door.

Silence.

His shaking hands banged about the door.

Silence.

He tried to barge the door. It rebuffed his efforts with ease.

Cold sweat began forming on his face.

He kicked it hard; the noise boomed down the corridor, but nothing moved.

He kicked it again and again, noise deafening. Boot prints scuffed on the wood, but it still did not move.

He gritted his teeth, muscles shaking in his neck, and kicked the door several more times, with the same result; it held fast.

His legs ached, gasping for breath.

‘Out of the way,’ a voice commanded behind him. Without thinking, he did as he was told.

A tall, lithe shape brushed passed him, white hair flowing as it went.

Pink light flared as Aralorne morphed his dull metal rod into an angular-shaped hook. Grunting, he swung it into the frame of the door, close to the handle, with a dull thud.

Teeth clenched; face screwed up in effort, he pulled at the end of the hook.

The door creaked, straining in resistance.

‘Help me,’ he groaned.

Kaoldan didn’t need any encouragement.

The two men pulled hard, forearms straining, muscles burning.

Slowly the door creaked and groaned, resisting them.

Kaoldan felt the familiar tingle of Fajin energy as Aralorne pulled with all his might.

Time seemed to slow. It was funny. He had not thought to use Fajin at all.

He closed his eyes and gathered his will. Chest tightening, arms bulging, legs on fire.

The door creaked in final defiance, there was a dull crack, the sound of something snapping, and the door finally gave way.

Wooden splinters clattered to the floor. Dust, like plumes of smoke, swirled where the door had been seconds before.

The room still and silent.

It was gloomy, illuminated by a single hanging lantern. There were two bunk beds, one on top of another at the far end of the room, two bodies lying on each of them. Blankets wrapped around them.

Kaoldan strode across the room. He pulled the blanket clear of the body on the lower bunk. It was pale and still.

His heart lurched.

He almost didn't notice it, a glimmer of light reflecting.

Eyes wide and staring with revulsion at the black slimy coil around the neck of the body of Zahara. He recoiled, then with a sharp breath in attempted to reach towards her.

'Don't!' barked Aralorne. 'Don't touch them,' he said moving forward pulling Kaoldan with his hand, eyes not moving from the creature.

'Whatever you do, don't touch them. They're coil slugs.'

Kaoldan clicked his fingers and Dref stood still by the entrance to the door, eyes fixed on the bunk beds.

Aralorne reached forward, brushing hair behind his ears, his face tense.

With a flash of pink light, his Walkerblade hook shrank in size, sprouting more barbs and spikes, until it was the length of his forearm.

Kaoldan watched - not daring to breathe - as Aralorne slowly moved one spike underneath the edge of the creature wrapped around Zahara's neck. Twisting it carefully, but with little effort, barbs caught underneath it. He twirled the Walkerblade as if gathering spaghetti around a fork.

The wet sucking noise set Kaoldan's teeth on edge.

‘Get me that canvas bag,’ he hissed.

Kaoldan responded quickly, grabbing the bag as ordered.

‘Don’t move,’ murmured Aralorne, eyes locked on the oily, curling creature on the end of his Walkerblade.

Kaoldan did as he was told.

Aralorne took three tentative steps forward, holding the blade towards Kaoldan. With a shake and a flick of his wrist, he deposited the squirming creature into the bag.

‘Close it up,’ he whispered, face glistening with sweat.

Kaoldan could feel the creature wriggling at the bottom of the bag. It made his skin prickle ice cold; he pulled the cords, closing the bag tightly.

Aralorne turned, stepping cautiously. He craned his neck, searching, then using the bottom bunk as a step dragged himself up.

He carefully pulled away the blanket covering the body on the upper bunk, leaning he poked the fork towards the neck of Romina.

Kaoldan held his breath.

Aralorne’s entire body tensed. Painfully slowly, he twisted his wrist. With a sharp intake of breath he stepped down

The coil slug hung from the fork, caught on the barbs. Like a flat, black snake it flicked and curled, lamplight glistening on its rippling body.

‘Open it,’ he breathed.

Kaoldan did so.

Aralorne flicked his wrist as the slug dropped into the bag. Kaoldan closed it, feeling the occupants inside wriggling and squirming. He struggled to keep it closed.

‘Quickly, do exactly as I say,’ said Aralorne. ‘Take the bag upstairs. Burn it, don’t throw it into the sea. The content must be burnt. Fetch help, there may be more of them.’ He said looking around, gazing into dark corners.

Kaoldan moved towards the door, Dref backed away, he shouted at the top of his voice.

Heavy footsteps boomed down the corridor as Kryst emerged out

of the darkness in front of him.

‘Help him,’ Kaoldan ordered, pointing towards Aralorne carefully searching around the room.

‘Do whatever he says no questions,’ Kryst nodded and entered the room, eyes darting.

Kaoldan glanced at the still bodies on the bunk beds.

‘Go,’ said Aralorne. his voice urgent.

Kaoldan clenched his jaw, then still holding the wriggling bag sprinted down the corridor, taking the steps upwards two strides at a time. Emerging from the darkness below into the gloom of the deck, he darted left, his feet almost going from under him on the wet planks.

The main cabin was at the back of the ship.

There was a brazier there, this he knew, having spent much of the last two days, standing near it attempting to get warm.

He sprinted forwards feet booming.

‘Move,’ he barked, entering the room to startled faces of Tokel, Nova and Kubrean. ‘Move,’ he repeated, barging past Zalen.

‘Lift the grill,’ he said to Kubrean, pointing at the top of the brazier. The bag was getting heavy, the coil slugs juddering and twisting, desperate to escape.

Using iron tongs, Kubrean shifted the grill, smoking black and orange, heat pulsing out. Kaoldan threw the bag and its contents into the brazier. Kubrean let go of the heavy grill. There was a metallic clang as it dropped, followed by a sizzle, hissing and an ear-piercing screech.

Nova rose from his seat, face bewildered.

‘What the hell are you doing?’ he demanded.

‘Coil slugs,’ replied Kaoldan in between heavy breaths.

Nova’s face fell.

‘They got into the cabin where the girls were sleeping,’ said Kaoldan, breathing hard.

‘Quickly,’ said Tokel calmly standing up. She clapped her hands together with a sharp smack. Every eye in the room fell on her.

‘We must prepare an antidote to the poison. If you would accompany me, my dear,’ she said, leading the way with her hand.

Nova regained his senses, smiled, and followed his wife out of the room.

Kubrean took a step forward, his face pale.

‘The girls?’ he murmured.

Kaoldan shrugged his shoulders.

‘I don’t know,’ he said. ‘I just don’t know,’ he said over his shoulder as he ran, retracing his steps, back to the room. His mind was numb, and his hands shook.

He slowed before reaching the entrance to the room, the sound of heavy feet rattling downstairs close behind him. He raised his hand, Kubrean and Zalen, slowed, then stopped.

Moving forward slowly, despite an urge to charge in, his heart still racing.

Kaoldan peered into the room. Aralorne stood, fork in hand, back to back with Kryst who had morphed his Walkerblade into a similar instrument. Green and pink light mingling on the wooden walls.

‘There don’t appear to be anymore,’ breathed Aralorne, eyes still searching. ‘But we can’t be certain. You two get them,’ he pointed with his free hand towards the still bodies on the bed.

‘Each of you take one of them, but do it slowly. We will remain to check that there are no more slugs hiding in here. Do it carefully,’ he emphasised. ‘Anything done in haste and more of us will end up like them. Take them one at a time.’

Heart racing, breath short and stuttering, Kaoldan entered the room.

Dref backed away a step but did not leave.

Floorboards creaked as Aralorne and Kryst moved apart.

His eyes fell on the two still, waxy bodies.

‘No, no,’ he said under his breath.

Being slightly shorter, Kubrean knelt on the lower bunk. He heaved, rolling Zahara towards him, wriggling an arm underneath as he gritted his teeth and stood.

‘Go now,’ Aralorne said, eyes searching the shadows.

Kubrean strode towards the door, her body over his shoulder, arms swinging, lifeless.

Kaoldan took a shuddered breath. He flexed his fingers, put his foot on the lower bunk and hauled himself up.

She was still really still, no movement at all.

His heart sank.

He paused, thinking it too late, but as his eyes adjusted to the light, he saw her chest rise and lowered slightly, so shallow were the breaths he almost didn’t notice them. He reached forwards, arm snaking under her midriff, fingers clawing at her clothes, and he heaved. She was a dead weight, floppy and lifeless.

‘No, no, no...’ he whispered as he heaved again.

His chest tightened and his arms felt like stone. He winced as her full weight flopped over onto his shoulder.

‘Not now, not like this,’ he muttered. His feet felt like ice. He took a shaky step forwards. Then another, then again. Warm blood washed through his body, driving the cold back. Holding his left arm out for balance, he gritted his teeth and quickened his pace, stretching out his legs. He covered the distance in a haze; sound muffled; the edges of his vision blurred.

At the top of the stairs he half recognised Zalen. The blonde Walker pointed to his right. He turned, mind blank. Kaoldan kept going, feet echoing on the deck.

A face in the distance.

Dalon beckoning him forwards, words utterly lost as if said underwater.

He saw Kubrean kneeling on the deck over a heap of clothing.

Clenching his jaw, Kaoldan dropped to one knee and carefully placed Romina out on the deck. He recoiled as he saw the white, waxy sheen on their skin. He leaned in towards Romina. She was still breathing. An explosion of air rasped out of his lungs.

‘This way, my dear, quickly,’ fussed Tokel. ‘Quickly, quickly,’ she beckoned to her husband; Nova followed behind, his cane tapping

rhythmically as he moved.

‘Gentleman,’ she pointed to Kaoldan and Kubrean. ‘Please, sit them up and hope we are not too late.’

Kaoldan did not need to be told twice. Waves crashed against the side of the ship, knocking Romina’s lolling head to one side. He grabbed her head. It was cold, so very cold.

‘No, no, no,’ the words leaked out of his mouth.

Tokel moved toward Romina and Nova to Zahara. She twisted the cork stopper from the top of a small vial with a satisfying thwop. Opening Romina’s mouth, she forced the vial between her lips and emptied half the contents, a thick red liquid which rolled down inside the glass. Tokel removed the vial and clamped Romina’s mouth closed. She emptied the rest of the vial into Zahara’s mouth.

‘Hold them still,’ said Tokel calmly to both Walkers, ‘No matter what happens, hold their heads still and remain calm,’ she looked directly at Kaoldan.

Nothing happened, then there was a ripple, then a twitch followed by a full-blown jerk of Romina’s neck.

He gripped her tight, arms like rock, fingers trembling with the effort. Caught in an embrace as if his life depended on it.

A memory stirred.

Distant.

Faint, but becoming clearer, faded colours becoming more vibrant, sounds from muffled to clear.

He remembered.

He remembered how it felt.

How he had felt.

All those years ago.

As if he had become complete, as if he was no longer alone.

The sensation had taken him by surprise. A sense of calm that descended over his body like the softest and most comforting of blankets.

Utter calm.

Utter confidence that he knew what to do.

Meeting Morveen and forming The Link with her had brought him such happiness, but their children. Their children were a gift. The gifts his wife had created were the most precious of all. It had lit a fire deep within him, that they should, would never know, pain, hunger, sorrow or sadness.

He felt that he had been put on this earth to do this task and no other.

That this was his role in life, first, second and third.

He had first felt it with the birth of Jayk.

A boy, a healthy boy, but one that he was responsible for.

But the births of his daughters had been different.

Daughters had given him a fresh perspective.

Romina's birth had bought with it a sharper, more urgent need to protect and safeguard. Zahara had heightened and extended that feeling when she had arrived a few years later. He remembered how he had sworn to himself and them, that he would always protect them, always be there. He clenched his teeth and closed his eyes, pain sharp at the bridge of his nose.

He had failed them.

But he would fail them no more.

No matter the cost.

Whatever it took.

He clenched his teeth harder.

Remembering. Remembering how he had been there for her. How he would have done anything for her. Remembering how things used to be. It was as if she was that young girl again, being cradled by her father after a bad dream. But they were still the same, were they not?

He would still do anything for her, for either of them.

If they needed him, and they did.

He remembered washed out memories of cradling her and her sister; him at peace and them safe, snuggling within the protection of his arms.

The greatest sense of peace he had ever known, then or since.

He bit his lip, gripping her tighter, eyes still clamped shut.

He felt the calm, which was once his friend and now a stranger. The flicker of peace echoed inside of him. A peace that he thought lost and never to return.

The twitches grew into an intense spasm, moving downwards through her body towards her feet. She twisted and turned violently as Kaoldan held firm.

He risked a glance and saw Kubrean holding Zahara carefully but with complete strength and tenderness.

Kaoldan felt his eyes glaze over. He gritted his teeth and forced the tears back.

Gradually after what felt like forever. The spasms and the convulsion lessened. Their strength fading, replaced by no movement at all.

Romina went limp, worryingly, gut aching limp.

He opened his eyes. Her face had lost that waxy sheen, and she was breathing more deeply now. He felt tension in her arms, strength returning.

‘Help them sit up,’ said Tokel, kneeling between them.

Kubrean and Kaoldan sat the girls up, still supporting them from behind, making sure they didn't fall over.

Kaoldan felt Romina gasp, her head searching left and right.

She leant forward, as he backed away, heavily coughed, then hawked and spat, the contents disappearing into the murk. The coughing continued; raw, rasping coughs from deep within her lungs.

Her hands spread on the floor as she steadied herself.

‘What happened?’ she croaked, eyes darting. ‘I don't remember falling asleep here.’

‘Me either...’ came a strangled voice from Zahara, leaning on one hand, nursing her neck with the other.

‘Coil slugs,’ said Tokel with a reassuring smile.

‘Coil what?’ said Zahara, voice cracking.

‘You were both attacked by coil slugs,’ Nova leaned over his cane, face reassuring.

‘What the hell is a coil slug?’ said Romina, half coughing, covering

her mouth.

‘A nasty type of creature,’ came a voice from behind Kaoldan. He turned to see Inga Stone, stood with our hands on her hips and a face like thunder.

‘Horrible slimy creatures. They attack people. The slime on their skin is a form of venom,’ she knelt down to check the necks of the two girls. ‘One touch of it on your skin and it knocks you out cold. They then coil around your neck and slowly drain the body of blood like giant leeches. They slither away when they have had their fill.’

‘Slither...’ said Zahara shuddering. She touched her neck and winced.

‘We don’t tend to see much of them nowadays, but they can grow up to a metre in length. They must have got on board back at Celst don’t worry, we can deal with them. If I remember correctly,’ she turned towards Tokel, ‘They are not very fond of cinnamon?’

Tokel nodded, a grin growing on her face. ‘Yes,’ she said. ‘They hate it.’

‘Cinnamon?’ scoffed Zahara. ‘It’s a spice for cakes.’

‘No, no,’ Inga shook her head. ‘Cinnamon is actually a tree, and it is the bark on the tree that is used as a spice. We know it has amazing healing benefits for many ailments, partially for infections and some diseases. Just like gin.’

Romina clamped a hand to her mouth.

Inga frowned.

‘Not a fan of gin, I presume? Shame. Where was I? Oh yes, luckily for you, I have a quantity of cinnamon on board down below. Available for the right price, of course,’ she smiled sweetly.

Zahara’s eyes narrowed and grumbling Nova reached for his purse.

‘I don’t just transport Walkers and big cats,’ Inga shrugged, ‘And everyone is allergic to something,’

Zahara scrunched up her mouth, clearly not convinced.

‘I believe we can cover your expenses,’ said Nova, eyebrows knitted together.

‘Excellent,’ said Inga brightly. ‘If you could assist me in creating a batch, we can flood the lower decks with its essence. As I recall, it petrifies them, or it drives them away back into the sea. I’ll make the arrangements,’ she turned and strode towards the back of the ship, whistling as she went, boots heels rapping on the wooden deck.

Romina’s face screwed up, and she coughed several times again, a hand on her neck, then spit out the contents.

She held her hand out towards Tokel.

‘Thank you,’ she croaked, ‘I owe you my life.’

‘Not really,’ said Tokel with a smile, shaking her head. ‘It wasn’t all down to me. He found you,’ she nodded towards Kaoldan.

He stood and backed away, grimacing as he did so, suddenly aware of the eyes shifting towards him.

‘And if he hadn’t found you both, I very much fear, you would have died without any of us knowing.’

Romina struggled to turn around, face creased with effort and pain as she did so.

Kaoldan felt his face flush with heat, hands clasped in front of him as he rocked on his feet.

She looked up at her father, her eyes widening in amazement.

‘How many were there?’ said Kubrean, carefully placing his cup in the middle of the table. The contents swayed along with the room as the ship continued to make progress through the Iron Lake. Half a dozen lamps creaked inside the dimly lit room.

‘Nine,’ replied Nova, hands clasped across his chest. ‘Horrible things really,’ said the old man, pulling a face. ‘I had heard about them, but never actually seen one, I’m not entirely sure I want to get that close again. One thing is for certain though: I’m not sure I want to smell cinnamon again for a while,’ he sniffed his waistcoat and wrinkled his nose. ‘It’s everywhere,’ he said, flapping his arm.

It was true. The entire ship smelt of cinnamon, but Kaoldan found

it sweet, warm and reassuring; compared to the salt of the sea.

Good as her word, Inga had provided bags of Cinnamon, at a slightly inflated price, judging by Nova's expression when they had discussed money.

She and Tokel had created a fog of sweet, murky, brown gas that had been wafted into every compartment, every section, every cabin and storage space within the ship. They had made lanterns that billowed out the sweet nutty vapour which Kaoldan and others had carried around the ships which had taken most of the night.

The task had been rather mundane, and Kaoldan had suspected that the two Coil Slugs they had found were the only ones aboard. Then, as he had entered one particular cabin, an ear-splitting screech had made him jump and fumble for his Walkerblade.

The screeches echoed around the low room, like a pig in distress, until with a dull thud a black twisted stick the length of a person's arm had dropped from the ceiling just above his head.

Its oily skin rippled and convulsed, shrinking and withering before his eyes. The sheen on the creature's skin faded and was replaced with a coal-like veneer.

When it eventually stopped moving and screeching, Kaoldan had stabbed it firmly with his Walkerblade, deposited it into a sack and burnt the contents. The entire process had made Kaoldan's skin crawl and also made him feel very hungry.

It had taken most of the night to cover all the ship and no-one had slept.

A door creaked, announcing the arrival of Zahara and Romina.

The two women, while still slightly pale, were by appearances mostly recovered. It appeared that the Coil Slugs had knocked them out and only drained a pint or two of blood before they had been interrupted. The pair lowered themselves wearily into their chairs, with a collective groan.

'Some food?' offered Nova, waving a plate of cheese and bread in front of them. Both women winced.

Romina waved the plate away. 'Not now, thank you,' she said with

a weak smile.

‘How do you feel?’ said Kubrean, leaning forwards in his seat, resting his elbows on the table, face a picture of concern.

‘Not too bad,’ offered Zahara, wincing slightly as she readjusted in her seat.

‘Just tired more than anything,’ said Romina, glancing at her father. ‘I remember lying down to rest and then waking up on the deck spitting out goodness knows what,’ she said stretching out her neck.

‘I told you there was a reason to wear all that armour,’ said Zalen, wrapping his breastplate with a dull clonk. ‘Wonderful stuff, this armour,’ he said with a nod. ‘Probably saved your life.’

‘Neck armour?’ said Zahara, eyebrows raised.

Zalen looked less certain of himself.

‘And not the best of clothing if the ship sinks either,’ added Romina, looking at her sister. Zahara tutted and shook her head. ‘All that water...’

Zalen’s face went still then slightly pale. He shifted in his seat, winced then stood.

‘I’ll be back in a minute,’ he said, sounding rather flustered.

The door banged shut as he left the room, in something of a hurry. A grin spread across their faces.

‘Must you constantly torture that poor man,’ said Nova disapprovingly.

‘It keeps him on his toes,’ said Zahara.

‘And it is rather fun,’ countered Romina.

‘If slightly easy,’ said Zahara.

Nova grumbled to himself, face serious.

Kubrean and Nova exchanged a glance, a look passing between them.

‘Time, we got some rest,’ said Kubrean, groaning slightly as he placed his hands on his knees and stood.

‘And you too ladies,’ said Nova, placing a wrinkled hand on Zahara’s shoulder. ‘And yes, we will inspect your quarters just to

make sure there are no more uninvited guests.'

'Not sure that we can go back to that room now,' said Zahara with a slight shudder, 'Not with the door hanging off its hinges,' she pursed her lips while staring at Kaoldan, who winced and coughed.

'A fair point,' said Kubrean, 'Which is why you will be moved to another room.'

Kaoldan clenched his jaw and rubbed his hands together.

'I'll do it,' he said, voice surprisingly high.

He cleared his throat.

'I'll show them to their new room. You go,' he waved towards the door, his throat becoming increasingly dry and tight.

The two old men paused, then nodded.

'As you wish,' said Nova. 'Just don't keep them up for too long.'

'We aren't kids,' sighed Zahara.

'No, you are not. But you have had an awfully close call. I just want to make sure you are not being kept up for no good reason,' he stared at Kaoldan for a long time.

Kaoldan screwed his mouth up and slowly nodded. 'I'd like to,' he croaked.

'We would too,' said Romina with surprising enthusiasm, her eyes bright, studying Kaoldan closely, causing another flush of heat through his body.

'Very well. Come along, old man,' said Nova pointing towards the door.

Kubrean looked slightly injured at that comment.

'I'm much younger than you,' he muttered, opening the door for Nova to walk through.

'Only by...' words were lost, drowned out by the creak of the ship and the crackle of the brazier.

A heavy silence descended on the room.

Kaoldan desperately wanted to say something, but his throat was tight.

He licked his lips and cleared his throat, stood and poked the brazier, trying his best to appear to be doing a serious job of it. When

in reality, he just prodded and poked for the sake of allowing his head to clear.

‘Thank you,’ came a voice behind him.

He turned, surprised by the words.

‘We never said thank you,’ said Romina, looking at him then away when their eyes met.

He looked at her blankly.

‘For the Coil Slugs,’ she offered, brows raised.

‘Oh, oh yes,’ he waved it away. ‘Horrible things, it was Aralorne as much as me.’

Then more silence.

Zahara looked at her sister and then took a seat.

Goodness it was hot in this room, Kaoldan pulled at his collar.

The silence continued.

He glanced at his daughters, who glanced at him. Their eyes met once or twice, but they averted their eyes, almost too embarrassed to speak.

Still, silence consumed the room.

Say something, his head screamed.

He coughed and moved to the table, turning a chair around, so its back faced towards them. He straddled it with a wince. He closed his eyes and took a sharp breath inwards.

‘I was told when I was very young,’ said Kaoldan, scratching at an imaginary stain on the table with his fingernail. ‘That being a parent is the hardest job in the world. At the time I dismissed it as nonsense,’ he shrugged. ‘It couldn’t possibly be so hard. Surely anyone could do it, or so I thought. I was very, very wrong,’ he said, shaking his head. ‘And I know I’ve got some things - things between us - very, very wrong,’ he licked his dry lips.

His daughters said nothing. They simply looked at him.

The silence returned.

He rubbed the top of his head, hair rustling between his fingers.

‘Most of which, I am very sorry for,’ he said, his voice wavering slightly.

‘Most of which?’ said Zahara, lips pursed.

He wriggled in his seat, felt like there were ants in his trousers.

‘I got something right,’ he countered, but his voice was weak.

Zahara raised her eyebrows.

‘That doesn’t matter now,’ he said, biting his lip.

Her brows raised further.

‘That’s not what I meant,’ he cursed himself. Anger flashed through his head.

‘You still needed protecting.’

Romina snorted.

‘Really...’ she said.

‘Yes.’

She snorted again. ‘We were in the middle of a city surrounded by Walkers and a city watch,’ she spread her hands towards him.

He turned, face tense, jaw muscles aching.

‘What could we possibly need protecting from? The harsh realities of the world, from bad news?’ she sneered, folding her arms.

A tension rose from within him, cold and hot, furious and unstoppable.

‘You needed protection from me,’ he yelled. The tension was instantly released. He felt his heart relax and slow. He closed his eyes and looked down. ‘You needed protection from me,’ he said, softer this time.

Brows dropped the room silent again.

‘You were right,’ he said, voice clearer. He looked up and sniffed. ‘Both of you,’ he said, returning his attention to the stain on the table. but he glanced at each of them. Their eyes less accusing, perhaps.

‘You’ve been right about many things, possibly more than I’m comfortable with in all honesty. You both said it weeks ago. Things have changed. You both have changed in many ways; many beautiful ways, ways I didn’t expect that caught me off guard.’

‘That is a lot of ways,’ said Zahara to her sister, who nodded sagely in agreement.

He sucked at his teeth.

They were not making this any easier. Best to just say it all.

‘When I sent you away, which I still maintain was the right thing to do, back then,’ he said, raising one hand defensively.

‘You were children, barely in your teens. How could I possibly look after you both? When my head was shattered, my world blown apart. It was too much for me to deal with,’ he said, flicking imaginary dust from his lap.

He glanced at them, their faces softer now.

Romina watching him intently, it unsettled him.

‘I can't really put into words where I was back then. The day that it happened,’ he felt a pain at the back of his head. ‘The day that we lost your mother and your brother. I felt so helpless,’ he half whispered. He remembered the look on Nova’s face as he had told Kaoldan the terrible news.

‘So utterly, utterly helpless. I had lost the woman I loved; I had lost my firstborn child; both in one day,’ he rubbed his teeth with his tongue. ‘Instantly my world was smashed and in trying to do the best thing for you, I turned *your* worlds upside down too,’ he said, voice breaking. He swallowed, reaching for a cup, hungrily swallowed down several gulps before bashing it down on the table, a little harder than he had intended. It made them jump and nervous laughter leaked out of them. Romina flushed briefly with embarrassment.

‘Please, continue...’ Zahara said, face serious for once.

Kaoldan cleared his throat.

‘I am sorry for what I did at the time, and for what I have failed to do since,’ he could not meet their eyes. ‘It made sense at the time; it was the right thing to do. Because I was in no fit state to look after anybody. At that point, I could barely look after myself.’

He lowered his head, the pain at the back of his head increasing. ‘It was only with the support of others, Nova, Tokel, Zalen, Kryst and Kubrean that I survived, that I continue to exist,’

He took a deep breath, rising from his seat bowing his head turning away from them. ‘I nearly did some idiotic things,’ he offered,

his hands wide, 'At that time they were things that I never considered before. But they seemed like an answer. A way out,' he muttered. 'Not the perfect answer to the situation. But an answer that beckoned to me none the less, but I couldn't,' he turned, head still low, avoiding gazes and eyes. 'The reason that I couldn't do it was because of you two,' said Kaoldan.

He looked at his hands, fingers fidgeting.

He looked at the ceiling.

Then the wall.

The floor.

The table.

God, this was hard.

He swore.

He felt a rage building within him.

He flexed his fingers, moved his feet, strangely felt the warmth of Fajin flowing through him and then for some unknown reason he punched the wall as hard as he could.

His hand disappeared through the wood as light burst through the hole. The noise cracked around the room, making his daughters jump. A sharp pain shot up his arm.

'Oww...' he groaned, pulling his hand out, splinters and shattered segments of yellow wood clattering to the floor. 'See...' he said somewhat sheepishly, shaking life back into his right hand. 'I'm still very capable of doing stupid things.'

His daughters looked at each other, then at him, nervously laughing. Either it was out of fear or awkwardness, he wasn't sure.

The pain had left him, but strangely it felt good.

It felt honest and truthful; made him feel alive.

'I do that sometimes,' chirped Romina with a shrug of her shoulders.

He frowned. 'Really? I thought I was the only one doing stupid things?' he said. He was pushing it, he knew that, but it felt like the right thing to do.

'I don't know why; I've never really understood it. It's just one of

the things that I do. It helps at the time. I feel better afterwards, but it's partly because I'm angry,' she said, inspecting her fingers. 'I'm angry all the time. I get so annoyed about little tiny insignificant things and recently I've felt angrier, if that were possible,' she said with a nervous smile. 'I find it difficult to control myself and then I see you doing exactly the same as I do and it makes me feel better about it,' her face was twisted in thought. 'That man. The one I killed on the journey down after the attack. I did that because I was angry,' she lowered her head. 'I did it on a whim without thinking, I rarely think through the consequences of my actions, particularly when I'm angry,' she frowned then looked straight at him.

'The anger has been deep in me since you left,' she said. 'I hated you for a while, I suppose, for ripping us apart. It still hurts, and it has changed everything, but I understand,' she nodded slowly, sighed and continued to look at her fingers, flexing and twisting them.

'In some ways you had no actual choice what could you do? Us being around you would have been a reminder of what you lost, of what we all lost,' she looked at him and bit her lip. An impish smile appeared on her face. For a second, she looked like a child again.

An image flashed through his mind, a black and white image; a silhouette of two bright young girls stood, hand in hand, at the entrance to Vanguard, its stone gates dark, hard, cold.

'I'm scared,' croaked Zahara, her face pale. 'All the time,' she confirmed, looking at her sister, then at Kaoldan. 'I'm more scared than I've ever been in my entire life, if I'm really honest,' she said. 'It makes no sense, I should know I'm surrounded by people who love me, people that would do anything to protect me, but I am scared all the time.'

Romina looked confused, uncertain.

Kaoldan narrowed his eyes, 'You're not the only one,' he said. 'I've been scared my entire life. Scared of responsibility. Scared of failure. Scared of hurting people. Scared of not being there.'

He looked up, rubbing the side of his head, which was now throbbing with pain.

‘But most of all, scared of making things worse,’ he murmured.

He paused, silence holding for a long time.

‘I’ve seen things in this world that would make your blood run cold. I’ve seen things that I thought, I pictured, could happen to you,’

He turned to face them.

‘You are the reason I’m still here,’ he said, frowning. ‘And for a while, if I’m honest, I resented you for it,’ he sucked his lips, breathing in through his nose.

They said nothing and watched, eyes searching his face.

‘I’ve never felt such pain, before or since then,’ he said more to himself than anything. He remembered the feelings, horror, disbelief and above all else guilt.

Romina raised her hand to her mouth, her eyes wet.

Zahara looked down at the table and seemed to find the same stain that Kaoldan had, her jaw tight, nails digging into the wood.

‘Please understand this is not an easy thing for me to say, it is not an easy thing for any father to say to his children, no matter how big they are,’ he tried to make a joke of it, but no-one was laughing each in their own world or memories and what ifs.

Silence held the room for a long time.

His eyes shifted from the floor to the gaping hole in the wall and then to them.

The girls. The women.

‘I think that may be part of the reason I never visited,’ his face creased in concentration. ‘I feared I would make things worse, destroy your lives again. You didn’t need that, and I couldn’t bear the thought of causing you more pain. It was easier to remember you as you were. Just as it is easier to remember Jayk and your mother as they were, in that perfect world, in that perfect moment in time, before that day.’

He could not help himself.

All embarrassment fled; all propriety left him at that second.

It was like his body did not belong to him, that he was an observer, powerless to change anything.

But why would he want to?

The shaking of his shoulders felt good, the tears rolling down his face felt sweet; the tension wiped from his muscles.

He slumped into a heap on the chair, burying his head in his hands. Deep gasping sobs emitted from his body, his shoulders quivered, vibrated.

He felt an arm circle around him.

Then another.

Then two more.

They said nothing. He heard their sobs combining with his own. And they held each other as years of pain and anger rose up and were released from within them.

Chapter 24 – What Do You Know?

If Celst had been a depressing seaside town, then the small harbour they entered on the way to Zuivosal was even worse, but Romina didn't really care.

They had been at sea for all of seven days, strong winds that had helped them to make excellent progress on the first two days, but had eventually dwindled and faded, and their pace had slowed.

The Iron Lake had very much lived up to its name, dark, dirty water, seemingly with no end. The sight of small rocks in the distance which had grown overnight into a cluster of small islands had lifted her spirits.

The islands themselves were nothing special, but grey granite, bland white seams glistening, tufts of grass here and there was about the best that could be said of them. But the prospect of stability underfoot, and freedom from this ship, made anything look far more appealing than they were.

She had got restless on board, beginning to see the ship as a wooden prison, a great trap and her the mouse within it.

The sky had mirrored the water, and she hadn't seen the sun for several days, something else that had eaten into her positivity, but the prospect of different surroundings, regardless of how grey and bland they might appear, was most welcome.

The town itself was pitiful. Tall dark logs reached like dead fingers towards the sky forming a grim but effective looking outer wall, cutting off when it reached a sheer cliff face.

The town itself sat unassumingly in a nest of rock, dark peaks disappearing into the murk of the morning. As the ship silently glided into the harbour, the town revealed itself, slowly unwrapping before her eyes.

Buildings along the edge of the town were nothing special, but they contained windows and glass. She bounced on her tiptoes as she looked. Who would have thought windows could bring such a

reaction?

A bell clanked absently in the distance, adding to the impression that the entire town itself was made of metal. The few ships which were at anchor had seen better days as they slowly bobbed with the movement of the water; nets and lobster pots stacked haphazardly on the jetty and they too had seen better days.

Boards creaked and groaned behind her; a familiar presence swept over her.

‘I heard Zuivosal was one of the most beautiful places in the world,’ mused Romina. ‘I hope this isn’t a taste of things to come,’ she said to her sister.

‘We can only hope,’ said Zahara as she came to a halt at her side.

They stood silently, taking in the view as the ship slowly glided through the water towards the jetty.

Behind them, Captain Inga Stone shouted directions, using fairly colourful language, towards her crew ordering the gathering in of sails and the small group of oarsmen beneath them slowly guiding the ship into its place.

Romina had grown to like the young woman. She was ten years older than Romina and was quite the most direct person she had ever met. They had shared stories on the way over in the dull lamplight of breakfast or on the deck, with only the wind and the waves for company.

She would be sad to leave her. They had got on well, and most importantly she had provided a welcome distraction. Ever since the conversation with her father, she had craved something to occupy her attention and mostly she had found it in the young captain.

Inga was all wild hair and even wilder stories.

Romina wasn’t entirely certain she believed all of them, but they had done the trick. They had traded stories and tales whilst teasing and winding up Zalen. The blonde Walker seemingly a sucker for a pleasant tale, his eyes wide as she talked. But afterwards, on her own, her thoughts would inevitably return to her father.

She had been shocked that night, but not entirely surprised. She

had thought something wrong but had not been expecting his outpouring of emotions.

It was the prospect of him taking his own life which caused most concern.

He was, or at least she remembered him, as being the most stoic of people.

Principled, pragmatic, and proud.

How had he been reduced to seeing the loss of his own life as the only escape? But maybe that was the whole point. It was the only escape from a world that he felt held nothing for him. And yet, it did.

It held something for him; he was just too blinded by grief, not seeing what was right in front of him. Or what was hundreds of miles away in Vanguard.

She considered that given the circumstances - the sudden and life-changing events that had happened all those years before - inevitably, he would reconsider what he truly needed.

His admission that he needed Romina and Zahara had provided great comfort.

She better understood now why he had done what he had done, and she supposed given the same circumstances with her in his place, she may well have done the same. Not that she had forgiven him. One conversation does not heal all wounds; indeed, she knew this still had a long way to go. But they had made some progress.

‘Depressing sort of place,’ said Zalen conversationally, voice echoing from behind her. ‘Not sure I fancy hanging around this place too long.’

‘Don’t worry, Zalen. We were thinking the same thing,’ said Romina, giving her sister a knowing look. Zahara winked back.

The girls smiled, then turned and stared at Zalen. Immediately the red Walker took half a step back, eyebrows knitted together.

‘What,’ he said suspiciously. ‘What...?’ he repeated, searching their faces.

‘Nothing...’ they said in unison.

Zalen scowled, slowly turned, then stomped away, muttering

under his breath.

Their ability to constantly windup Zalen provided much amusement, and there was no prospect that he was getting any wiser to their routine.

She loved him dearly, but it was a good way of keeping him on his toes.

Kubrean approached the front of the ship.

‘Let me know the moment we dock,’ he said to the sisters. ‘Time is of the essence. We have somebody to meet and they should have arrived by now,’ he said.

The women looked at each other than at him.

Romina bristled. ‘Who?’ she asked.

‘For the moment, that is none of your business,’ replied Kubrean with a crocodile grin. ‘You two will just have to wait and see but trust me,’ he said, ‘You won’t be disappointed.’

The tavern they had chosen as their overnight accommodation was surprisingly good. White plastered walls, wooden beams, low ceiling, a roaring fire in the corner.

Everything that Romina had hoped.

It smelt clean, fresh, and slightly of salt. The food – a hearty broth of red meat and vegetables, crusty dark bread with yellow butter - was good. The first meal she had eaten and felt able to keep down for a long time. Her legs were still buffeted by phantom waves. She wriggled in her seat to shake the sensation away.

They also had a rather excellent selection of beers, which sent a slight shudder through Romina, and so on this night she had settled for just water.

Most surprisingly, although it was a large tavern, they had acquired an entirely separate building for themselves. The entire group had settled under one roof and best of all, she had taken a bath after the long weeks of travelling, weariness, grit, dirt and the

monotony all washed away.

‘So, who we are we here to meet?’ she said to Kubrean.

He smiled and raised his cup.

She sat back, instantly a sulky teenager.

‘You’ll get nothing out of him,’ said Lauden, shaking his head. ‘The man is stone.’

Romina grunted, pursing her lips.

‘Believe me, I’ve tried,’ continued the young man. ‘He could keep a secret from himself if he chose to.’

Romina frowned, trying to figure that one out.

‘Any guesses?’ he asked, peering over his cup.

She shook her head.

The suspense had been killing her.

They had waited patiently for over a day now, but still their guest had not arrived. She had tried her best to get the secret out of Kubrean – with a little help from her sister – using all manner of different tactics: sweetness, innocence, cheekiness and lastly blatant all-out pestering.

Nothing had worked.

Each attempt deflected, brushed aside, shrugged off or smiled away; the skills of a man who had acquired complete immunity to persuasion.

‘Please, Kubrean,’ she moaned in her seat. ‘Who are we waiting for?’ she curled her lips.

‘I believe that would be me,’ said a voice in the doorway.

Lauden jerked his head up, face slack and his eyes wide.

Romina turned to see a tall, lean woman stood there, dressed head to toe in black, a traveller cloak over her shoulders, a hood covering her head. She took a step forward and pulled the hood back, revealing short platinum blonde hair, completely at odds with her dark midnight skin.

She smiled openly and approached Kubrean with open arms. Her footsteps echoing on the wooden floor. He rose, and she hugged him. He appeared slightly unsettled by the act of affection. He then bowed

and smiled.

‘My Master,’ he announced. ‘Ladies and gentlemen, may I introduce you to the Paragon Master of the Walker Order. The Black Walker – Gythe.’

Lauden raised his eyebrows.

Pleased with the announcement, she beamed and nodded to each in turn to the entire group. There was a collective screech of chairs as all in the room stood and bowed towards her.

‘Please, please, sit, continue with your meal,’ she said waving them down.

Excited chatter broke out between them.

Lauden puffed out his cheeks and let out a slow breath.

Romina herself was flushed with a sudden bout of nerves. She risked a sly look at Gythe, eyes darting away as the Black Walker looked towards her.

She had never actually met Gythe, even though they had lived in the same city, Vanguard, for over 6 years.

‘I wasn’t expecting that,’ whispered Lauden behind his hand.

‘You weren’t expecting what?’ said a voice, rich and deep.

Romina turned to see Gythe take a seat beside her, looking straight at Lauden.

The young Walker squirmed slightly in his seat, lost for words.

‘Anybody?’ Gythe said, looking around the table. Her eyes fell upon Romina.

Romina coughed, spluttered, raised her hand. But no words came.

Gythe grinned.

‘I thought you’d be taller,’ Romina blurted, her mouth appearing to take on a life of its own.

Gythe burst out laughing. The corners of her eyes lit up and wrinkled. She attempted to cover the laugh with her hand but failed miserably.

Lauden winced.

Romina pulled her knees together and tucked her arms into her side.

Gythe raised a hand, shaking her head.

'I am sorry,' she snorted. 'But you do not know how many times I have heard that.'

Romina blushed, unable to look Gythe in the eyes. 'My apologies,' she blurted again.

'It's quite all right,' Gythe laughed, waving it away. 'It just never ceases to amaze me how that's the first thing that people say when they meet me. I wish I was taller, if the truth be told, but unfortunately the universe does not wish that to be the case, and who am I to argue,' she said with a shrug.

Romina's face felt cooler now, and she raised her chin, stretching out her neck. A smile fixed in place and she looked towards Gythe.

Gythe flexed her fingers, and an apple jumped out of the bowl straight into her hand. She settled back into her seat and whilst still looking at Lauden beckoned with two fingers of her other hand and a clay cup of water shuffled across the table and settled in front of her.

'So, what else do you know about me?' she said, looking between the pair, 'Other than how short I am?'

'That you're a legend,' blurted Lauden, face stiffening, having realised half a second later what his mouth had just said.

Gythe winced.

It appeared talking without thinking was spreading.

'That might be putting it slightly too...' she struggled for the right word. 'plainly?'

She looked at the apple, polished it. 'Or maybe not...' she grinned and took a large bite.

Lauden swallowed. 'You have been the Black Walker for 5 years.'

'Four, not five,' she said, inspecting the apple. 'But close enough,'

'That you are the most powerful Walker alive,' Lauden said, eyes widening.

'I'm certainly more powerful than the dead ones,' she said, 'And I'm not sure I am the most powerful living Walker. But do continue...' she placed the remnants of the apple back down on the table.

Lauden licked his lips, leaning forward in his seat.

‘I heard you single handily saved Ramazi at the battle of Rynk...’

Gythe glanced at Romina, who swallowed, but said nothing.

‘There was no battle of Rynk, just a great tragedy,’ said Gythe, working the muscles in her mouth as she ground a cup into the table.

‘If you wish to know the truth, I was lucky. Others were not. Ramazi was injured and despite my efforts he was never the same afterwards,’ she blew out a long heavy sigh.

‘He died less than a year later,’ she shook her head. ‘But that is the past, and you should study your history more closely. Less you say something you may regret,’ she looked sharply at Lauden.

Romina remained silent, eager not to draw any attention to herself.

Lauden lowered his gaze.

‘Yes, my Master,’ he said, clearing his throat. ‘I, er, have to go. Call of nature,’ he stuttered, pointing to the door with his thumb, smiling weakly.

A creak of wood and he was gone.

‘I am sorry about that,’ said Gythe, eyes soft.

‘It’s not his fault,’ said Romina, fiddling with her shirtsleeves. ‘He’s just enthusiastic, and how could he have known?’

‘That’s very good of you,’ said Gythe, nodding slowly to herself.

Romina shrugged.

‘I see much of your mother in you,’ said Gythe.

Romina felt hot. She shifted in her seat but stayed silent.

‘I knew her, not well, but I knew her. She was a woman of extraordinary talents,’ Gythe said, stroking her neck.

‘Your brother too. Jack?’

‘Jayk,’ corrected Romina, not looking up.

‘Jayk,’ Gythe nodded slowly. ‘Such a waste. Such a dark day for the Walker Order,’ Gythe narrowed her eyes and rubbed the back of her neck.

‘You were there?’ murmured Romina.

Gythe nodded. ‘You should be proud of them. I would not have

survived if it wasn't for them,' she said. 'Small comfort for you, I suppose,'

'It helps,' said Romina, still inspecting the sleeve of her shirt.

'I'm glad,' said Gythe, reaching forwards to rest her hand on Romina's shoulder.

The touch felt like ice, but Romina just looked up and forced a smile.

'So glad you two are getting acquainted,' beamed Kubrean as he dropped himself into Lauden's seat with a grunt.

Gythe smiled sympathetically and settled back into her seat. She clicked her tongue and removed her cloak, draping it over the back of the chair to reveal the identical grey and black armour of the other Walkers sat around the table.

'Time, we got started,' she said to Kubrean, business like once again.

Kubrean nosily cleared his throat, rapping the cup on the table.

As if well rehearsed, the room fell into silence and all eyes looked towards him.

Kubrean sniffed, leant forwards, and began.

He recounted recent events; their engagements with the Krund outside Thura, the carnage at the village of Grihr, the threat of the return of Reng, their partially successful visit to the university city of Prava, the instructions of Duke Lomman and lastly their encounter with the unknown enemy – The Otan - en route.

He introduced Aralorne – sat as if chiselled from white marble at the end of the table - as an adviser to Nova and Tokel.

He nodded towards Gythe, who returned the gesture.

Romina frowned.

Was it her imagination or did a look pass between them?

Aralorne gazed towards her and she flinched slightly as their eyes met, but she forced a smile back and maintained eye contact.

He held her stare for an uncomfortably long time.

The hairs on the back of her neck rose.

Then for no reason at all, Aralorne winked at her, then returned

his attention towards the table.

She let out a slow controlled breath; her stomach no longer feeling like a rock.

Whatever that was she did not like it, not one bit.

She folded her arms and looked towards Zahara; face bright and attentive, but completely missing the look. Then at her father; he sat elbows on the table, nursing a cup between his hands. He glanced towards Romina and raised his eyebrows in acknowledgement as he took a slow drink.

Had he seen the look, had he felt what she had?

'So, why am I really here?' said Gythe, pursing her lips, looking around the table.

'If I may?' offered Aralorne.

'By all means,' said Nova, hands wide,

Aralorne licked his lips, then moved forward, placing his elbows on the table.

'We need to get into Zuivosal soon,' he said, respectfully.

Gythe tilted her head to one side but said nothing.

'The records that we need to investigate, which can confirm or deny the return of Reng, are inside the archives of the city,' he said. 'Unfortunately, there is no other way. The threat of Reng returning, the apparent murder of the scholar at Prava caused me great concern and I've shared those concerns with Nova, Tokel and Kubrean. As members of the Grey Council, they have the authority to open the city if the Council is entirely in agreement.'

Gythe looked towards Nova. The old man twitched but nodded back.

'The Grey Council are all in agreement. We must enter the city, investigate, and put an end to this matter with facts, at the moment we are just dealing with myths and legends. The records we have access to here, or anywhere in Athos, are simply not sufficient to provide the answers we need,' he said. 'Zuivosal will provide those answers.'

Gythe nodded her head thoughtfully.

‘And you have spoken to all the Grey Council?’ she asked.

‘Between the three of us, yes. They are all in agreement,’ said Tokel.

Gythe cocked her head. ‘They can be a stubborn bunch; I’d like to have seen how you’ve got them on side.’

Kubrean grinned.

‘We have exhausted all of our options and Aralorne is right, we must sort this mystery out. If there is even the remotest possibility of Reng returning. We have to be certain and, if necessary, we have to stop it,’ said Tokel, banging her hand on the table.

It made almost everyone in the room flinch, except Gythe, Aralorne and her father, she noticed.

Nervous laughter filled the room.

‘Sorry,’ said Tokel sheepishly, looking around the room at smiling faces. ‘But it is important.’

‘It most certainly is,’ said Gythe, as the laughter died away.

‘I know that entering Zuivosal brings with it certain challenges and complications. Unfortunately, there is no way around it,’ said Nova with a slow shake of his head.

‘So, with respect, Master, I have to ask that you allow us access to Zuivosal. We will be in and out as quick as possible. But we need access and I apologise for bringing you here. It was too important not to ask in person.’

Gythe slowly blew out a breath as she hunched her shoulders forward and swallowed.

‘Two days,’ her eyes looking at each member.

Nova and Aralorne exchanged a look.

‘Two days,’ she announced crisply, ‘Two days is all you have. If you’re not done within that time. That is it,’ she said with a shake of her head. ‘This is a one-time offer. Can you do it?’

Aralorne shrugged, ‘In all honesty. I don’t know. I believe I know where we will have to go, but I have no idea about the size of Zuivosal until I’m inside. I cannot say.’

‘Take it or leave it,’ said Gythe with a shrug.

Aralorne frowned, almost scowled at her.

‘It is the best I can do,’ she said. ‘You do not understand. The toll it will take on me opening it up.’

‘You’ve done it before?’ said Tokel, head tilted, voice slightly raised.

‘Just the once,’ said Gythe, squinting.

Tokel’s face did not move, but she sat back quietly in her chair.

‘It takes a tremendous physical and mental toll, and the amount of Fajin energy needed,’ she whistled. ‘Wiped me out for weeks.’

She looked at Aralorne intently, causing him to shift in his seat.

‘Might I make a suggestion?’ she said, leaning forward. ‘I agree, we need to investigate this. But you are not asking for something simple. Zuivosal has been opened only a handful of times since it was sealed hundreds of years ago. And there are risks. Some Walkers have entered and not come out.’

‘Sealed in?’ said Zalen, face paling.

Gythe nodded. ‘It has happened, I cannot say otherwise.’

Zalen swallowed and sat back, seat creaking.

‘From my knowledge of the city, there are only two places you will need to go to find whatever you need and get back. Split into two groups. It means you can cover twice the ground in half the time.’ She looked around the table, her eyes searching, a few nervous coughs, some tense looks, but slowly nods of agreement from around the table.

Aralorne pulled a face and nodded towards Nova and Tokel.

‘Agreed,’ said the old man. ‘In which case. I have knowledge of Zuivosal and its layout so I will take Kaoldan, Zahara, Aralorne, Zalen. And Tokel will lead Kubrean, Romina, Kryst, Dalon and Lauden.’

‘Sounds like a plan to me,’ said Gythe with a slow nod, a grin spreading across her face. ‘It will take us most of the day to reach Zuivosal. Might I suggest an early night?’

‘Kaoldan and I will see to the restocking of supplies,’ said Kubrean.

‘And you are sure about this?’ said Gythe, her face serious.

Nervous looks around the table.

‘We have to know, so we all go, together. No-one left behind,’ said Kaoldan looking at Zahara then Romina. ‘But we can do it,’ a smile grew on his face.

Romina felt as though something had just changed and smiled back.

‘He’s right,’ said Tokel, hands open, ‘So we go.’

‘That settles it,’ said Gythe, dusting her hands together. ‘We leave tomorrow. First thing. Get plenty of rest. We will travel quickly, fully armed, I’m not taking any risks,’ she emphasised, looking around the table, nods of agreement followed.

‘Excellent,’ she chirped. ‘Good night, everybody,’ she said with a bow.

Chairs creaked; shoes shuffled as bows were repeated around the table.

Gythe smiled, turned on her heels and marched out of the room, closing the door behind her with a clank.

Chapter 25 – New Horizons

As planned, they had risen early and set out en masse.

Romina had awoken earlier than anyone, excitement at the prospect of the day ahead playing on her mind all night.

She had used the time unconstructively, taking in the view of the harbour; boats bobbing and seagulls swooping, fighting and screeching. It was wasted time, she knew, but it didn't really matter to her.

She was full of enthusiasm; the prospect of not having to sit on a ship for days at a time thrilled her. She yearned for the open countryside, although in this part of the world it was mainly grey. At least she would feel as though she was achieving something.

Progress was important and given the activity over recent weeks, the prospect of reaching their goal later that day was the main reason for the uplift in her mood.

The other reason for the uplift had been one sentence uttered by her father the previous night.

'We all go, together. No-one left behind.' her father had said.

A simple line.

A line that could mean many things.

But for her, only one.

Acceptance.

Her father had voiced his support for something that was undeniably dangerous, that prospect too was daunting and thrilling in equal measure, but he had voiced his support for both his daughters to be part of the group to undertake the task.

She scowled at the thought he had no choice, which in fact he did not.

But that did not matter.

It was a vote of confidence.

Wasn't it?

However it was intended, she was determined to see the positives

and therefore saw it as an endorsement.

He had not been forced to say the words; they had been spoken freely, and the look on his face had at least seemed sincere. And the most important thing, he had said it in public. Before other Walkers.

In front of members of the Grey Council AND the Paragon Master.

She smiled, it was progress to her, and that was what mattered.

Romina had felt a surge of pride at the sight of twelve Walkers that morning. Geared up and ready to go. She had exchanged an excited grin with Zahara, who returned the look clearly feeling the same way.

In recent weeks she had felt that nothing had progressed. Long journeys, varied surroundings, but nothing felt had changed. Today was altogether a different prospect.

She sniffed the air - clean and cool – sitting slightly taller in her seat, shoulders back, head raised. Even Essa walked with more swagger than usual.

Today was the day at least. She felt as though she belonged in this company.

Today was the day she and her sister would work towards becoming a Guardian Walker.

The Guardian or Green Walkers were the lowest ranked Walkers within the Order system. After leaving Vanguard and completing training, all students were expected to gain at least a year of practical experience before earning the right to be called a Walker.

Sometimes students had earned their green cloak in less than a year, Ramazi and Gythe herself being the best-known examples.

Romina licked her teeth.

She saw no reason why she and her sister could not do the same.

Her brother earned the title of Guardian in just under a year. It had been difficult, had challenged and stretched him both mentally and physically. He had been supported by their parents but had earned his leadership expedition under the watchful eyes of his mother on merit.

Her heart ached as she remembered him; tall, blonde and

confident smiles.

Her mother watching him; brimming with pride, a wry smile on her beautiful face, dark hair flowing in the wind.

It was perhaps a romanticised view of them, something you read about in books, but it was the last accurate image she could recall of them together.

She clenched her jaw and looked into the distance.

Twenty two Walkers lost in a single day. Composed of twenty trainees, her brother, mother, Gythe and the Paragon Walker, Ramazi.

There had been accusations, criticism - how could there not be? Walkers were not invincible, they died like anyone, but never in such numbers, or not in living memory at least.

Zahara and Romina had seen the looks, heard the whispers, the comments when they had arrived in Vanguard. It was this that had drawn them closer to each other, particularly when the punches and kicks had begun. Slyly at first, a shoulder in the corridor, an accidental strike at a hand during weapons practice, then more overtly and then in front of an audience.

No-one had intervened.

Why support the family responsible for losing so many lives?

It had been borne out of fear; she knew now.

Fear that it could happen to them.

Death.

The Abyss.

No-one's favourite choice of subject; she glanced at Aralorne riding in the distance; alone and yet comfortable.

They had survived by safety in numbers. That and learning how to throw a good punch. Tokel had taught them that. The fine art of fighting dirty. It had worked well for them and as they had grown, developing a well-earned reputation for always getting back up and not being a soft target. The waves of punches and kicks had faltered and then stopped.

Their tormentors had finally backed away after Zahara had

broken the nose of one particularly vexatious male trainee. The look on his face; eyes accusing, blood smeared across his cheek, hands trembling.

They had stopped after that.

It had been a lucky punch, no finesse or intention to strike there, but the effect had been instant. They were no longer the victims, no longer fair game. Not when the game bites back.

She sniffed and blew out a long breath. It all seemed so long ago and yet look where they were now, on their way to Zuivosal. It all added to the feeling that today was the start of something new.

‘How good is your history?’ came a voice behind her.

She turned to see Tokel approaching, face intent on mischief.

Romina frowned.

‘Your history?’ said Tokel. ‘Time for a little test.’

Romina’s face fell. ‘Really?’ she groaned.

‘Really,’ said Tokel with a grin. ‘Everything you know about Zuivosal, go...’

‘Everything...?’ she pouted, eyes wide.

Tokel raised an eyebrow. ‘That may work on men,’ she looked towards Lauden – taking in the countryside like it was the first time he had been outdoors – ‘But it will not work on me.’

Romina followed her gaze, recoiled, then shuddered.

‘Go...’ repeated Tokel.

Romina snorted; face creased up.

‘Can’t I do the test with Zalen?’ she asked.

Tokel frowned.

‘He doesn’t know much. I can make things up and he just accepts it as fact,’ she shrugged.

Tokel’s eyebrows rose even higher, her gaze turning towards the sandy-haired Walker, her tongue working around her mouth.

Zalen - as if sensing the danger – looked up and waved.

He then caught the expression on Tokel’s face; his smile and his hand both lowered rather quickly. He looked down, conveniently finding a loose buckle on his panthera Salah.

Tokel sniffed, having made her point, and returned her gaze to Romina.

‘Go,’ she said.

Romina sighed.

‘The city of Zuivosal is the historic and original home of the Walkers,’ she said in a droning voice.

Tokel tilted her head, jaw hard.

Romina winced.

‘It was abandoned and sealed 500 years...’

‘400 years...’ corrected Tokel.

‘400 years ago...’ smiled Romina. ‘It was a centre of commerce, for both profit and knowledge, and it held the seat of government and power in Thura, or Thura before it existed. It was joined formally with the university at Prava and was known as one of the most beautiful cities in the world.’

Tokel grimaced. ‘Depends on your taste,’ she interjected.

Romina ignored that.

‘It was originally a small town based purely around trade dealing with and supporting the Walker Order. Over the centuries, it grew as the influence of the Walker Order expanded. The city itself had become an epicentre of justice, learning, culture and science. It became a symbol of progress and peace; showing what could be achieved when people work together. Until it reached its peak about 400 years ago when, virtually overnight, it was lost and ultimately abandoned.’

Tokel nodded, ‘Keep going.’

Romina squinted and looked up, grey clouds rolling overhead.

‘There are various thoughts about what happened and why so; they varied depending on the author. The consensus appears to be that the city had been attacked - overwhelmed - defences circumnavigated. Hundreds if not thousands of Walkers, along with the other citizens, had been lost.’

She bit and rubbed her teeth along the edge of her mouth.

‘Things are much less clear after that.’

Tokel nodded.

Romina sighed - time to ad-lib.

‘It has become a secret in the history of Walkers. No-one has, to the best of my knowledge, studied it or at least nothing has been written meaning that the lack of information has been filled with folklore, myths and legends. Something catastrophic happened. What that could be?’ she shrugged. ‘The decision was taken to leave the city and restrict access. Why, I do not know. But what I do know is that Zuivosal has become synonymous with the darkest chapter of Walkers and also carries with it an air of tragedy. It is the uncertainty of what we will find that makes all this so exciting.’

Tokel hummed.

‘Not bad, a little basic, but not bad,’

‘Do you know what we will find?’ asked Romina, voice slightly strained.

‘No. If I’m honest. But you are right, that is what makes this all so much fun,’ said Tokel with a cheeky grin.

While the countryside most definitely lacked variety, it felt good to be back in the saddle as Romina pressed Essa onwards. The big cat also appeared to be enjoying the wide-open space, having been contained on a ship for far too long.

Rolling hills, a swirling golden sea of tall thin grass and a grey sky for company. Conversation had been light but infrequent, each choosing predominantly to keep their thoughts to themselves. Perhaps the prospect of seeing Zuivosal was occupying more than just Romina’s attention.

They peaked over another hill down below them stretched a long thin curved valley, more of the same.

She leaned forward.

There was something off about it.

Her eyes narrowed.

The colours of the grass seemed slightly richer, gold rather than the paler yellow on either side of the valley.

She looked up, a break in the cloud, smiled and shook her head.

A trick of the light. And yet.

There was something about it that did not sit right with her.

All she saw before her was golden coloured grass waving, swirling in the patterns of the wind. Broken up by eruptions and seams of black, grey rock.

She touched her neck and rubbed her chin.

Nothing to see here.

She pressed Essa onward.

At the bottom of the hill, before the start of the curved valley, Gythe and her black panthera stopped. She slowly climbed out of the saddle, patting and ruffling the big cat's ears.

Dref bounced around the big cat, his barks echoing around, trying to force a reaction. Gythe bent down to tickle his head, but he lowered his head and backed away.

Romina pulled a face. Why stop here? They were at least half a day's ride from Zuivosal.

'Why have we stopped?' her voice trailed off as she whispered badly out of the side of her mouth, her eyebrows knitted together.

'Damned if I know,' replied Zalen with a shrug. 'I just go where I'm told and do as is needed. It makes life much easier and I have the unique set of skills needed to do it,' he said with a light smile, grunting as he dismounted from Salah.

The group of Walkers following on pulled alongside her, dismounted, and gathered in a small puzzled group. Gythe pointed at each of them, arranging them into a half circle.

Dref skulked around the edge and sat himself by the side of Romina.

She ruffled the big dog's head. He looked up at her tongue sticking out, enjoying the attention.

Gythe stood in the middle of the half circle, looked left and then right. Nodding to herself, everything was evidently in order.

‘We are here,’ she announced, presenting with open hands, a blank open space in front of them.

A chorus of ums and ahs, heads tilted and necks scratched.

‘If you can see nothing then it still works,’ said Gythe with a wry smile.

Romina rubbed her chin and ran her fingers through loose strands of hair.

Gythe snorted, then took several steps outwards and turned to address the semicircle, grass swirling around her.

‘This is serious,’ she announced. ‘Once I open the gates to the city, you will have precisely two days, to the moment before it is sealed again. If you are still inside after that time has passed, then that is where you will remain until it is opened again.’

‘Can’t you just...’ Zalen flicked his fingers outwards. ‘You know...’ Gythe tilted her head, eyebrows raised.

‘Do it again...?’ he said, lowering his hands.

‘Where did you find him?’ she said to Kubrean, shaking her head.

‘We were low on numbers and he is handy with a blade,’ said Kubrean meekly.

Zalen grinned.

Gythe gave him a withering look.

Zalen’s grin evaporated.

She pouted. ‘I can’t just...’ she mimicked the magic gesture with her hands. ‘It can only be opened once every five years.’

Romina frowned.

‘I don’t make the rules,’ Gythe raised her hands defensively.

Romina swallowed, stomach tightening.

‘Do you understand?’ she called.

Nods of agreement, although somewhat reluctantly, by Zalen and Romina herself.

‘I cannot enter the city myself. My job is purely to be the gatekeeper, and I will leave immediately after I have opened it. Do you understand,’ she said much more fiercely this time.

Kubrean nodded, ‘Two days in and out,’ he said with a sober grin.

‘Although I’m not entirely sure what we are meant to search as there is nothing here.’

Gythe grinned. ‘Watch,’ she said.

Shaking her hands out as she moved backwards, turned, took twenty paces forward slowly, she crouched down, pulling herself into a ball. She thrust her right hand outwards and her Walkerblade jumped into her waiting palm.

Romina felt the familiar tingle of Fajin energy, but on a whole different level.

It made the hairs on the back of her neck and arms stand up.

She felt an itching sensation throughout her body, a dull whining noise build in her ears. The air got closer; red hot and ice cold all at the same time.

Gythe shimmered, grass around her swirled as if she was surrounded by a miniature tornado - thousands of strands danced and twisted - with her at the epicentre.

Slowly, the shimmer formed into a glow just around the edges of her body, a golden dust surrounding her. Gythe pulled in heaving breaths. The surrounding image pulsed, vibrated, reaching slowly outwards.

Romina watched her, eyes searching everywhere, jaw slackening, eyelids flickering.

The golden image throbbed, seeming to breathe itself into life. Thickening out, golden specks of light solidifying into a shimmering image, many times bigger than the Paragon Walker herself.

The wind continued to increase in ferocity; it buffeted Romina, nearly knocking her from her feet.

The Fajin energy being absorbed and used by the Paragon Master of the Walker Order was on a scale Romina had never known.

Slowly, with visible strain, Gythe stood. Her hand still clutching the Walkerblade.

She raised her arms straight above her head and gently pulled her dark arms down either side of her; the giant golden image around her, mimicking each move.

The scenery in front of Gythe wavered, rippled, quivered upwards and outwards for hundreds of metres to either side of her, like a stone thrown into a pond.

She stepped forward, thrusting the Walkerblade straight into the wavering image. She twisted her hips, letting out an animal yell, head trembling.

The blade morphed into a long staff. Her yell increased in volume and pitch as she twirled the staff around her hands.

Faster and faster, the staff spun with dizzying speed, Romina could barely keep her eyes on it. The golden image above and around her doing the same.

Romina took half a step backwards, eyes fluttering. She raised her hands, trying and failing to stop the wind from blowing debris into her face.

The staff continued to spin.

Then a tear appeared between her feet.

Grey, cold, light.

Completely at odds with the yellow of the grass.

The tear crept upwards, dull light seeping from the crack that widened; Its jagged tip reaching, searching for the next weak spot.

The staff continued to twirl, but the wind changed direction. It no longer spun around Gythe, it pulled at Romina. Ice cold claws grasped at her clothing, at her legs, beckoning her towards like a lover.

The crack, a shard of grey - now fifty metres high – which continued to rise into the sky, widened out at the base.

Romina tensed her muscles, resisting the icy pull of the wind, legs trembling, as the crack expanded out revealing a different place behind it.

Romina's breath stopped, and maybe her heart did for a moment too, as the air rushed past, whistling around her head.

She saw grass; silver and lifeless.

Hills; low and menacing.

And towers; dozens of towers.

Grey, looming and monolithic.

But this was not what took her breath away.

When she had arrived at Prava, she had been amazed by the size of the Blue Oak tree that was the university itself. Its size and dominance over the land overwhelming. A view of beauty in nature she had never seen before.

What emerged before her now was the exact opposite.

Towers, each the size of the Blue Oak, but grey and shattered.

It was a moment caught in time.

Each tower burst apart; cracked, splintered and utterly, terribly, broken.

Her breath stopped in her throat as her eyes widened, working their way up from the wide base of the nearest tower.

It was shattered, but each splinter and shard gently, effortlessly held in mid-air. as if it had just that second exploded outwards.

Her eyes searched. They were all the same, dozens of towers, all broken; fractured parts floating above them helplessly. Giant chunks of masonry hovered in the sky, slowly twisting,

All at least half a mile wide. Entire structures blown outwards and upwards but remaining static hundreds of metres in the air. They slowly rotated, turning on themselves, twisting on their own axis, but very much remained in the sky. It was quite the most mesmerising sight Romina had ever seen.

She gasped as the tear continued to reach upwards into the sky, fading, blurring to the distance, its movement sideways stopped, the curtain fully pulled back. Golden fields with a blue, white clouded sky on one side. On the other grey, silver and lifeless.

The golden image surrounding Gythe melted away, dust fading into the ground.

Gythe, with a great deal of effort, slowly turned toward the stunned Walkers.

‘Welcome,’ she gasped, face covered with sweat. ‘To the lost city of Zuivosal.’

Chapter 26 – The Shattered City

‘This is,’ announced Lauden to nobody in particular, ‘one eerie frakking place.’

His eyes darting left, right, uncertain what to look at or what to expect next.

‘It’s just not natural,’ he continued, rambling incessantly.

Romina tried to ignore him; jaw clenched and breathing slowly through her nose.

‘Rocks shouldn’t do that...’ he said, pointing at a collection of masonry hanging above a ruined base.

To be fair, he had a point.

It wasn’t every day that you saw a half mile wide tower blown apart, with all its component parts merely dangling in the air.

‘It’s just not right,’ he continued shaking his head.

She pursed her lips and glanced at him.

He rolled his shoulder, blew out a breath and shook his head.

‘Weird,’ he said, ‘do you know what I mean?’

In fairness, Romina knew exactly what he meant, but she was reluctant to give him the satisfaction of a reply.

They had entered the city - or ruins of Zuivosal; she was unsure, which was more accurate - a few short hours ago. True to her word, Gythe had stayed at the entrance. Her forced smiles hiding a monumental effort to open and maintain the doorway.

Their first impression had been one of wonder.

How could a city end up like this?

What could have created such destruction?

Who or what was responsible?

Questions created more questions as they had taken in the sight before them.

Every part of the city was there - more or less. They had passed under several large arches, causing everyone to look nervously upwards at hundreds of tons of stone and masonry merely hanging

above their heads. It was quite a sobering thought entering the city knowing you could be squashed at any instant if, for whatever reason, the forces that held up the masonry suddenly stopped.

‘It is quite something,’ nodded Romina.

Lauden grunted, eyes fixed on something else.

‘I just can't understand how it works,’ he said, pulling a face leaning out of his saddle, gazing up at yet more wreckage.

She followed his gaze, squinting into the distance. Light reflected and glimmered; windows, chairs, tables, books, bits of staircases, all manner of wreckage and debris just hanging around. If she was honest. Lauden wasn't the only one that was unsettled by the new surroundings. Fixed firmly in her mind was the two day deadline. It did not include time for sleeping and eating or any of the other activities you would normally expect, but they had no choice, time was against them. The prospect of being trapped within the city was almost less appealing than floating buildings.

Everything within the city was slightly off. It appeared to be a network of towers connected by interlinking roads with no shops, no housing, nothing at all in between. Just independent towers connected by gravelly roads that had overgrown. Only the fact that the ground was slightly raised, meant that they were visible to the naked eye. It was unlike any city she had ever seen.

She had noticed other things too. It was as if all her senses were heightened just by passing through the barrier. It had taken a couple of attempts to encourage Essa to pass through, and if she was honest, she could hardly blame the panthera for being so reluctant. It had been a shock to their systems, sending a shudder through them both; like jumping into a river when the water is colder than you expect. Sound muffled for a second and then they were inside.

Greeted by silence. Complete and utter stillness.

She shifted in her seat. Other things had come to her attention after the novelty of shattered buildings had worn off.

The sun shone overhead, but there was no actual heat.

There were no trees, no bushes, no shrubs, only plain golden grass

and towers. That was it. She had seen no signs of life, anyway; neither birds nor animals.

Nothing else.

She continued to size up her new surroundings as tension increased in her body, legs tight, chest heavy.

She did not like this place and the sooner they were out the better.

They drew to a halt at a three-way junction, gathering around Nova, who was scowling at the surroundings.

‘I believe,’ said Nova, attempting to look at three pieces of rustling paper at once. ‘That this is where we have to split up,’ he offered a brief nod, partly Romina suspected to reassure himself, and a reluctant smile to seal the deal.

He pointed to a light grey building carved out of a sheer face of rock. A hill rose above it as the valley fell away, creating a hooded effect. A thick wall spread out from the central gateway, blocks cold, grey and square. They moved outwards left and right, enveloping the central structure before merging into the hillside. At its centre stood a thick-set tower, a unique building compared to the rest in Zuivosal, silver domed crown like top. The tower beneath as wide as it was tall.

A practical design. Not like some of the more opulent offerings that surrounded it. This was a building with a specific purpose in mind, to keep people out.

‘My guess is that is the citadel,’ he blinked.

‘Your guess?’ said Kryst with a smirk.

Nova ignored it.

‘You’d have thought he’d have thought this through better, being in charge and all that,’ said Dalon, face semi-serious. ‘But that is just a guess.’

‘Indeed,’ nodded Kryst sagely.

‘Do you mind?’ said Nova, shoulder slumping.

Dalon raised an open hand. 'Oh, don't mind us,' he said. 'Please continue...'

'That is the citadel,' said Nova.

'Now that sounds better...' said Kryst, nodding to Dalon. 'More definite.'

'Almost like he's in charge AND knows what he's doing,' said Dalon with a wide grin.

Nova gave them a withering look.

The pair grinned.

Kubrean's eyes fell upon them.

Grins faded as the pair shuffled to sit straighter in their saddles, but mischief still shone in their eyes.

'They go there,' Nova pointed at the citadel; eyebrows raised.

Silence.

'We. Go there,' he pointed in the opposite direction.

Silence.

A small smile spread across his face.

'Are you sure?' asked Zalen, winking at Kryst.

Nova groaned.

Kryst muttered something and lowered his head into his hands.

'He almost gets it,' said Dalon with a slow shake of his head.

'I know. I know,' said Kryst, shrugging his shoulder.

'Get what?' said Zalen, looking between the pair, face puzzled.

'I'll explain later,' said Kaoldan, suppressing a grin.

'Oh, ok,' said Zalen, face brightening.

Kryst sighed.

Nova sniffed loudly and waited, eyes searching.

Silence.

'I have spoken with both Aralorne and Tokel. They know where we need to search and what we need to look for. I hope that despite the rather, err, dilapidated state of many of the buildings. We should be able to work our way around them. The designers of Zuivosal were very well organised, apparently. At least that is my hope,' he said.

Nova raised a finger, mouth tight, and pointed at Kryst and Dalon, sat like statues in their saddles.

‘So be it,’ said Kubrean. ‘We will split into two groups. Group A will go with Nova and investigate the Citadel and group B will be led by Tokel and myself, we will investigate the old academic quarter.’

Romina looked towards the tower in the opposite direction; the academic quarter, she assumed. It looked vastly different to the stoic, pragmatic citadel; almost a recreation of the university at Prava. Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, she had been told. So, it made complete sense to copy what nature had conveniently already created. Three smaller towers - in proximity - of varying heights, leafless silvery stone representations of the Blue Oak, decorated with spires jutting out at various points, rather than a dome. Romina considered them rather beautiful.

‘We meet back here at midday tomorrow,’ said Kubrean. ‘We will have to sleep where and when we can, if at all. And I for one have no desire to be sealed up in this place. So, let’s be focused, thorough, and get out of here as quickly as we can.’

Murmurs of agreement.

‘Whether or not we have answers. We leave here together tomorrow. Good hunting and to all of you - Good Journey,’ he said, bringing his clenched fists together before pressing them to his lips and opening his hands outwards.

The old Walker blessing, Romina smiled, always one for tradition. All members of the group returned the blessing.

Tokel looked towards Nova, the pair dismounted from their horses, moved forwards hugged, words were exchanged, and they kissed.

Romina glanced towards them and then away.

She snatched a glance at her father. Their eyes met.

He mouthed to her, ‘Take care, please.’

She nodded, returned the smile and mouth back ‘You too’. She felt the cold gnawing of fear in her stomach. One thought had entered her head; why had they sealed the city? Why go to such

lengths and efforts to hide ruins and old buildings – impressive though they were – what was the point?

She had seen abandoned towns here and there; picked clean of all useful materials and left to rot. Why would Zuivosal be any different, or why should it be any different? There were only two reasons as far as she could see; keep people out or to keep something in. Her eyes scanned the surroundings, quickly skimming over everything, looking for clues. She caught Zahara staring at her, face amused.

‘What?’ she mouthed.

Zahara mimicked her sister’s terrified face.

Romina tightened her mouth and gave a look of contempt.

Her sister suppressed a smile, then stuck her tongue out.

Romina returned the gesture. If you can’t beat them, join them.

A grin grew on her face. Her sister’s attitude was the right one. They were here in a dead city, in numbers surrounded by rocks and debris. She turned Essa and followed Tokel.

What possible danger could there be?

The danger it appeared was death by silence.

She had never been particularly keen on research, especially involving more ancient dusty books than she could read in a lifetime and a growing uncertainty about exactly what she was looking for.

As they had entered the academic quarter, the carnage had become clearer. The buildings were a mess of masonry, rocks, planks of wood, shattered glass, plaster and above all else paper. It hung in the air like autumn leaves. It was the weirdest thing. They had entered the structure slowly, uncertain what to expect. Would they float up into the air upon entering it?

No, had been the answer. Kubrean had tested this by throwing a rock into the main entrance. It had clattered to the floor, sound ricocheting around the stone interior, making a hell of a racket. It was hardly subtle, but it had made tense faces less so.

The inner courtyard was a vast wasteland, scattered with debris, some objects floating, other strewn – over hundreds of metres - all over the ground. Grey walls reaching up into the sky, dizzyingly tall. Three towers stood side by side.

Wincing as she had done it, Romina had poked one large floating rock with her Walkerblade. It bobbed and slowly wobbled, like a barrel in a lake.

‘Don’t...’ said Kryst, face serious, one hand raised.

‘Why not?’ she asked. ‘We have to touch stuff.’

He lowered his hand, face less certain.

She poked the rock again to emphasise the point.

It slowly, silently spun away.

Kryst looked away sheepishly.

That was the other thing she had noticed, the silence. Every noise was sharp, amplified and echoed around them. She found that each noise made her jump, her ears alert for anything and everything. Which added to the eerie feel of the whole place.

She shuddered; it was getting colder too and paying so much attention to everything was making her neck and shoulders ache.

She arched her neck back, taking in the full height of the central tower.

‘I hope it’s not on the top floor,’ murmured Lauden with a pained expression.

‘Not sure we’d get up and down it by this time tomorrow.’

Romina gawped and swallowed.

‘It’s not that one,’ came Tokel’s voice. ‘It’s this one,’ she pointed to the left of the tower to a smaller, wider one. Its entrance identical to the other two, a colossal stone statue of a cloaked and hooded figure at the main entrance. She glanced between the three towers, each statue was made from a different coloured stone: black for the main tower, blue for the right and butter yellow for theirs. The statues – at least fifty metres tall – stood silent, solid. Romina wondered what sights they had seen, what had befallen the city.

Paper flittered as Kubrean pushed it away with his hand. He

rubbed his arms as he looked inside, eyes alert.

‘No way they can come with us,’ he pointed towards the panthera.

Tokel nodded. ‘They stay here,’ she said.

A rustle of movement as the group climbed down.

Romina dismounted, Essa’s big blue eyes watching as she did so. She nuzzled her enormous head into Romina, almost knocking her off her feet. Romina’s face broke out in a smile.

‘It’s alright,’ she said, stroking and tickling her ears.

Essa blinked, then pushed her head in deeper to Romina’s shoulder.

She giggled. ‘Stop it,’ shaking her head. ‘Stay here and watch the others.’

Essa snorted and glanced at the other pantheras that had dropped to the ground, bags and saddles rustling as they did so.

‘Stay,’ Romina raised her hand, then turned, gaze darting around. She swallowed, throat dry, and wondered if Essa felt as she did, slightly sick and excited all at the same time.

Muffled footsteps echoed as they entered beneath the billowing yellow cloak of the Walker. Faces serious, hands near to weapons.

If this was one of the most important places within Zuivosal, no expense had been spared in its construction. Surprisingly, the building was intact only major parts of the outer wall appear to have been dismantled, thrown away, as if a small child had knocked toy blocks away with one tantrum filled stroke of their arm.

Once fully inside the splendour had continued; a pale marble floor, several doorways leading off in other directions, cold light shone in capturing swirls of dust and debris, paper and chunks of plaster - minding their own business - silently twisting in the air, as if the most natural thing in the world.

A line of columns spread out before them, rising towards the ceiling hidden in shadows and flickers of light. It took her a second to recognise the sight before her.

A slow breath escaped from her chest.

A forest.

A stone forest.

The columns were not columns; they were a breath-taking arrangement of stone trees, branches stretching out from each central trunk, supporting the floor above, differing heights to support floors that rose and disappeared into the darkness.

She found herself mouth open, just looking. Frowned as she realised the strength and beauty of the arrangement. Why not imitate nature? It was genius.

Why create something new when nature shows you how to do it best. The air inside the tower was cool, but with it came a sense of peace. Her shoulders relaxed, aching muscles fizzed as the tension within them melted away. The more she saw, the more comfortable she felt.

They followed Tokel up a set of wide, curved, paper-strewn stairs. Treading carefully around the debris on each step.

She noticed little details; slits in the outer wall, filled with yellow glass, adding to the warm feel in the air, leaves carved into a handrail made to look like a vine of some sort. She reached, touched it; it was warm, coarse and smooth in places under her fingers as she moved her hand up it. Much smoother than she had expected.

She wondered how many hands had gripped it for support over the centuries.

In her mind she pictured scenes from Vanguard, students in huddles moving between classes, chattering with excitement, busy, noisy.

Imagining the same here, people within this place bringing it to life, giving it purpose and now silent.

A thought entered her head.

She gasped as a wave of ice washed over her body.

‘Where are they?’ she blurted.

The entire group turned to look at her, hands hovering by weapons.

She looked towards the puzzled faces.

‘Where are they?’ she said louder this time, but voice cracking

slightly.

‘Who?’ said Tokel.

‘The people.’

Tokel’s eyes narrowed.

‘That lived here,’ Romina pointed to the floor. ‘The citizens, the Walkers? Where are their bodies?’

Confusion melted from Tokel’s face, her eyes wide with horror.

She looked towards Kubrean, his face grim.

‘Good point when you think about it,’ he conceded.

Tokel looked around, ‘As if I didn’t hate this place enough already,’ she muttered.

‘We stay together, no-one goes off exploring,’ he said firmly. ‘No-one. Clear?’

Heads nodded; the throbbing ache returned to Romina’s neck.

‘We focus on what we are here to do,’ said Tokel.

Lauden looked towards Romina. She smiled weakly. He swallowed, then they followed the group up the stairs.

‘This way,’ said Tokel.

They continued upwards, wide stairs sweeping round, light soft and atmosphere tense. Eventually they reached the destination, a small conversation between Tokel and Kubrean, the rustling of paper, fingers pointed, and then they continued.

Her mind felt active, hyperactive. Senses turned up to a new level of awareness.

She noticed things like never before, the scratching of boots on dusty floors, the slight metallic clink of a collection of knives at Dalon’s waist, Kubrean’s slightly heavy breathing.

They passed through a series of rooms, light, warm, inviting. If she had been dropped into this room with no idea of where she was, it could have been any library in the world. A very messy library granted, but no real sign of the horrors that had wiped this place from the map of the world within one night.

The dull ache at the back of her head was working its way towards the front. She paused for a moment, pressing her fingers deep into

the bridge of her nose, shook her head out and leaned with one hand on a nearby table; its surface warm and smooth. Blinking the pain receded, her vision cleared, and she saw in the dust on the table her handprint, right next to another less fresh print. She wiggled her fingers. It was a bigger hand, but who's? A survivor, someone trapped inside after the city had been sealed? The last evidence of life before the loss of the city.

Tension built in her body, she clenched her teeth, short shallow breaths rasped in and out.

An enormous hand rested on her shoulder; she almost went for her weapon, but another hand firmly but gently stopped it.

'Breathe,' said Kryst, stepping around in front of her.

'Just breathe,' he said, as if showing her how to do so for the first time.

Her eyes locked with his. Gentle pale blue, with specks of green.

He just stood with her.

They breathed together, slowly, deeply.

He nodded slowly, setting a pace.

In. Out. In Out.

She felt the ache in her head fade away.

'Better?' he asked.

She nodded. 'Much, thank you.'

'Just focus on your breathing,' he said, 'It helps to keep all of this in the background,' he flicked his hands towards their surroundings. 'This is the past. This is history. This is not us. This will not *be* us,' he said, voice level and calm.

'Just breathe,' she said.

He nodded. 'Easiest thing in the world. Even Zalen can do it. He would even consider himself an expert at it.'

She grinned.

'We will be out of here soon,' he said, face gentle.

She closed her eyes and let out one long last breath. When she reopened them, she could not help her gaze falling onto the two handprints in the dust of the table. She swallowed and heaved herself

after Kryst.

The tower was enormous.

They continued to pass through rooms, each almost the same as the last tables, chairs, bookcases towering towards vaulted ceilings. Books and papers strewn around, some floating, others covering furniture and floor.

‘This is it,’ she heard Tokel’s voice in the distance.

Tokel and Kubrean had stopped at the end of the chamber in front of a pair of ornate and rather imposing copper plated doors, which rose full length to the cracked ceiling. Their handles woven ribbons of gold - rivets and hinges the same.

Kubrean grin seemed to light up the air around the door.

‘Good,’ he growled. ‘Would you?’ he gestured towards Lauden and Dalon.

The pair moved forward, each grasping a handle.

‘1,2,3...’ they heaved, the screech of metal filled the room, Tokel winced covering her ears. The sound set Romina’s teeth on edge.

Grunts of effort, a grinding noise and a whine of straining metal followed by a sharp clank on the other side of the immense doors. They gave one last whine and then moved fluidly open. Warm light burst through the opening, swirls of dust scattered away as the air flowed. For perhaps the first time in 400 years. The grunting stopped.

‘Thank you,’ said Tokel, striding through the doorway. Lauden and Dalon weakly raised hands in acknowledgment.

A wave of curiosity swept over Romina. She followed Tokel, carefully picking her steps between discarded books and chunks of plaster.

‘Wow,’ she muttered as the sight came into view.

‘Quite,’ said Tokel, stood hands on her hips by a balcony.

As she moved alongside the Grey Walker, the full view was revealed.

Two floors within a large oval room. Bookcases as before, paper scattered and floating as before. But there was a difference. The

decoration of this room was darker, red walls rather than the buttery yellow of others they had passed through. On the ceiling an ornate painting of two halves, the black of night complete with silvery moon and the other the blue and yellow of day.

The upper floor swept around with multiple alcoves evenly spread out, each containing neatly stacked or floating books. The lower floor mirrored the upper, except the central floor space was filled with table and chairs, seemingly unaffected by the chaos within the city.

‘This is definitely it,’ said Tokel with a grin. ‘The copper on the doors, must have shielded the room somehow. But this is most definitely what we have been looking for.’

Warm optimism refreshed Romina’s muscles.

It was short lived.

The book slammed shut with a dull thud.

Dust blew up into Kaoldan's face. He gagged, half coughed, raising his hand to his mouth. He muttered something rude and unintelligible under his breath.

Kaoldan had always hated research, reading books. Anything academic was to him one of the greatest challenges in the world. His mind wandered constantly, like a lost butterfly, always unable to give it the concentration and the effort to find what he was looking for, and today was no exception.

The circumstances were unusual; the surroundings of Zuivosal like another world. They had set Kaoldan's nerves on edge, ever since they had passed through the ice cold barrier. He shuddered, just the memory of it sent a shiver down his spine. Once inside, he had felt on edge, nervous, unable to settle in these surroundings, it seemed to seep into every sense; sight, smell, taste, sound and touch, altering them all, setting them all off for no obvious reason.

He glanced around for the fiftieth time that hour. He was certain his imagination was playing tricks on him. But somewhere deep

within his guts there was a cold nagging feeling that something just wasn't right.

They had been searching the citadel for what felt like hours and so far without success. Room after room, book after book, page after page, they'd found nothing to suggest either that the Dark Crown or Reng even existed. It was disheartening, annoying, and more than anything monotonous work.

The citadel was a fortress of a building. Heavy grey stone in square blocks interlinked like a giant jigsaw puzzle. The blocks did not merely sit side by side, like bricks. They interlocked every block via a dovetail joints to each other. Aralorne had spoken at length about how this gave the building incredible strength and probably saved it from greater damage.

Since passing through the barrier, it was as if Aralorne was a different person. He had been switched from a quiet, reserved man for a non-stop chattering expert. He appeared to know everything about everything and was not shy in now sharing this fact.

A small frown crept onto Kaoldan's face; it had helped during the journey, a welcome distraction from the gnawing feeling in his guts. Perhaps the white haired man was not so bad after all.

His eyes rose on the ceiling, vaulted and robust.

The citadel was relatively intact compared to some that they had seen on their journey through the city. Only the outer and highest ramparts and parts of the roof appeared to have been blown out, but they hung neatly ten or twenty metres above the derelict building beneath.

Nova had been as good as his word. Through a combination of conversations with Aralorne, wrestling with rustling bits of paper, looking in several directions, muttering, cursing, twisting and turning the paper in his hand, they'd finally found their current surroundings.

The citadel tower they had been slogging their way through had struck Kaoldan as being very reminiscent of Prava. It may well have been the case that the two had been designed and developed by the same people at the same time. The library within the tower was

extensive.

Piles of leather-bound books placed high on shelves, in dark red, browns and greens appearing mouldy from a distance, but surprisingly well preserved up close. They had come across collections of scrolls filling entire rooms, piled haphazardly like logs ready for the fire - twice the height of a man. They appeared to be in no order, to have no system, no coherent structure, just a reflection of the chaos that they saw around them.

The familiar tap of a staff on the stone floor announced the arrival of Nova. The old man slammed down the book next to Kaoldan, a look of profound disappointment on his face.

'I'm getting sick of the sight of books,' muttered the old man irritably.

'I was thinking the same thing myself,' said Kaoldan, rolling his shoulders. 'Do you really think it is here?'

Nova considered, glancing around the wood-panelled library, as a look of frustration grew upon his face.

'I'm beginning to doubt it,' said the old man, somewhat reluctantly. 'If we are to find answers anywhere, this is the place,' He tapped his staff on the floor with rhythmic irritation.

'All the evidence says it should be here, and Aralorne has been correct in everything so far. The man is without a doubt the greatest source of knowledge on this in the entire land, and I do not believe in my heart of hearts he is wrong. It's just unfortunate that we don't have the numbers we require and, worst of all, we have a very limited window within which to do it. Not the perfect set of circumstances when trying to search through hundreds of years of history,' said Nova. 'It must be here somewhere.'

'I hope the others are having better luck,' Kaoldan murmured.

'I'm sure they are my friend,' he said, likely patting Kaoldan on the shoulder.

Kaoldan worked his jaw as he saw the sun finally set.

Surely, they would find something soon.

She muttered a swear word under her breath as she turned another page. The paper crackled and dust scattered out before her. She clenched her jaw and swiped at a book that floated in front of her like an irritating fly. It twisted in the air, fluttering without a care away from her.

They had been searching through papers and books within the oval room for hours. Through the night they had worked by candlelight, moving systematically from alcove to alcove along the upper balcony. It appeared this area had been mainly used for the collection and storage of scrolls and maps.

They had made excellent progress until they had moved downstairs. Hundreds if not thousands of books thick with pages of text. She shook her head and rolled her neck muscles heavy and numb; squinting at the early morning light that had entered the room. They had not slept, how could they with so much to look through. Time was getting tight.

The books all appeared to have been written in the language of the Walker, not always the common tongue, which had further delayed their progress. Her knowledge of them both was solid, but having to flip between the two was making her eyes numb and her head hurt.

Despite having cleared through six rooms, they'd found nothing but ancient stories, recollections of battles, training manuals, ledgers, notes of meetings and very little of interest.

She was losing heart.

How could they possibly find the information they required within the timescale they had available; she slammed the book shut in frustration with a thump.

Tokel looked up at her, elbows resting on the table, with a reassuring smile.

'Patience, my dear,' she said, 'We will find it, and have the time to do so, we just need to remain sharp and focused. Trust me,' she said

with a small nod. 'We will be out of here soon.'

Despite herself, Romina snorted, looking at their surroundings with disdain.

Tokel leaned forward over her book.

'Don't think you are the only one finding this place a little creepy,' she said, looking with a certain disgust around her. 'This place has no life. It died a long time ago, a long time before any of us, and it needs to be sealed again and consigned to history.'

A short yelp made their heads jerk up towards the noise.

A different shout of annoyance came after it.

They heard another small shout of triumph as Kryst sprinted forward from the edge of an alcove bookcase, an enormous book cradled in his arms. He carefully placed it on the table, face beaming. Dalon followed, fists clenched, shaking his head.

'It is here,' said Kryst with a level of triumph. 'It's definitely here.'

The scuffed sounds of feet and chairs moving in unison filled the room.

'I think you'll find I found it,' said Dalon, scowling at the dark skinned Walker.

'Prove it,' said Kryst, rocking on his heels.

Dalon muttered something and looked away, working his mouth from side to side.

'I found it,' said Kryst, but his grin suggested otherwise.

'Must you?' said Tokel tartly.

'It isn't dated, but it most definitely quotes a Dark Crown removed or being taken from a King or Emperor of some sort to be maintained and protected by the Order of Walkers,' blurted Dalon, eyes fixed on Kryst.

'I've only skimmed part of the text, but it also seems to give mention of Reng, also of his Dark Crown being brought back here to Zuivosal...' said Kryst.

Collective eyebrows were raised.

'I knew it,' breathed Tokel. 'I knew it,' rapping her knuckles on the table rhythmically.

‘It is here,’ she said, looking around the room. ‘I knew it, I could feel it. Nova said I was wrong,’ she shook her head.

Questioning faces looked at her and then Kubrean.

‘We’ll explain later,’ he said calmly, eyes not moving from Tokel, face unreadable.

Romina loved Kubrean dearly, but there were times...

‘We are not far off,’ Tokel said, almost joyously, ‘Bring that with you, we must tell my lovely husband,’ she playfully smacked Kryst’s cheeks, turned and gathered her items before Kryst had time to respond. The look of disappointment on Kryst’s face was obvious the book was large, heavy and leather bound; hardly what one would choose to carry around.

Romina sighed and pursed her lips. More questions than answers, as usual.

She looked to the unexplored alcoves. At least they didn’t have to spend hours rooting through them, which was a relief.

Her eyes narrowed.

She leaned forwards, really looking, eyes taking in everything.

There was something that had been hidden in shadows, only now illuminated by the rising sun.

Dark stains on the walls and on the floor.

Covered by dust and debris, but most definitely dark stains.

They merged with the red of the walls, almost a perfect match. Then her eyes went wider. A cold sweat formed on the back of her neck. That terrible moment when you see what has been in front of you all along.

The stains were everywhere.

Blood, the dark stains were blood.

Splattered, smeared, sprayed against the walls, the furniture, on the stairs. Why would they fight here? Unless... She backed away, shrinking from it. Words lost in her throat, coming out weakly. The group too busy gathering their items to hear.

Movement.

Her head jerked towards it.

Movement in the corner of her eyes, near the entrance to the room. She was about to shout out when a low rumble of footsteps within a matter of seconds, turned into an avalanche of noise.

Shapes filtered out of the darkness in perfect formation.

Boots thumping on the floor, like a roll of thunder.

Shapes, dozens of dark shapes poured into the room covering the entrance and the three exits at quarter points within it.

‘Shields!’ shouted Kubrean, face grim as he watched the room flood with more dark shapes.

The Walkers reacted in unison. Kubrean, Dalon, Tokel and Kryst reaching over their shoulder to remove the shields from their backs. There was a metallic clank as they connected and were pulled into place. The air glowed green as the shields flashed and expanded outwards to twice their original size. Round and reassuring. Green light flickered and rippled over their surface, fading replaced by the silvery glint of cold, hard silver. On instinct more than training, they formed into a tight circle back to back, heads alert, eyes searching.

The deafening noise around them subsided.

They were completely surrounded and heavily outnumbered.

Heavy square shields banged into the floors of both the upper balcony and lower floor. By each shield bearer stood another figure; bows raised, arrows notched, strings drawn, pointing straight at them. All exits covered; they were trapped. Light shining in the yellow stream illuminated these most unwelcome visitors. Black and red. They were dressed in black and red armour.

Romina attempted to pull her blade from her side, her hands like jelly.

‘Wait,’ whispered Kubrean, warm hand falling lightly on her wrist. ‘Not yet.’

The room was quiet save for the hum of bowstrings and the creak of leather grips.

They waited.

Romina felt unable to speak. She grabbed Kubrean’s forearm gripping it tight, the black vambrace smooth and warm. Kubrean

shoulders were tight. He moved the shield in front of them, offering as much protection as he could.

Silence.

Romina felt her arms getting colder, her hand on Kubrean's arm trembled. She placed her other hand on top to stop it shaking.

Nobody moved.

Necks strained; eyes moved, but nothing else. Cold tension rose from her back to her neck.

'Surrender or die,' a voice split the silence like an axe blade. The words bounced around the room. 'The choice is yours,' it came again, strong and confident.

Kubrean's arm tensed.

'It is a simple choice...' the voice continued.

Kubrean let out a hiss under his breath.

'You have ten seconds to drop your weapons...'

He glanced at Tokel.

She looked back, her face hard and pale.

'10...9...'

Tokel shook her head.

'8...7...'

Kubrean worked his jaw.

'6...5...'

'We don't have a choice,' hissed Tokel, face tight. Kubrean peered over the top of his shield, eyes searching for anything.

'4...3...'

Bow strings creaked. Romina shrank in on herself.

'Kubrean...' Tokel pleaded, 'Now is not the time...'

He lurched upwards and dropped his shield on the floor with a sound like an anvil dropping from hell. The sound jolted Romina. Kubrean raised his hands.

'Drop your weapons,' he said, voice cracking.

Blank faces.

'Now,' he commanded, face hard. 'We have no choice,' Romina felt her body shudder. She swallowed shakily, looking towards Tokel,

who reluctantly nodded.

‘There will be a time to fight, but it is not now,’ she whispered.

Glances were exchanged as each Walker stood hesitantly dropping shields and weapons to the floor, bangs and crashes of equipment hitting the marble floor ricocheted around the room.

‘Do it...’ said Kubrean.

Romina realised she hadn’t moved.

His face softened, ‘Please...’ he said, voice low. His look pierced her heart.

She swallowed and stood, limbs like lead.

‘A wise choice,’ announced the voice from the shadows. ‘I commend you on taking the more practical solution,’ it continued, ‘It will make conversation much more civilised.’

Romina frowned.

That voice.

‘I’m so glad that we can speak properly.’ Something about the voice made Tokel stiffen.

‘It is so rare to just talk.’ Kubrean’s fingers curled inwards, fists clenched.

‘Everyone is so keen to fight,’ said the voice jovially. The rap of hard boot heels on the stone floor echoed behind Romina. Tokel smirked, crossing her arms. Romina felt an icy shiver through her body. Kubrean slowly shook his head. Romina felt sick. Kryst’s posture stiffened. Sharp footsteps continued to approach behind her.

Romina closed her eyes, body feeling numb. She felt her ears picking up every sound within the room. Heels on stone, the ragged breath of Lauden.

‘So nice that we should meet like this.’

Romina turned slowly, clenching her fists - hoping against hope. She took a deep breath, then opened her eyes.

The figure passed through the darkness between streams of sunlight, parts illuminated for an instant, then fell back into shadow as it descended the stairs. It was tall, lithe, and graceful.

Romina forced her eyes closed, screwing them tight. Footsteps

continued, then stopped. She set her jaw and opened her eyes. As her vision returned, she saw first the boots, black and shiny. Her eyes slowly rose, seeing the same outfit as their attacker. Her eyes crept upwards, resisting the urge to turn away. She saw the outline of a tall, middle-aged woman with dark hair pulled back, a black cloak unfurled behind. Romina blinked, shuddered, eyes fluttering. She now saw. She saw the face. She knew the face. It was a face she had not seen for seven years.

It was the face of her mother, Morveen.

Chapter 27 – The Truth

Through the darkness, a whoop of joy echoed around the library.

Dref jerked his head up, looked around, snorted, then settled back down to sleep. Kaoldan eyed him jealously. He shifted in his seat, arching his back, letting out a soft groan.

The whoop continued from a room next to Kaoldan. It belonged to Aralorne. The tall, white haired man strolled through leather-bound book under one arm and three scrolls stuffed under the other, very much as though he had just won first prize in a competition.

‘I believe,’ he announced with a certain flair. ‘That I have found part of what we are looking for.’

He swept the table, wiping books and scrolls rustling and thudding onto the floor.

‘Hey...’ said Kaoldan, hands raised. ‘I was reading that and you’re messing up my system.’

Aralorne gave him a flat look. ‘System?’ he pouted.

Kaoldan looked at the piles of books on the floor.

‘It’s a sort of system...’ he said defensively.

Aralorne’s eyebrows said everything.

‘Read...’ Kaoldan pointed to the mess on the floor.

‘Not read...’ he pointed to another hill of books.

Aralorne hummed and narrowed his eyes, then cleared the rest of the items from the table, Kaoldan slowly shook his head.

Space cleared, Aralorne placed the book on the table and unfurled the scrolls, weighing them down with candles.

‘I’ve found it,’ beamed Aralorne.

‘Found what?’ said Zalen entering the room followed by Nova and Zahara.

Aralorne gestured to the items on the table.

‘Books...’ Zalen whistled. ‘And scrolls... Well done,’ he said, face thoroughly unimpressed.

Aralorne snorted.

‘Look...’ he pointed.

They followed his finger, huddling closer around the wooden table.

‘He existed,’ said Aralorne, pointing to a section on the lower right-hand page of the book. ‘He most definitely existed.’

Zalen leaned in reading, lips moving as he did so.

‘This is the first time I’ve seen anything written about him,’ said Aralorne, smile wide on his face. ‘According to this, he ruled for 300 years, exactly as I predicted.’

Nova looked on, head tilted slightly to one side.

‘I found no detail about how it ended, but it does also mention a Dark Crown worn by the Lord of Shadows,’ he rocked on his feet, hands clasped behind his back.

‘Sounds rather spooky,’ said Zalen, wiggling his fingers.

Nova scowled at him.

‘Lord of Shadows?’ Zalen said, keen to move the conversation on.

‘Another name for Reng,’ said Aralorne, squinting up at the ceiling. ‘That was the title that many of his followers used.’

‘Sounds rather...’ Zalen began.

Nova shushed him.

Zalen grimaced and shrank back.

‘Any suggestion about where this Dark Crown is?’ asked Kaoldan, chewing his lower lip.

Nova looked at him sharply.

‘If they want it, then we have to get it before them,’ Kaoldan shrugged.

Nova inclined his head.

‘Ah Er, no,’ Aralorne sucked through his teeth. ‘That is the one thing we are rather light on at the moment.’

‘At least that is one question answered,’ said Nova.

‘With several others replacing it,’ murmured Kaoldan.

‘The most critical question, I suppose,’ said Aralorne.

Kaoldan nodded. ‘At least we have something to confirm our information is right. I still don’t understand how this Dark Crown

could sustain him?’

‘In my experience, everything dies at some point. How could some stupid crown stop it from happening?’ said Zalen with a shrug of his shoulders.

‘Anything is possible,’ said Zahara, looking down at her hands. ‘We don’t know the full extent of the power of magic within the world. We know most of the things that Fajin can do to help the ways of the Walker. We manipulate it and use it to our advantage for attack and defence, but the full extent of its power and use is still largely unknown to us. Even the most skilled of Walkers cannot know everything and there are some of us who are more skilled than others,’ she cocked an eyebrow at Zalen, who caught the look and scanned the other faces, puzzled.

‘She was paying you a compliment,’ Kaoldan lied.

Zalen’s face lit up.

‘As I was saying,’ said Zahara, eyeing him with slight derision. ‘Anything is possible. Just think about all the knowledge that was lost when this place fell.’

It was a good point. Kaoldan knew a considerable amount about the power and various uses of Fajin, but there were some Walkers he knew who could do extraordinary things: move objects with a gesture, jump great distance. Powers varied from person to person, but the main use was for attack and defence using their Walkerblade.

‘Although not all users of Fajin are necessarily Walkers,’ said Aralorne.

Another good point. Just thinking about the possibilities was making Kaoldan’s head hurt.

‘This is a development,’ said Nova. ‘We must keep looking. There will be other information. This is just the start, my friends. Mark my words.’

‘Wonderful,’ Zahara said dryly.

Kaoldan gave her a hard stare.

She frowned and shrugged her shoulders. ‘Back to it,’ she said.

‘So, what were you saying about me that was so wonderful?’

began Zalen, wrapping his arm around her shoulder. He turned and winked at Kaoldan. There were times Kaoldan very much underestimated his friend.

Another book and nothing of note.

Kaoldan looked up at the ceiling and stretched out his arms, working the blood back into his shoulders. It was the early hours of the morning as far as he could guess. Bored, he spied Aralorne perched at the end of a polished table.

‘Suppose this must be something special for you?’ he asked, clicking his neck from side to side.

The white-haired man hummed and nodded in agreement, but did not remove his eyes from the page.

Kaoldan shifted in his seat, angling himself away from Aralorne, and bit the inside of his lips. He was - Kaoldan had decided – a strange mix. He kept to himself and said very little until they had entered Zuivosal. Now he wouldn’t shut up.

He was a more than capable fighter with the gift for Fajin. He had almost bested Kaoldan back at the Palace. He was also highly intelligent and passionate about this subject. There was little he appeared not to know, and his reaction to the discovery of the book had brought him delight and also driven his curiosity to look deeper, harder and more intently.

He clearly had a relationship with certain members of the Grey Council, particularly Nova and Tokel. Kaoldan rubbed his arm and picked up a book, absentmindedly pulling it close and hugging it to his chest.

That being said, Kaoldan couldn’t honestly say that he completely trusted him, and yet without his swift intervention he would have lost both his daughters. He sniffed, bit at a fingernail, then looked at Aralorne.

‘I never thanked you,’ he said.

Aralorne looked up. ‘Sorry?’

Kaoldan wet his lips. 'I never thanked you, not properly anyway.'

Aralorne frowned.

'For saving my daughters on the ship.'

Recognition washed over Aralorne's face.

Kaoldan shrugged. 'Without your intervention,' he let the words hang in the air. Aralorne shifted in his chair, pulling the book up – like a drawbridge – in front of him.

'Just. You know. Thanks,' Kaoldan offered clearing his throat at the end.

'No worries,' white hair disappearing behind his book.

Kaoldan settled back into his seat, stretched out his neck. It reassured him somewhat, that despite still being a mystery, Aralorne could have thoughts and still be socially awkward. Time would tell, but for the moment at least he would continue to keep a close eye on him.

It was just after dawn as Kaoldan looked out of the window; he blew out a breath as the sound of arguing caught his attention.

'You tell them,' a deep voice carried down a corridor to Kaoldan's right.

'No, you tell them,' came a lighter, younger voice. 'It was your wonderful idea to go off exploring.'

'You didn't find it.'

'And neither did you.'

'I was bored, and you came with me.'

'No, I didn't,' pitch slightly higher this time. 'I was keeping an eye on you. Someone has to look after you.'

'I'm quite capable of taking care of myself, thank you very much.'

Kaoldan sighed. He removed his feet from the end of the table and rubbed the bridge of his nose.

'That's what you think,' the second voice rang out again, dripping with sarcasm.

‘I can take care of myself and don’t need young girls like you to do it for me.’

There was a rustle of materials, a dull thud followed by a yelp of pain.

Kaoldan groaned, placed his book on the floor and rose out of his chair. Nova - eyes smiling - watched with amusement over the top of his book.

‘That wasn’t worth a punch in the arm.’

‘That’s what you think.’

‘Something you want to tell us?’ Kaoldan asked, turning into the corridor.

Zahara and Zalen both stiffened – like children caught eating biscuits in the night.

‘Oh, it’s only you,’ said Zalen, relaxing and rubbing his left arm, looking accusingly at Zahara.

‘You have something to tell us?’ asked Kaoldan with a hard smile.

‘Yes,’ said Zalen, taking half a step backwards, ‘Zahara has something to say. Don’t you,’ he looked expectantly towards her.

‘Really?’ she said, turning to face him, jaw hard.

Zalen was about to respond when Kaoldan moved in between them, his head was aching, he looked at each of them fully in the eye.

‘What is it?’ he drawled with great effort.

‘We’ve found something,’ blurted Zahara.

‘Something magical,’ said Zalen with a grin.

Kaoldan frowned.

‘It is quite magical,’ conceded Zahara with a nod.

‘Very magical, I’d say,’ said Zalen, eyebrows bouncing.

‘You’re probably right,’ said Zahara, face softening.

Kaoldan groaned. ‘Ok, ok,’ he raised his hands in defeat. ‘What is it?’

The pair paused, looked at each other, faces screwed up with concentration. They huffed and grimaced.

Zalen’s eyes lit up. ‘Stairs,’ he offered.

Kaoldan’s eyebrows said everything.

‘Magical stairs...’ said Zalen, rocking on the balls of his feet.

‘You’ve got to see it really,’ said Zahara.

‘Yeah,’ nodded Zalen. ‘It’s hard to describe.’

‘Fine,’ said Kaoldan with a growl, beginning to walk.

‘They have to come too,’ said Zahara, pointing over his shoulder.

‘Trust me,’ said Zalen with a wink.

Kaoldan hummed a response but said nothing. He poked his head back through the doorway.

‘Come on,’ he said. Aralorne and Nova frowned, looked at each other, stood and followed on.

The sound of boots on hard surfaces bounced around Kaoldan as he followed a whispering Zalen and Zahara down a corridor.

‘Any idea what this is about?’ asked Nova, cane rapping rhythmically on the floor.

‘Magic stairs,’ said Kaoldan out of the side of his mouth. His head was really hurting now.

‘Magic stairs...’ he heard Aralorne murmur. He caught a look of concentration on his face in between shafts of light.

‘Is it important?’ he asked.

‘I’m not certain...’ said Aralorne, hesitating between words.

After a few moments of twisting down corridors, they came to a halt.

Kaoldan stood stiffly and spread his hands. ‘What have you found?’

The pair grinned.

‘This...’ said Zalen, pointing behind Kaoldan at two large arched wood panelled doors.

Kaoldan frowned, Nova and Aralorne shrugged.

‘This is the good bit,’ said Zalen, brushing past his friends. With an effort, he pushed at the doors. They groaned in protest but moved smoothly.

A roar escaped through the gap.

A light spray of cold water enveloped Kaoldan's face, he blinked. Wiping the moisture from his forehead. He rubbed the liquid between his fingers and sniffed; nothing.

'It's just plain old water,' assured Zahara.

'Come on,' beckoned Zalen.

Kaoldan grimaced as he made his way down the dark corridor towards the light.

The noise of water rose, almost to the point of being deafening.

He blinked away the brightness – eyes fluttering - and emerged onto a staircase. His jaw went slack as he took in the sight before him.

A magnificent stone spiral staircase winding upwards and outwards around the edge of the circular wall. It was at least twenty metres wide, white, blue stone sweeping upwards into the darkness. The strangest part, however, was in the centre of the room, a hole. A great gaping hole with an endless stream of water dropping through its centre, an indoor waterfall.

Light shone down its centre from high above, causing a kaleidoscope of colours which shone out on to the walls.

Kaoldan inched closer to the edge, the chasm of blackness beneath sent a wave of dizziness through his entire body. Water disappeared into nothingness.

He flinched backwards, fighting the urge to be sick. A firm hand grabbed his arm.

'Steady,' came a reassuring voice, a woman's voice.

He swallowed down the acid taste in his mouth, opened his eyes and saw Zahara holding his arm.

'I don't mind it so much,' she shrugged, 'But I remember you hate heights.'

He smiled weakly. 'How do you know that?'

'Not everything changes,' she said with a soft smile.

'Thank you,' he croaked, his other hand moving to cover his chest. She nodded and moved backward as he shuffled away from the

edge.

'I don't believe it,' rang out Aralorne's voice, neck arched back, mouth gawping. He shook his head in disbelief.

'Do you know what this is?' he demanded. Zalen's face went serious.

Silence.

'This is the Prism Descent.'

'Is that good?' asked Zalen, leaning forward.

'Oh yes,' laughed Aralorne. 'This is very, very good.'

'Oh. I found it,' grinned Zalen.

'Well done my good man,' said Aralorne clapping him hard on the shoulder. 'You have an explorers' instinct.'

Zalen looked rather pleased with himself.

Zahara snorted, squished up one side of her mouth.

'I never thought I'd see this,' said Aralorne, marvelling at the sight in front of him. 'Never even thought it actually existed. If I'm honest.' He moved forward and swept his hands through the rushing water, whilst slowly shaking his head. Kaoldan winced as he did so.

'And that's not the best bit,' said Zalen.

Aralorne's entire body tensed. 'There's more?' his head snapped round.

'Up the stairs,' said Zalen.

'Which means...' Aralorne murmured. 'No...not possible...' he said each word slowly, then scrambled for the exit. 'My notes,' he shouted over his shoulder. 'I need my notes, I'll catch you up,' voice fading down the corridor.

Zalen nodded, pointing up the stairs. His smile slipped.

Halfway around the sweeping curve of the stairs stood a four legged black figure. It barked, sound bouncing off the walls, eventually drowned out by the sound of crashing water.

'Oh, how did he get up there?' hissed Zalen, face hardened.

Dref barked again, tail wagging.

'Must have run on ahead,' said Zahara, a small grin spreading across her face.

Another bark rang out.

'I found it' said Zalen sulkily.

'You did, my friend,' said Kaoldan. 'After you,' he pointed the way ahead.

Zalen stomped off up the stairs. In the distance Dref play bowed, barked, then ran off up the stairs.

'You don't see that every day,' said Nova, falling in alongside Kaoldan.

'Beautiful,' Kaoldan nodded, deliberately avoiding looking towards the edge, concentrating on the refraction of light on the walls, and climbed the steps.

Romina couldn't think. Her mind was numb.

She stood, unable to comprehend the sight in front of her. Breath caught in her throat, heart pounding.

In life, she knew, some things were fact.

When she had last seen her mother, she had been barely a teenager: fact.

She had been told her brother had died: fact.

She had been told her mother had died: fact.

And yet, her mother now stood right in front of her: fact.

'How are you, my dear?' smiled Morveen, sauntering towards her. 'I hope this isn't too much of a surprise to you,' her strides were relaxed, at ease; the opposite of Romina, who said and did nothing.

'There are reasons for all this,' she waved her hand absently, 'but time is pressing. So I will have to explain everything later.' Morveen raised her hand as if to touch her daughter's cheek.

Kubrean stepped forward and intercepted the hand before it touched, teeth clenched.

The sound of stretching bows strings echoed around the room. Morveen calmly raised her other hand. The tension immediately dropped.

‘Stay away from her,’ he snarled.

Morveen turned her head and smiled.

‘How I have missed you,’ she said sweetly, twisting her hand free of his grip. ‘Have you been keeping well?’ she asked, turning away, slowly walking around the group.

Each rap of her boots on the polished floor sent a spasm through Romina’s heart.

‘How’s the cooking?’ she said conversationally. ‘Learnt any new recipes I might like? I was always rather partial to your chicken and white wine, what was the special ingredient you put in?’ she tapped her front teeth with a fingernail.

She snapped her fingers. ‘White truffles, of course,’ she looked over at him, teasing. ‘That aroma,’ she smacked her lips, ‘Earthy, smooth and rich. Beautiful.’

Kubrean said nothing, his eyes following, jaw set hard.

She smiled, clicked her tongue back towards him.

His face hardened, and he half attempted to raise his hand towards her.

‘I wouldn’t if I were you,’ said Morveen without turning. ‘Before you do anything an arrow will be through your throat and what would be the sense in that?’

Kubrean froze, eyes moving between Morveen and Romina.

‘You always were so terribly predictable,’ she said, shaking her head. ‘And why would you want me to inflict more trauma on my daughter?’

Blood rushed, whining into Romina’s head.

‘Your daughter?’ Romina spat; eyes narrowed. ‘Your daughter?’

‘Ah, she speaks,’ said Morveen, licking her lips.

Romina held her gaze.

‘Yes,’ screamed Morveen, ‘You are my daughter,’ bursting forward like a wild animal charging at its prey. Her face whitened. Trembling with anger, she grasped at the open air between them.

Despite herself, Romina took half a step back, and the group closed in around her.

Morveen hesitated, face softening. 'You will always be my daughter,' she said, voice lowering to barely a whisper.

Romina sniffed and raised her chin.

'Forgive the outburst. It has been a long, emotional day,' Morveen said, voice returning to normal. 'Who else do we have here?' she peered to the back of the group.

'Dalon... I almost didn't recognise you. Nice beard, it suits you. Makes you look rather manly, for a change,' she pulled a face.

'Kryst, I might have guessed. Never far away, always hanging on. Surprised you're still with us to be honest,' she prowled around the edge.

'Who else...'. she frowned at Lauden.

He tensed and attempted to stand tall. 'My name is...'

There was a metallic ring, and he gargled.

Words stuck in his throat along with the purple blade of a sword stuck right through his neck.

He twitched, hands reaching towards his neck, as a dark velvety liquid oozed from the wound.

Romina gasped and recoiled from the sight, head back, eyes wide.

There was another metallic ring and the purple blade shot backwards and shrank back into Morveen's hand. 'I need not know who you are,' she said, placing the black rod back into its sheath.

Lauden gurgled, hands grasping, blood pulsed between his fingers.

Kubrean fell to his knees by the side of Lauden as he collapsed. His face was pale, he choked breaths through his nose, voice rasping. Kubrean tried to help, hands clasping, trying to stem the flow of blood. But it was no use, the dam had burst. Blood continued to flow, spilling through the mesh of fingers.

Romina looked at her mother, who caught the look and shrugged. 'Don't need to know,' she smiled sweetly.

There was a long groan as Lauden wobbled - looking straight at Kubrean - air hissed from him and then he was still. Yellow light flickered, emerging from within his body. It rose silently and

gracefully up, limp as if being pulled through water. His head turned, and he looked at Romina, who watched. It rose into the air, illuminating the room in golden light, upwards towards the ceiling. It passed straight through and the room was dull yet again.

Kubrean shook his head, collapsing into Lauden's body.

Romina felt her body turn icy cold from head to toe.

'What?' said Morveen as eyes fell upon her. 'I only wanted people I know to speak.'

'That was beneath you,' said Tokel, face like stone.

'What makes you so certain?' asked Morveen.

'The woman I knew...'

'That woman has gone,' hissed Morveen, moving towards her. 'Things change.'

Tokel shook her head sadly.

Morveen's face brightened 'So, how are you? It has been so long.'

Romina watched this person who looked like her mother - who was her mother, she reminded herself - as she shrank towards the back of the group, away from Lauden and away from whatever this was.

Tokel did not move.

Morveen frowned. 'Why the silent treatment?' she asked.

'What do you want?' said the old woman, hatred in her eyes.

'What do I want? What do I want?' mused Morveen, looking towards the ceiling.

Romina felt a fresh wave of dread wash over her. Her head was still numb, like it was wrapped in ice.

Morveen gasped as if coming to a great realisation. 'The answer is very simple, I want many things, but first I want my daughters back.'

Kaoldan's legs burned like hell.

'Come on,' beckoned Zalen through the archway ahead of him.

‘How many times have you done this?’ asked Kaoldan, stretching his muscles out.

‘Twice,’ he shrugged. ‘It’s more fun on the way back down.’

Kaoldan winced.

‘Getting old?’ teased Zalen.

Kaoldan gave his friend a withering look. Sensing danger, Zalen retreated through the archway.

The view from the top of the staircase was not one that Kaoldan particularly wanted to take in. The waterfall that dominated the centre of the stairwell ran from a great stone lip which jutted out above the entrance to the main door. Water streamed over the edge, softly before disappearing downwards - Kaoldan shuddered before following Zalen.

‘This is what I wanted you to see,’ said Zalen, pushing open two large white doors with a loud creak.

Darkness greeted them.

Nova looked blankly around.

Still darkness.

‘Well done,’ said Kaoldan with a frown.

‘Wait, wait,’ said Zalen, voice coming from nowhere.

Slowly, Kaoldan’s eyes adjusted. He blinked several times as the black melted into sharper and faded shades. The room was cavernous, no windows, but slowly walls emerged. The room was vast; it appeared to be circular or hexagon-shaped; it was hard to tell. But Kaoldan saw two or three familiar shapes form in front of him. Zalen, Zahara and Dref.

‘Look up,’ said Zalen. Kaoldan could hear his smile through the murk.

He lifted his head and his jaw went slack.

There was no ceiling. Not something that could even be described as a ceiling. There was a night sky. Black, velvety. Thousands, no tens of millions of stars, stared back twinkling in all the colours of the rainbow and every other colour in between. Yellows, greens, reds, blues, oranges, purples. Endless, uncountable clusters of stars. On a

clear night it was possible to see stars in the sky, but this was something else entirely. Everything was bigger, brighter, more colourful; it was quite the most beautiful thing that Kaoldan had ever seen.

‘Not bad is it,’ came a voice by his ear.

Kaoldan jumped.

‘Be careful,’ said Zalen, catching his friend.

Kaoldan let out a sigh of relief and shook his head.

‘It is rather...’ he turned, and his head clanged into something hard and cold. Pain and bright light burst through the front of his head.

‘Oh, yes, sorry,’ came Zalen’s voice. ‘Forgot about them.’

Kaoldan’s eyes fluttered and a wave of fizzing pain rippled across his scalp.

‘He did the same thing,’ sang Zahara’s voice.

‘It can happen to anyone,’ Zalen said defensively.

‘It did,’ winced Kaoldan as he shook his head. The light faded, and darkness returned.

‘They run around the edges of the room,’ explained Zalen, boots echoing around them. ‘Not sure what they’re for,’ he said, shoulders shrugged in the dark.

‘I think I might know,’ said a fresh voice. Aralorne.

‘I thought you might,’ murmured Kaoldan.

Aralorne moved forward, head up, mouth gaping, a book stuffed under his arm, just gazing up at the stars.

Kaoldan frowned.

Still he wandered, slowly shaking his head

‘You were saying,’ came Zahara’s musical voice through the murk.

‘Oh yes,’ Aralorne shook his head. ‘This is a very important room.’

‘You don’t say,’ sneered Kaoldan.

Aralorne continued, oblivious. ‘If my theory is correct, this may be exactly what we have been looking for. Have you touched any of the panels?’

‘Only with their heads,’ replied Zahara, arms crossed, leaning

against the entrance.

‘That is not the right way to do it,’ sniffed Aralorne.

‘I thought so too,’ said Zalen, face serious.

‘Push that one lightly with your hand,’ Aralorne pointed to the panel nearest to Kaoldan. The big man paused. Nova nodded. Taking a deep breath, Kaoldan turned and pressed the panel with his hand. Light spread outwards from the point of contact, like ripples on a lake across the panel.

A smile slowly built on Kaoldan’s face as they all moved backwards. The panel was enormous, square about the size of a house now fully illuminated, green and blue flickered in the darkness revealing shapes and symbols. Walkers, dozens of Walkers in lines.

Kaoldan tilted his head, then turned to his right and took half a dozen steps to a different glass panel. He raised his hand and pressed it - cold like stone - it was only when all five of his fingers were placed upon the glass; it burst into light. He winced; slightly taken aback.

The panel in front of him showed figures, writing, and pictures. Simple forms, but intricately detailed up close. Walkers stood, cloaks flowing, green blades in their hands. He shifted backwards several steps to take in the emerging view in front of him, looking towards Aralorne busy rifling through the pages of his book.

‘What do you see?’ he called.

Kaoldan looked again, the panel now fully illuminated. He saw a battle, a great battle between three distinguishable groups of figures: light, dark and grey. There was writing – graceful and ornate – at the bottom, but not in a language he knew. He took a few more steps back to gain a better view.

The picture became clearer, most definitely three groups involved in a battle. To the left white figures with pale blades, to the right dark figures, with purple blades and in the middle grey figures with green blades: Walkers? His eyes moved to the dark figures: Otan?

‘Are those the devious bastards we came across in the woods?’ asked Zahara.

‘Maybe,’ said Kaoldan, lost in the imagery.

‘What I want to know,’ said Dalon, arms folded. ‘Is who are the ones in white?’ He nodded to the left of the panel.

‘That,’ said Kaoldan, ‘is an excellent question.’

‘I want everybody to touch as many panels as they can at the same time,’ said Nova, directing people with his cane.

‘I have an idea,’ said Zalen out of the darkness. He moved to the first of the panels on the other side of the entrance and then ran along the edge of the room. He pressed his hand with a smack onto each one, they burst into light, as he continued running hitting them in sequence. The surrounding darkness evaporated as the room spilled with light.

‘Clever boy,’ murmured Nova. ‘It’s a story,’ He pointed to the first panel. ‘If you follow the sequence of the panels, you can see the whole thing.’

Kaoldan’s eyes went wide. It was a story. How had he not seen it?

A shout from the far end signalled Zalen had finished his sprint. Seven panels were illuminated; they pulsed in unison – like one heart – faster and faster until with a burst of light that made the group shield their eyes, then they stopped.

Kaoldan tilted his head, the ache subsiding in his neck and shoulders, turning to see all seven panels lit as bright as day.

He narrowed his eyes. There was something else.

Movement. Silent and constrained, but definitely movement within each panel.

They had come alive. Figures moved in each living painting.

The glass showed etched figures, scenes with true colours, tinged with a translucent light.

Nova looked at Kaoldan, then at Aralorne. ‘Were you expecting that?’ he asked.

Aralorne shook his head and blew out a breath of surprise.

Kaoldan could hardly blame him. It was something he had never seen before either.

They moved in silence to the first panel. It showed Walkers – judging by their green blades - clad in grey, moving materials, blocks,

grey and yellow, laying them in lines. The view panned out to show the walls were actually the beginnings of towers, dozens of towers. The creation of Zuviosal? They moved to the next.

Walkers, but at their centre a black-robed figure. Then hammers clanging, smiths working, illuminated by fire, sweat. The Grey Council, but far more than the current seven members, dozens. All surroundings something, working together to push, to force, tremendous amounts of Fajin magic and energy into something. A black crown, a Dark Crown. It is presented to the black figure at the centre of a circle of grey Walkers.

‘The Paragon Walker?’ said Zahara, face screwed in disbelief. ‘We made a dark crown for the Paragon Walker? The Dark Crown?’

Nova said nothing and walked to the next panel.

The central black figure raised their arms, a black inky smear enveloped them, it spread outwards, gathering in members of the grey circle. Black figures emerged with purple blades. The view panned out, showing the terrible, inevitable spread of darkness consuming other Walkers, spreading across a map of the world. It spread like oil on a canvas, consuming all around it; corruption itself.

‘He was one of us?’ said Zahara, no-one answered.

Kaoldan worked his jaw, tension itching at his back.

More images. Hundreds, thousands of deaths, orbs floating in numbers beyond the counting towards the Abyss. Fleeting images of destruction, murder and much worse.

Kaoldan averted his eyes and moved towards the next panel.

It showed a great war, a war between forces of light and dark. Green and purple blades clashed. Sweeping views of battles, individual struggles, death on both sides – more orbs for the Abyss. But the dark forces overran the light, a map of the world overrun with black ink.

‘They, we, won?’ spluttered Dalon, looking to the faces of the group for answers, none came.

Aching tension crept further up Kaoldan’s back.

‘Or we lost?’ offered Kryst, ‘depending on your point of view.’

Nova shrugged his shoulders. Aralorne looked on, face expressionless.

A shuffle of feet and they viewed the next panel.

Darkness throughout the circle of the world. More towers were built, always in view of the dark crowned Paragon Walker. Time passed, trees grew, seasons captured in silver, green and brown. Then a flicker. A flicker of light deep within Zuivosal. It shone like a star in the midnight sky. Piercing through the murk. Images of combat in a tower.

Kaoldan looked closer. Images fluttered past. They were familiar, strangely, sickeningly familiar. A waterfall, a staircase. The Prism Crescent, he realised all at once.

He looked, the view entered a room, this room. A struggle between grey cloaked figures carrying green bladed weapons, slowly overwhelming the dark opponents. Until only one remained. The Paragon Walker. Surrounded, hopelessly outnumbered, they converged on him. A flash of green and the crown fell.

‘Yes...’ came an excited shout.

Heads turned towards it. A sheepish-looking Zalen coughed uncomfortably, then fixed his eyes back on the panel. He pointed towards it. ‘Wonderful stuff...’ he mumbled.

Heads turned back toward the panel; it began the images again. Silently they moved towards the sixth panel.

An image of a tower, this tower, the view moved upwards, outwards, the light within spreading from within, melting the darkness. The black retreated until it condensed into an area that Kaoldan recognised as the Freth Expanse. It stopped, festered there, throbbing, waiting.

The view shrank back into Zuivosal - seasons passing – to a scene of grey Walkers surrounding the Dark Crown; it fractured and broke into three pieces.

Aralorne gasped.

The pieces separated out, merging with the three groups. Two of which disappeared out of view.

Then something strange. The view turned, moving between the faces of the remaining grey figures, men and women, but Walkers all. The cloaks of some changed from grey to white, then more - spreading like ice across a lake - taking in others.

An image of a battle; grey cloaks, green blades against their brothers and sisters cloaked in white with yellow blades. The viewpoint expanded, more figures, more blades of green and yellow clashing.

Kaoldan scratched his jaw, eyes fixed on the images. A civil war? Between Walkers? Surely such a thing was not possible. But given what they had seen, his head was a melee of thoughts, ideas and feelings.

‘Does this mean anything to you?’ said Kaoldan to Nova as they moved to the final panel.

Nova shrugged. ‘No,’ he said. ‘None of this makes any sense to me.’ His fingers drumming against his cane. ‘But one thing I do know is that the more I see, the less I like.’

They came to a halt in front of the final flickering panel.

‘Broken,’ said Zahara, pointing to the bottom corner. A great crack spreading out like a spider’s web. The panel twitched – flickers of colour - but no images came, just a dull constant glow.

Silence, each taking the information in. Kaoldan’s own head felt like it was stuffed with wool. Reng had been a Walker? The Otan? Darkness? Revolt? Peace? A civil war? Other Walkers?

‘Even in my wildest dreams I never thought I would get to see so much,’ said Aralorne after a long while.

‘You knew about this?’ said Zalen, voice rising.

‘Some of it. Other parts were merely a theory,’ admitted Aralorne.

‘The theory being?’

‘Pretty much all of that.’

‘So we created the Dark Crown, we created Reng, we created the Otan and then fought against each other?’ said Zahara, forcing each word out whilst looking at the floor.

‘Seemingly so,’ said Nova, looking from under his eyebrows.

Zahara sucked her teeth and Zalen hummed, face for once serious.

‘But I don't recall any of this being taught in history,’ said Zahara.

‘History is written or erased by the victors,’ said Nova.

Zahara swallowed.

‘It seems we were all lied to,’ said Kaoldan with a frown.

‘To all intents and purposes, I suppose it makes sense now,’ Nova said, scratching at his beard. ‘It makes sense that this city was abandoned; regardless of what caused it to fall. Some things are best kept secret. I know I was far happier half an hour ago.’

‘Something like this couldn't be kept a secret forever,’ said Zalen. ‘Someone can always piece it back together,’ he looked towards Aralorne.

‘It took time and my considerable intellect,’ nodded the white-haired man.

‘But we still don't know what happened here,’ said Kryst. ‘What caused all this?’ he pointed at floating debris hidden in the shadows.

‘Does it really matter?’ said Nova. ‘When the city was lost, so was the knowledge of how. Narratives change, stories are forgotten or apparently over written. A lot can be changed over 400 years. Maybe this is just best forgotten. Perhaps it serves no purpose to rake up the past. Our Order has never been without some form of controversy. We are what we are.’

‘It matters to me,’ said Zahara, face set hard.

‘It's not as though there are a lack of problems in the world that need dealing with right now,’ said Kaoldan. ‘Ul'Thadra is slowly eating away at the world, determined to make it his own. I'm not sure solving this 400-year-old mystery is high on anyone's agenda.’

Zahara worked her jaw and looked away.

A gasp, then soft, slow, deliberate steps caused Kaoldan to turn. He saw Aralorne looking over his shoulder.

The white haired man's eyes went wide. He began rifling through his book. Paper rustled. Confused looks passed amongst the group.

‘What is it?’ asked Nova, leaning heavily on his cane.

‘Something that we might have an answer to...’ Aralorne mumbled.

Kaoldan turned and looked over his shoulder. The main wall opposite the giant panels looked much like the other walls in the darkness, uninteresting.

‘Yes...’ muttered Aralorne slowly. ‘Yes... Yes... YES,’ his eyes shone as he raised his head, smile wide.

Nova frowned.

Aralorne marched past Kaoldan, book tucked under his arm, with Dref padding slowly by his side.

More shrugged shoulders, and the group followed him through the darkness, feet rapping on the stone floor.

As the gloom cleared, and they reached the wall, Kaoldan's posture sharpened and he wrinkled his nose. Two lines of black glossy stone jutted outwards from the main back wall, forming into a wedge pointing directly towards the main entrance.

‘What is it?’ whispered Zahara.

‘He’s definitely onto something,’ said Kaoldan, nodding while grinning.

Aralorne came to a halt and leaned towards the wall, running his hands over the polished stone. ‘I knew it,’ he said to Dref.

Dref looked about as impressed as a dog can.

‘It moves, which means there is something behind it,’ he said to the confused faces.

‘What do you suppose is behind here?’ ventured Zalen.

‘I don’t have the faintest idea,’ said Aralorne. ‘I think that’s why they call it a mystery.’

Zalen scowled back.

Kaoldan ran his fingers along the surface of the wall, the coolness of the stone made him wince as his fingers felt in the darkness. Smooth but with small paths of coarse grooves in the wall running from one side to another. ‘Smart,’ he muttered under his breath.

‘Do you think you can open it?’ Kaoldan asked as Aralorne inspected the imposing stone walls.

'I'm not sure,' he said. 'And there is no way any of us could get through the stone, even with Fajin,' he breathed out slowly through his nose, eyes searching for a clue.

'Holes,' said Zalen with a grin.

'Sorry?' said Nova.

'Holes...' repeated Zalen, pointing to the wall to the left.

Aralorne looked up. 'How many?' he asked.

'Two.'

'Two over here,' yelled Zahara from the other side of the wedge.

'Of course...' gasped Aralorne. 'You clever man,' he raced over to Zalen – who stood beaming – by the left side of the wedge.

'What?' said Kaoldan, feeling a flush of excitement.

Aralorne frowned. 'I believe that this next part cannot be done by me.'

'What do you need?' asked Nova, cane tapping as they gathered around him.

'I need two of you on that side of the wedge and two on the other. You'll need your Walkerblades too, I believe,' said Aralorne, glancing at Kaoldan.

The big man worked his jaw from side to side, resisting the growing urge of nerves, he glanced at Nova. The old man twitched, shrugged, and with a flash of green light his cane shrank back into a short black rod, he hefted it in his hand.

'No harm in looking...' he said.

'There are four holes in the wall,' said Aralorne as they moved into position. 'I believe if you take out your Walkerblades - do not change them - but insert them fully into the hole at the same time.'

Zahara looked at Kaoldan, who shrugged back.

'Ready?' asked the black clad man.

Kaoldan sniffed and set himself, sweaty fingers flexing around his blade.

Aralorne stood at the apex of the wedge, licked his lips, raised both hands.

'Insert them...' said Aralorne, his voice half trembling. 'Now...' he

dropped both of his arms at the same time.

Kaoldan swallowed and pushed the Walkerblade into the hole. It was a perfect fit, there was the scratch and scrape of metal on stone. His heart raced, his eyes searched for movement. Nothing. The sharp clink of metal on stone indicated the blade would go in no further.

Silence.

Kaoldan gasped.

Silence.

He sighed, shaking his head.

‘Oh...’ said Aralorne, face full of disappointment.

Zahara rolled her eyes at Kaoldan.

‘Ah...’ hummed Aralorne. ‘There was something I forgot.’

‘You forgot?’ asked Zahara.

‘I’m not perfect all the time,’ said Aralorne.

Zahara hummed.

‘Now,’ said Aralorne, raising his hands once again. ‘Take hold of your blade with both hands and gather as much Fajin energy into your body as you can, then channel it into the blade.’

‘You sure about this?’ came Zalen’s voice from the other side of the wedge.

‘Yes, I’m certain of it,’ said Aralorne, ‘please trust me,’ forcing a smile.

‘I think I know what he means,’ said Kaoldan, grasping the blade with both hands. ‘Close your eyes, empty your mind. Gather Fajin and feel it flowing through you, through your hands into the blade.’

Zahara glanced at her hands, then at Kaoldan.

‘I think I can do it,’ she said.

‘I know you can,’ said Kaoldan and meaning it.

She looked at him for a long time and a small smile grew on one side of her face, before closing her eyes, taking a deep breath. She moved back to her blade; three quarters embedded in the wall and breathed out.

Kaoldan ground the front of his feet into the floor. They squeaked, and he felt a wave of calmness wash over him.

‘Ready,’ called Aralorne. ‘Start pulling the Fajin in... now,’ he called.

The familiar tingle itched around Kaoldan’s heart. He felt the reassuring heat: throb, ebb, stretch out within him - filling his chest, his arms, legs and lastly his head. It was like being drunk. The rush of blood filled his ears, his heart sped up.

A tension built in his body, as if overstimulated. He had a sudden urge to run, to release it from his muscles. He fought it, gritting his teeth, sweat forming on his head. The Fajin circled around his muscles. His heart racing. He heard a groan from behind him.

‘Hold on,’ he called, ‘Hold on...’ uncertain who he was encouraging.

‘Now...’ called Aralorne over the sound of rushing blood.

Kaoldan pushed, feeling the energy sweeping through his body, down his shoulders, through his forearms into his fingers and finally to his Walkerblade. The blade grew hot, scalding hot, but he gripped it tighter, teeth clenched as he did so.

There was a heavy clank deep within the wall.

Kaoldan opened his eyes, shoulders and legs trembling.

Several more clanks and clatters of movement was followed by the slow grind of stone on stone. He saw movement, one side of the wedge was moving backwards. Light spilled out as if the sun were kept inside.

Aralorne raised his hands, shielding his face. The brilliance of the light made Kaoldan wince. The black stone wedge ground backwards, the floor vibrating as it moved. Aralorne slowly lowered his hands. He stood taller - seeming to grow - his eyes wide as the light enveloped him.

‘Why?’ said Romina, her face like stone. ‘What do you want with me?’

‘I want you to be with me. The time is right for this to happen and

so it shall,' said Morveen.

'Why now? Because you decree it?' said Tokel, chin rising, eyes locked on the dark haired woman.

'Yes,' nodded Morveen.

Tokel took a deep breath in and out through clenched teeth.

'I want my daughter back with me on the right side.'

'The right side,' sneered Tokel.

'Yes,' Morveen barked. 'The right side. I want my daughters with me again.'

'A little late for Jayk,' said Tokel, voice now calm and even.

Morveen lowered her head and turned away as if struck. Romina's heart was pounding, she felt her limbs turning numb. Kubrean looked toward her, his back still facing Morveen. Romina caught a look in his eyes. He glanced towards the table. She frowned.

'Books,' he mouthed. 'Inwards.'

Romina looked at the shelves. There were hundreds, perhaps thousands of books, large and heavy on the surrounding shelves. Between the books and the group stood two circles of black clad warriors on the upper balcony and the lower floor. All with their backs towards the books and a ring of shields between them and the Walkers.

She looked at Kubrean and gave the smallest of nods.

'Do not speak his name,' said Morveen over her shoulder.

'Why not?' said Tokel, taking a half step forward. 'He was your son, and in your charge as I recall,' she looked towards Kubrean who mouthed 'Books, inward,' to her. She nodded as if agreeing with her own point.

'Do not speak his name again,' repeated Morveen, turning to face Tokel, her face white, fists clenched.

'Or?' said Tokel.

Morveen breathed out a short laugh and shook her head. 'You always knew where to hit. So good at finding the right spot,' she pointed her finger like a rapier.

'You make it so easy,' shrugged Tokel.

‘Do I really?’

Tokel nodded. ‘Your emotions always were your biggest strength and your greatest weakness. You wear them so openly, even a blind woman could hit them.’

‘Really?’ said Morveen, chewing the next words around her mouth like a fine wine.

Kubrean looked at Kryst and Dalon and mouthed the same words. Morveen’s head tilted to one side.

‘They lied, you know,’ said Morveen, waving her hand in the air. ‘The Grey Council, the Paragon Walker, all of them, for centuries,’ she looked around the magnificent library. ‘Walkers created all of this. That is true, but they also created something else. Us,’ she said, spreading her hands towards the shield and bow bearers. ‘The Otan are the same as you.’

Tokel snorted.

Morveen raised one dark eyebrow. ‘Why so certain?’

‘Because something so good could never create something so bad.’

It was Morveen’s turn to laugh; it tinkled around the room. She shook her head. ‘You know so very little. They have lied to you for so very long that you do not see the truth when it’s right in front of you,’

Tokel stood still, breathing slowly through her nose.

‘I used to be like you. Blinded by duty, honour and the great Way of the Walker,’ she spat on the floor. ‘Lies, all of it. It took a loss, a tragic loss...’

‘Jayk,’ said Tokel. ‘His name was Jayk,’ her voice like a gunshot. Morveen faltered for a split second, then regained her composure. ‘Before I saw the truth, before I saw what was most important.’

‘And that is?’

‘Peace,’ said Morveen, raising her hands.

‘Peace through bloodshed is slightly counterproductive, wouldn’t you say,’ said Tokel, tilting her head to one side.

‘The method justifies the means,’ shrugged Morveen. ‘And

because the world does not belong to the Walkers. It belongs to us. You resist so pointlessly. Fighting to prevent what? Peace throughout the world.'

'Peace, according to your rules,' croaked Romina.

'Naturally,' smiled Morveen.

'Sounds like tyranny to me,' Romina raised her chin, voice cracking.

'Perhaps, but peace provided by those who see the truth, is still peace. It all depends where you stand. I have seen the truth and we have the power to make it happen. There is only one universal truth within this world, and it is not yours,' said Morveen with a slow shake of her head. 'You will see. Trust me,' she said, looking straight into Romina's eyes.

Romina shuddered. This was too much. Too much of everything. Her head pulsed, throbbed as though it was about to explode.

Kubrean looked at Kryst and Dalon and mouthed the same word. 'Books,'

Morveen's eyes narrowed, and her head tilted to one side.

'Not thinking of doing anything silly, are you old man?' she called out, brow wrinkled. She shot a look towards Romina, who despite her racing heart, kept her face straight.

'Only the usual,' said Kubrean, voice level.

Morveen smirked. Crisp footsteps echoed around the room; a black clad warrior walked towards Morveen. She half turned towards him but hesitated, looking straight at Romina.

Romina tensed, her jaw trembling. She swallowed, trying not to look suspicious. Her mother still looking towards her for what felt like an eternity before turning towards the bowing Otan soldier.

Romina looked at Kubrean and nodded.

'On three,' Kubrean whispered.

She took a deep breath in quietly, flicked a glance at Lauden - crumpled on the floor in a pool of blood - then immediately regretted it. She began gathering Fajin energy inside her, feeling the reassuring prickle in her chest and arms.

‘One,’ murmured Kubrean
It fizzed, warm and familiar.

‘Two,’ he said, curling his fingers into fists.

She raised her eyes towards her mother. Who looked over and immediately saw the danger.

‘Three,’ roared Kubrean, launching himself to his feet.

All noise within the room stopped for a split second – Morveen began raising her hand - then it was although a hurricane had landed on top of them. There was a rush of wind which made Romina’s ears ring. Everything seemed to happen in slow motion.

Tokel sprang forward, pushing her arms out before her, the air around her rippling with energy.

Morveen threw herself to the ground, covering her head with her hands, as the Otan warrior beside her stood rooted to the spot.

The release of Fajin from Romina felt like ecstasy. She had never felt such power, such hatred, such pent up anger exploding from within her. She screamed like an animal, primal sounds from somewhere inside her.

Kryst and Dalon turned and threw their arms out.

There was a tug at each of them, like all the air within the room had suddenly been sucked into the centre. Followed by a boom of thunder, as hundreds of books burst outwards from their shelves straight into the backs and heads of the surrounding Otan soldiers. A blizzard of books filled with the noise of cracking bones, the dull thud of heavy ledgers driven into ribs, legs and arms. The shields the Otan held forming the other side of a terrible anvil. Archers attempted to release their bows but were drowned in an avalanche of wood, masonry and leather bound paper.

Grunts, groans accompanied screams, as heads twisted, snapped around to loll at unnatural angles; bodies dropped. Light flickered and shone all around the room - yellow, pink, blue - orbs emerging from corpses.

Romina felt Fajin energy flowing through her. She stretched her arms out as the scream faded, but with a last effort - her neck and

head trembling - she closed her eyes and dug deeper. Every muscle in her body burning with a scolding pain; she felt lightheaded, dizzy, but so very alive.

It was chaos. The noise of heavy wooden bookcases - three times the height of a man – creak and snap before crashing down ripped from the walls. Stone fell like rain onto screaming Otan soldiers.

‘Out!’ yelled Kubrean, his voice somehow audible above the deafening sound all around them.

Romina opened her eyes. Dust and light mingled in the air; paper fluttered around them. Kubrean’s voice cut through the fog and her mind was once again clear.

‘The door. Make for the door,’ he shouted, pointing towards the staircase.

A group of Otan soldiers stood ready on the stairs, purple blades in their hands.

Walkerblades leapt from scabbard to hand – the reassuring feel of cold, hard metal in her hand as Romina snarled. The room flashed green.

As if they were one; Kubrean, Kryst, Romina, Dalon and Tokel charged forwards, weapons in hand to engage the Otan.

Light surrounded Aralorne, illuminating him like some sort of god. His face serene. A boom reverberated around them; the grating noise of moving stone finally gone.

Kaoldan turned to check on Zahara. She smiled weakly, face pale.

‘You good?’ he asked.

She nodded.

‘You sure?’

She waved him away, embarrassed.

A gasp made Kaoldan turn.

Aralorne raised his hands to cover his mouth, shaking his head slowly. Even Dref sat by his side was transfixed.

Squinting, Kaoldan peered along the line of the black stone wall to the gap that had been created which shone with the power of the sun. He left his Blade embedded in the wall and walked to the apex joined by the others.

The sight that greeted them was one of pure light, a half circle scooped out of the wall containing a glowing white pillar, a section missing from its centre. There was something in the gap.

Kaoldan looked towards Nova.

The old man grinned back eyeing the object and nodded.

Kaoldan swallowed and stretched out his neck, before taking a tentative step forward. The object in the middle of the pillar shimmered, then moved. He hesitated. It moved again. Twisting and turning, like a worm on a hook.

He licked his lips. The oily liquid wriggled - he took another step – it stopped front end, turning towards him as if sensing his approach.

He glanced back at Zalen. Black liquid rippled and squirmed. The blonde Walker blew out a laugh and shook his head.

‘Thanks,’ said Kaoldan, voice strained, not really meaning it. A patting sound. He became aware he was patting his hand against his thigh. He glanced at the liquid and took a deep breath – ‘it is better to do it, than live with the fear of it,’ a wise man had once written.

Kaoldan steeled himself and moved forward, holding his breath. He reached toward the liquid – it rippled and flexed. His fingers stopped at the edges of the column, it felt like he was pushing his hand into cold mud. He leaned in, locking his shoulder. The liquid reached towards him - skimming the edge of his fingers - it felt like ice. He winced as he closed his fingers around the black eel; it was cold, so very cold. Pulling his hand back there was a burst of light then silence. He staggered back, right hand cold, but with no movement.

He looked down. In his hand sat a disc of black metal, flat and shiny, nothing like he had been expecting. Nova frowned and straightened.

Kaoldan inspected both sides of the disc. Other than being cold, there was nothing special about it. He stuffed it into a small bag which hung from his belt.

Dref stood, head turning.

‘Nothing to it,’ said Zalen with a grin. ‘Easy...’

The fur on the back of Dref’s neck stood up.

‘I would hardly describe any of this as being easy,’ said Nova tartly.

Dref let out a low growl.

‘Do you want it?’ said Kaoldan, offering him the bag.

Zalen backed away as if being offered a snake.

Kaoldan smiled, tied it to his belt and flexed his hand, trying to shake out the pins and needles in his fingers.

‘I’ll have it,’ came a voice loud and clear from the other side of the room.

The group tensed, looking towards the noise.

‘I believe,’ announced the voice, ‘That you have saved me a great deal of trouble.’

Kaoldan squinted his eyes, searching.

‘Where are my manners?’ the voice smiled. There was a spark, a dull glow of light, which dropped and then was thrown high into the air. It burst outwards like a firework, bathing the room with light. Yellow streams of light stretched out - a golden tree - shimmering, hanging in the air.

A tall figure moved forwards flanked on either side by several dark soldiers carrying glowing purple weapons.

Kaoldan hesitated, eyes darting.

The figure raised both its arms and curled its fingers inwards. With a grunt Nova and Zahara spasmed and froze as if gripped by invisible hands. They were pulled backwards towards the tall stranger, bodies twitching as they floated through the air, coming to a halt in the middle of the room.

‘Now,’ he said. ‘Let’s make this very simple. You will hand over what you have just taken, and I will allow both to live,’ he teased with

a smile as he walked forward.

Kaoldan's head throbbed, heart racing. Eyes flickered between them.

The stranger continued to walk forward, then stopped moving as he emerged from the darkness.

Kaoldan saw before him a tall, lean looking man dressed in black. The black of the Otan, he now realised. A smile crept over his white face as he looked at his two prisoners. His hair was shoulder length, dark with silver. A black cloak flapped to reveal weapons and the dull glint of armour.

'So what is it to be?' he asked, 'You do as I say, or do I have to kill one of these two?' He frowned, looking between them, then grinned, his eyes straight at Kaoldan. 'In fact, let's make this interesting, shall we? You choose...'

Kaoldan felt his heart being gripped with ice. The horrific realisation swept through his body

'So, who is it to be? The old man or the girl?' he nodded towards them but didn't take his eyes off Kaoldan.

Kaoldan looked on in horror. How could he possibly choose between his daughter and his oldest friend?

'But where are my manners?' he said with a half bow. 'Let me introduce myself. I am Rhazien, Master of Shadows and leader of the Otan. I believe you have met my Otan Reaver, Ormrik,' he nodded to his left.

Another dark figure emerged from the gloom, hulking with menace.

Ormrik moved forward dragging his blade from its scabbard it flashed purple into a double-ended glaive. It was the older man Kaoldan had fought in the woods.

'You know that since our last encounter I have very much fallen in love with this weapon again,' Ormrik's gravelly voice said. 'I hope to use it again very soon with a very different ending.' A grim smile appeared on his face. He dug one end of the glaive into the marble floor with a gritty scratch.

Fingers flexed, but nobody moved.

Silence.

‘Come, come,’ said Rhazien, tapping his foot, ‘Please don’t keep me waiting for too long. I may be forced to act impulsively,’ he shrugged. ‘It is one of my less appealing qualities according to my wife,’ he said. ‘I believe you know her. I believe you know her very well.’

The words were lost on Kaoldan; he gritted his teeth, options and choices flying round his head like leaves in a storm, but at the back of his mind cold and grim was the knowledge that he would lose something.

Rhazien pursed his lips and cleared his throat. ‘Well...’ he said, drawing out the word.

Kaoldan looked between the two.

Rhazien sighed and twisted his right hand clockwise, Nova's body spasmed and jerked inwards with a sickening crack, his head slumped.

Kaoldan shuddered, a wave of horror enveloping his body.

Rhazien flicked his wrist and Nova's lifeless body dropped to the floor.

Revulsion spasmed through Kaoldan's body.

‘Oopppsss...’ said Rhazien. ‘Was that the wrong one?’ he pointed to the mangled mess that was Nova’s body.

Kaoldan glanced at Zahara, held helplessly in Rhazien's left hand. His hands shook, scrambling for the bag at his belt.

‘Okay,’ he called, voice trembling.

He pulled the bag from his belt; he knew he had no choice; he could not lose another child. ‘Alright,’ he whispered. ‘Take it.’

‘Now that is better,’ said Rhazien, a smile of satisfaction appearing on his face. ‘A sensible man, a rational man, and a man with whom I can do business,’ he said, beckoning Kaoldan with his right hand.

Kaoldan quietly stepped forward, removing the bag from his belt. He hefted it in his hand and held it up in front of him.

Rhazien shook his head. 'You bring it to me.'

'Why?' asked Kaoldan, surprised himself by his reaction.

Rhazien's raised an eyebrow. He silently laughed to himself, turning to share the joke with a grinning Ormrik.

'Because I wish it,' said Rhazien.

Kaoldan took a breath and began walking. 'Do nothing rash,' he said, eyes locked on the Master of Shadows. 'And this is yours,' he dangled the bag in front of him.

The guards on either side of Rhazien shuffled sideways outwards enveloping Kaoldan forming a wall, separating him from the rest of the Walkers. Kaoldan slowly stepped forwards towards Rhazien continuing to hold the bag in front of him. Ormrik stood at the side, arms folded around his glaive, watching Kaoldan with fascination.

'Good boy,' he said sarcastically. 'It is good that you know your place.'

Kaoldan flicked a hateful glance at Ormrik but continued forwards.

'Leave it on the ground just there,' said Rhazien, pointing to a space on the floor twelve feet in front of Kaoldan.

Kaoldan's mouth was dry. He glanced at Ormrik, then at Rhazien. The sound of tramping boots ceased. The Otan soldiers had reached their destination. Lips tight, Kaoldan stepped forward and placed the bag on the floor in front of him. It hit the floor with a metallic ring.

'Now back away,' said Rhazien, flicking his hand as if dismissing a peasant. Jaw tight, Kaoldan moved backwards, eyes not leaving Rhazien.

'Enough,' said Rhazien.

'Good boy,' said Ormrik from Kaoldan's left; he ignored the words.

Rhazien moved forward slowly and gracefully, as if out for a morning stroll. He bent down to pick up the bag when a black object hurtled towards him with incredible speed with a growl and a snap, Dref sank his teeth into Rhazien's right forearm.

He screamed in pain, grabbing at his arm with his left hand,

attempting to wrestle it free from the giant dog's vice like grip. He released Zahara from his grip. She flopped to the floor, shaking her head.

It was a distraction, but it was all the time that Kaoldan needed.

He thrust his right hand out, beckoning his Walkerblade towards him. The blade thundered out of the wall, with a dull phut sound it passed straight through two of the Otan that had formed a wall between him and the other Walkers. The dead Otan fell to the floor - red and orange orbs emerging from their bodies.

Zalen threw his hand to the right and roared. Green light springing from his hand into a long, hungry sword. At the same time Aralorne charged forward, two pink swords in hand, cutting and hacking, making busy in the business of death.

The screams echoed loudly behind Kaoldan, there was a snap, his blade arrived in his hand and he grinned.

Dref continued to growl, wrestling with Rhazien as the lean man screamed in pain.

Kaoldan charged towards Rhazien, his blade flashed green into a broadsword. With a snarl he swung the blade overhead, but with a bone jarring clank it hit another blade. A purple blade.

Ormrik had intervened, saving his master from a killing downward stroke.

'About time we did this again,' Ormrik growled through his teeth.

Kaoldan clenched his teeth and shoved the older man back. He glanced to his side as Zahara appeared to be coming to her senses. She reached for her Walkerblade - which shot through the air like an arrow - passing straight through three other Otan soldiers with a sickening crunch, and they flopped to the floor like dominos. Light flickered and ghosts emerged from their fallen bodies, rising silently towards the Abyss.

Behind Kaoldan blades clanked together - steel on steel - interrupted by cries of agony. Ormrik came at him, glaive spinning and swirling Kaoldan ducked, dropping back into a crouch. He was panting now, sweat hot and satisfying on his brow.

Despite his best effort, Rhazien was getting the better of Dref. With a last scream, the shaggy-haired man was able to prise the dog from his arm just as Zahara swung her blade at him. The blade bit deeply into his forearm. He let out a cry and fell backwards. Otan soldiers moved to his aid, attacking Zahara, who fell back flanked by Dref.

‘Get it,’ called Rhazien, pointing at the bag, before wincing in pain at his injured arm.

One Otan soldier sprinted forward, picked up the bag and then retreated.

Rhazien, face creased with agony, scrambled to his feet. He backed towards the entrance, cradling his arm, surrounded by half a dozen Otan soldiers.

‘Get her too...’ he cried, nodding towards Zahara before disappearing through the door.

Otan soldiers swarmed around her - Kaoldan could do nothing as Ormrik’s blade swished close to his side again. She let out a scream as a pair of hands grabbed her from behind, Dref hemmed in by purple blades snapped and growled but could not reach her.

Kaoldan watched in horror as his daughter was dragged kicking and screaming towards the door. He tried to charge towards her, but Ormrik was there again.

‘I’m going to enjoy getting to know her,’ snarled the giant man.

Kaoldan caught a look in Ormrik’s eyes and something inside him snapped.

His head became lighter, all other choices gone. He knew what he had to do.

‘No,’ Kaoldan swore under his breath.

Ormrik swung his glaive, Kaoldan parried it.

‘No...’ he said again. His weary muscles tingled and relaxed.

Ormrik swung again, a huge double handed chop over his head, Kaoldan side stepped it with ease. Doubt appeared on Ormrik’s bearded face.

‘NO...’ he said, thrusting his left hand outwards. Nova’s blade was

still embedded in the wall - with a whistle it shot through the air straight into Kaoldan's hand, it flashed green and formed into a short sword. The scraping sound of moving stone rang out behind him.

'Tell me again what you intend to do to my daughter,' said Kaoldan, voice calm and even, as he and Ormrik circled each other.

'You don't want to know,' said Ormrik with a grin, heaving breaths in.

Kaoldan clenched his teeth. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Zalen and Aralorne moving towards the door.

'Get her,' he called without looking. Shouts of acknowledgment echoed out as the pair battled their way forward.

Kaoldan charged at the hulk of a man, long and short blade sweeping and slashing towards Ormrik, who parried them with increasing difficulty. They traded blows, strike and counterstrike – metal on metal rang out – but they were now alone.

Kaoldan saw the light behind Ormrik shrinking. He heaved in a breath, closed his eyes and dropped both his blades. They clattered to the floor as Kaoldan clapped his open hands together. Ormrik spasmed, unable to move. His glaive skittered and slid out of his hand, screeching across the floor.

Kaoldan felt something between his hands, an object, pliable and slippery; like trying to hold a giant wriggling fish. He took a deep breath in through his nose. His aching arms trembled. He opened his eyes and turned his palms outwards and began pushing Ormrik backwards. The giant tried to move, but he could not get free. It was a battle of wills.

Kaoldan clenched his teeth. The more Ormrik struggled, the harder it became. Sweat trickled down Kaoldan's back. His arms burned; his heart felt as though it was about to burst.

He continued to push, step by trembling step, but it was getting harder and harder - as though pushing a giant boulder uphill – the weight increasing with each step.

Kaoldan opened his eyes, his brow furrowed.

Ormrik continued to struggle, his head and neck were now

moving freely. The door of the black stone wedge continued to grind closed behind him. The giant's head turned, seeing the danger for the first time. He roared in desperation.

White hot rage consumed Kaoldan, but it was not enough - he was losing control. Ormrik thrashed his head, bellowing like a wild animal. Kaoldan winced, his hand slipping half an inch. Ormrik raged, the upper side of one shoulder now free.

His head dropped, his neck trembling, eyes squeezed shut. They flickered open. He caught a glimpse, just a glimpse of Nova's body. Lying so very still. Like a discarded rag. All his being, all his wisdom, all his memories; gone. Ended.

A life ended in an instant.

He clamped his eyes closed to hide the horror, the revulsion that gripped him.

But it remained.

The image burned into his mind. His friend, gone. Lost to the abyss, like so many. Their faces came then, haunting him.

Morveen, his wife – a lock of chestnut hair hiding a knowing smile of the purest joy saved just for him.

No more.

Jayk, his son - a warm, firm hug; blonde hair, whispers of thanks. A hug of the rawest happiness, just for him.

No more.

Yasmina, his responsibility – her head thrown back laughing, white teeth flashing at one of Zalen's terrible jokes.

No more.

Nova, his oldest friend – his twitching smile, a warm hand clamped to his shoulder, after he completed The Link with Morveen. The old man's eyes moist with pride.

No more.

All moments he had shared with them, now lost. Consigned to the Abyss.

Romina - her nervous smile when the group had split, now far from him. Perhaps in danger.

Zahara - her face filled with panic; taken. Lost right in front of him.

The images flowed. Flickering through his mind. Births, jokes, smiles, hugs. All gone. All to the abyss.

He felt a renewed icy rage – familiar, glorious - deep inside him.

No more.

This would happen no more.

Years of anger, years of hurt, years of shame, years of regrets, flooded his head.

The rage turned cold, terribly, brutally cold.

He dropped his shoulders and pushed harder, every muscle within him screamed in agony.

He pushed and pushed until slowly Ormrik passed between the sliding stone walls into the glowing chamber. The walls continued to close, grinding like the dead brought back from hell.

Ormrik caught sight of the walls closing around him. A flash of dawning realisation crossed his face. Eyes filled with horror, unspeakable horror as he envisaged his fate.

Kaoldan clenched his jaw tight, his teeth grinding like the stone walls. He dropped to one knee with a last push and fling of his hands. Ormrik flew backwards, crunching against the wall. He was free to scream now, his desperation silenced with a deafening boom as the stone walls closed around him.

Kaoldan felt all the strength wash out of his body as he collapsed to the floor. He heaved in heavy gasping breaths when a thought struck him.

He scrambled across the floor on his hands and knees, reaching towards Nova's body.

The old man was somehow still alive, but in terrible shape. Chest caved in, blood splattered from his mouth, coating his beard, covering his face, limbs twisted and ruined. Kaoldan pulled him up. The old man gasped in pain, blood dribbled from his mouth, breath rasping.

Kaoldan cradled the old man's head, brushing hair from out of his face and eyes. His mind racing, tears stabbing at the back of his eyes.

‘I’m sorry,’ Nova wheezed between each word. He gasped, eyes wide. ‘I should have told you...’

Kaoldan frowned.

‘She is alive,’ said Nova. ‘Do you hear me? She is alive...’

His head ached and fizzed.

‘Morveen,’ whispered the old man.

Kaoldan’s head was instantly, coldly clear.

‘She is alive... Morveen is alive,’

Nova’s body spasmed then relaxed and his eyes went blank, head slowly dropped, lolled to the side. A sky blue image rose from his body upwards silently into the sky and Kaoldan was left cold and alone in a quiet blood splattered room.

This concludes The Dark Crown
Book One of The Souls’ Abyss.

Book Two: *Coven of Shadows* will cover the desperate search for the long-lost Dark Crown, Kaoldan’s missing family, and reveal the truth about the Otan through far lands and strange adventures.

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